SK 24253840 FINAL THESIS

by SARAH KIELY

Submission date: 12-Sep-2025 11:28PM (UTC+0100)
Submission ID: 2749287876
File name: 80908_SARAH_KIELY_SK_24253840_FINAL_THESIS_918641_968408560.docx (11.95M)
Word count: 31291
Character count: 186937

OLLSCOIL NA HÉIREANN MÁ NUAD
THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND
MAYNOOTH

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

M.Ed (Research in Practice)

(2024 – 2025)

Becoming Attuned: How can I Support Children's Social and Emotional Development in a Junior Infant Classroom through a Combination of Direct and Indirect Social and Emotional Learning Strategies?

Sarah Kiely

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

Date: 12th September 2025

Supervised by: Dr. Tríona Stokes / Professor Marie McLoughlin

Cover Sheet

Ainm / *Name:* Sarah Kiely

Bliain / *Year group*: M.Ed Research in Practice 2024/2025

Uimhir mhic léinn / *Student number*: 24253840

Ábhar / *Subject*: EDF689 Dissertation Project

***Lecturer / Tutor*:** Dr. Tríona Stokes / Professor Marie McLoughlin

Sprioclá / *Due date*: 12th September 2025

Teideal an tionscadail / *Assignment title*: *Becoming Attuned: How can I Support Children's Social and Emotional Development in a Junior Infant Classroom through a Combination of Direct and Indirect Social and Emotional Learning Strategies?*

Líon na bhfocal / *Word Count:* *20,664*

Líon leathanach / *Number of pages*: 151

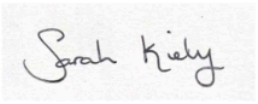
Aon ábhar eile sa tionscadal / *Any other material in the assignment*:

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

Dearbhaím go bhfuil treoirlínte an choláiste do thionscadail léite agam agus go dtuigim iad. Tá cóip den tionscadal coinnithe agam dom féin.

I confirm that I alone produced this project. I clearly acknowledge any help I received from any other person, staff members or relatives included. This project is my own composition except for material of any kind taken from other sources. These sources are acknowledged in the footnotes or references.

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

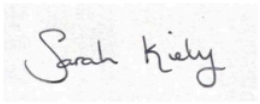
Síniú / *Signature*: 

Dáta / *Date*: 12th September 2025

Turnitin Report

Declaration

I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I acknowledge that the use of Generative artificial intelligence tools is prohibited on the MEd (Research in Practice) programme and has not been used in this body of work.



Sarah Kiely

11th August 2025

Abstract

This self-study action research project examines how I can support children's social and emotional development in a junior infant classroom, using a social and emotional learning (SEL) intervention. The research was conducted in a co-educational junior school in an urban area. Self-study action research was the chosen research methodology due to its values-laden, reflective nature and its potential to transform practice.

Two cycles of action research were undertaken, with critical reflection serving as a key element in redefining my teaching practice. I implemented a combination of direct and indirect SEL strategies, including routines, lessons and opportunities in which children could engage in meaningful learning experiences and apply their social and emotional skills to real-life contexts. Qualitative data was gathered throughout both cycles through classroom observations and my reflective journal, as well as children's work samples, parent questionnaires and conversations with my validation group and critical friends.

An analysis of the data led me to conclude that children's social and emotional competencies can be effectively fostered when children are supported within an emotionally safe, caring environment rooted in a relational pedagogy. The data revealed that caring relationships functioned as the invisible thread weaving together all aspects of the social and emotional learning experience. Equally, my findings emphasise the teacher's role in facilitating these relational learning experiences, drawing on organic interactions as teachable moments that enhance social and emotional learning. My ontological value of caring relationships and epistemological value of experiential learning underpin the research reported in this thesis and informed all stages of the process.

These results have significant implications for my ongoing professional development. This inquiry deepened my understanding of my evolving role as a teacher and affirmed the importance of aligning my practice with my values. I learned the importance of attuning to the needs of my learners through reflection and open-mindedness. Moving forward, I will continue to adapt my teaching practise to prioritise critical reflection, attunement and social and emotional learning to support the holistic development of every child.

Acknowledgements

This journey has truly shown me the power of relationship at its finest.

Firstly, I wish to thank my supervisors, Tríona Stokes and Marie McLoughlin, for your expertise, guidance and steady support throughout the year. Your practical perspective kept me grounded amid moments of overwhelm. Your calm, clear direction made a difference and for that I am deeply grateful.

To my school and the Board of Management, thank you for your steadfast support and encouragement. To my supportive colleagues, critical friends and validation group, your listening ears, generous insight and thoughtful critique were invaluable throughout this process. Thank you for providing me with meaningful feedback and being a genuine sounding board, supporting me to find direction when I needed it most.

To my family and friends, for your continued support throughout a challenging year, thank you. As always, you have shown me unwavering patience, encouragement and love. Your presence behind the scenes made all the difference and I am grateful to have you in my corner.

To the parents and pupils who engaged with this research, your openness and participation were central to this journey and I truly appreciate the connection we shared.

Finally, my sincerest gratitude to my biggest teachers in life, my students. Thank you for constantly reminding me that there is always more to learn. Your courage, curiosity and creativity are daily reminders of why I chose this path. I am forever grateful that this is what I get to do.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning

CFF: Critical Friends' Feedback

CWS: Children's Work Sample

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DWS: Draft Wellbeing Specification

ECS: Empathy Scale for Children

GRR: Gradual Release of Responsibility

KEDS: Kid's Empathic Developmental Scale

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCSE: National Council for Special Education

PCF: Primary Curriculum Framework

RJ: Reflective Journal

SEL: Social and Emotional Learning

VGD: Validation Group Discussion

WCD: Whole Class Discussion

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

This introductory chapter sets out to narrate the context in which my self-study action research project was conducted. I outline the research background of this study in terms of my initial concerns and educational values as a practitioner. More specifically, I provide the context of this project in terms of the research participants and setting, while providing a rationale for the study with this context in mind. I summarise the focus of my study and its development based on my identified values. Lastly, I conclude with an overview of the contents of the thesis, providing a synopsis of each chapter.

1.2 Research Background

My initial concerns originated from my previous three years of teaching in the infant classroom, where I observed significant gaps in children's social and emotional development. I questioned whether this discrepancy was linked to the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted early childhood experiences during critical developmental stages (Egan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic offered a stark example of disconnection, as prolonged school closures and physical distancing removed children from most social interactions (Hanley et al., 2024). In January 2020, children were brought into the world during a public health emergency of international concern. The pandemic severely impacted outcomes on children's social and emotional wellbeing due to prolonged school closures, social isolation and limited access to health services (OECD, 2024). Emerging Irish research documents children's feelings of social isolation, loneliness and anxiety, largely due to the sudden loss of social interaction (O' Sullivan et al., 2021). Hanley et al., (2024) reveal the negative impacts on children's social and emotional functioning as a result of school closures. If anything, the pandemic highlighted major socioemotional concerns among children of all ages, alongside humanity's innate

yearning for connection. These experiences serve as a powerful reminder of the centrality of relationships in education and the challenges that arise when these social interactions are disrupted. With these challenges in mind, I felt unequipped to meet the prevailing needs of my pupils, lost and unsure of how to best support them.

> *"I feel helpless. What they need goes beyond anything I was ever trained for… and it's safe to say I haven't found the answer in a teacher's manual or policy document"*
>
> (Reflective Journal (RJ), 2nd October 2024).

In addition to this, I became increasingly aware of the longstanding 'hierarchy of subjects', where academic ability, particularly in literacy and numeracy, has traditionally dominated our understanding of intelligence (Robinson, 2007). Foran et al. (2021) critique contemporary education as overfocused on achievement, side-lining children's emotional and relational needs. This notion has been recently challenged in Ireland by the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (NCCA, 2023), signalling a shift in perspective. The PCF promotes a more holistic view of the child, emphasising the importance of children 'being' and not just 'becoming', and prioritises wellbeing, relationships and belonging as central to the learning experience (NCCA, 2023). This is reinforced by the recent Wellbeing Specification (NCCA, 2024), which places equal importance on the development of social and emotional skills, recognising their role in supporting children to thrive socially, emotionally and academically.

Despite this recent policy shift, many existing social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes I have piloted tend to oversimplify the emotional abilities of young children, often avoiding complex yet critical topics such as conflict resolution. While it is essential to remain developmentally appropriate, I believe it is equally important to challenge and scaffold children

in ways that acknowledge their growing capabilities. Additionally, Dowling and Barry (2021) note the lack of developed or evaluated programmes in Ireland that support children's social and emotional development. My research was motivated by the desire to address this gap, creating space for more meaningful, relational and responsive teaching of the soft skills required to help children navigate the world with care, compassion and confidence. Central to this pursuit was a commitment to my belief that teaching and learning is relational and experiential.

1.3 Values

At the beginning of this research journey, I found it difficult to articulate my values with clarity. What I valued instinctively felt fragmented, like loose thread without a clear pattern. My practice reflected 'outward manifestations of some internal thought processes that were yet unclear', my realisation of my values 'still lying dormant within me' (Glenn, 2006: 54). I initially mistook this complexity for confusion. However, I would learn that my values were stitched into the fabric of who I am. Through the self-study action research process, reflection became the loom upon which I wove these threads into something more intentional and visible.

A caring, relational pedagogy, as an ontological and pedagogical commitment, shaped how I positioned myself in the classroom, not simply as a transmitter of knowledge (Sharan, 2015), but as a teacher who developed caring relationships with my pupils. My understanding of caring relationships was further deepened by the work of Noddings (2003; 2005; 2012), whose 'ethic of care' positions care as a moral and relational commitment in the context of education. My commitment to a relational pedagogy reflects my belief that purposeful learning is built 'on the position that people are inherently, and unavoidably, relational beings' (Riddle and Hickey, 2024). Relational pedagogy cannot be reduced to a technique, it is a way of seeing and

being that invites both teacher and learner into a dynamic, co-constructed learning relationship. It aligned with the NCCA's (2023) Primary Curriculum Framework, which advocates for teaching approaches that are rooted in caring relationships.

While relational pedagogy speaks to my ontological stance, experiential learning reflects my epistemological belief that learning is active, situated in real, meaningful contexts. Inspired by Dewey's (1938) vision of education as experience and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, I view children not as passive recipients of information, but as capable co-constructors of knowledge. In my classroom, learning is most powerful when it emerges from experience, a belief that was affirmed throughout my research into social and emotional learning. While experiential learning is commonly understood as an epistemological approach, a way of constructing knowledge through lived experience, my research also revealed its ontological significance. The process of learning through reflection, relationship and responsiveness not only expanded my understanding of social and emotional learning, but reshaped my sense of self. In this way, experiential learning bridged both *how* I come to know and who I am *becoming* in my practice.

My values of a caring, relational pedagogy and experiential learning now informs not only how I teach, but *why* I teach. These values give shape to the type of classroom I seek to create, one where children grow socially, emotionally and academically through meaningful engagement with the world around them (OECD, 2015). This is the foundation from which my inquiry to social and emotional learning emerged, and it continues to guide the transformation of both my practice and my professional identity.

A Living Contradiction

The NCSE (2025) acknowledges that barriers do not reside within the child, but within the environment. As educators, it is our duty to uncover and reduce these barriers (NCSE, 2025: 41). The primary aim of this research was to do just that; to critically examine how my practice could best support children's social and emotional development by identifying both the barriers that hindered it and enablers that nurtured it. Furthermore, I sought to live more closely to my values of a caring, relational pedagogy and experiential learning. Yet, in the early phase of this project, I came to realise that the climate I was fostering fell short of these ideals:

> *"What unsettled me today wasn't the behaviour I saw, but the way I handled it. I reacted instead of responding, controlled instead of connecting. It felt like I abandoned my values in favour of quick fixes"* (RJ, 20th September 2024).

> *"I left the school feeling disheartened today, I jumped in trying to 'fix' things instead of supporting the children to navigate the moment themselves. My actions didn't reflect the caring, responsive teacher I want to be or the relationships I want to create, they reflected someone trying to stay in control"* (RJ, 22ndNovember 2024).

Here, I reflect on the dissonance between my values and my practice as an infant teacher. Despite holding caring relationships and experiential learning as foundational values, I found myself either responding to emotional and behavioural challenges in ways that felt reactive and disciplinary, or rushing to 'fix' situations that might have offered meaningful opportunities for social and emotional growth. I recognised myself as what Whitehead (2009) refers to as a 'living contradiction', holding values I was not consistently practising. This was the primary motivation for undertaking this action research project. I felt unequipped to provide the

guidance and emotional support my young learners required, leaving me frustrated and disconnected from the teacher I aspired to be. This internal conflict became a catalyst for change. Through action research, I aimed to develop practices that better aligned with my values, and ultimately, the teacher I sought to be. In order to explore this shift in practice meaningfully, it was necessary to situate my inquiry within the specific context of my classroom, the setting in which these values, challenges and changes would unfold.

1.4 Research Context

Research Setting

My study took place in a primary, co-educational, junior school under the Catholic patronage. The school is located in an urban area with a generally prosperous socio-economic background and has a population of over 350 pupils. I have taught in the school as an infant teacher for four years. During the entirety of the research process, I taught a mainstream class of eighteen junior infants.

Research Participants

The research participants throughout my project included a mixed-group of boys and girls in my junior infant class. Parents participated via questionnaires. Critical friends and colleagues in my stream took on a supportive role in the form of my validation group. According to Farrell (2005:1), children should be considered as 'competent participants' in research. To ensure inclusion, all eighteen junior infants, aged 4/5 years old, were invited to participate in my research. Out of the eighteen, seventeen children participated. Following this overview of the participants and context of my study, the next section outlines the focus and main objectives of my research.

1.5 Focus and Aims of the Study:

As early years are considered a rapid stage of development for young children that set foundations for later development (Bierman et al., 2024), early social and emotional learning is especially crucial for young children's development (Zinsser et al., 2014; Acar et al., 2017). Equally, it is well established that learning involves social, emotional and cognitive elements, in that 'emotions and social relationships affect learning' (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023: 2). Given this, my study aimed to unveil the key barriers and enablers of children's social and emotional development in the context of the classroom, while exploring the educator's role in facilitating this development through caring relationships. Equally, I sought to facilitate purposeful socioemotional learning experiences, enacting my value of experiential learning, so that it 'bridges the classroom and the real world', enabling children to develop social and emotional skills to tackle the demands of the twenty-first century (Malik and Behera, 2024: 59).

As my project evolved, my research context and values provided a steady compass to help navigate through the challenges of my daily practice and harsh realities of critical reflection (Mohammed Idris et al., 2021). They allowed me to refocus when I strayed from my initial purpose, to *support the children's social and emotional development in an infant classroom*, ensuring that my research remained grounded in principles that matter most. Additionally, the following ancillary questions provided guidance in times of overwhelm:

Research Question	**How can I Support Children's Social and Emotional Development in a Junior Infant Classroom through a Combination of Direct and Indirect Social and Emotional Learning Strategies?**
Ancillary Questions	*What are the barriers that hinder and enablers that support the development of children's social and emotional development?*
	What is the role of the teacher in facilitating children's social and development through a relational pedagogy?
	How can I leverage teachable moments as opportunities to help students develop social and emotional leaning skills?

Figure 1.1 Research Questions

Research was carried out once all ethical approval and consent was received. Data collection tools used throughout were varied. The study was conducted over two action research cycles. Research cycle one was centred on cultivating a safe, emotional environment to enhance the children's emotional literacy and awareness. Research cycle two focused on enhancing the children's social development through organic interactions. I collected data through my own observations, teacher reflective journal, conversations with my validation group and critical friends, children's work samples and parent questionnaires.

1.6 Organisation of Thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. **Chapter one** provides an **introduction** to the context in which my research was conducted. I summarise initial concerns regarding my practice and describe my ontological and epistemological values that I sought to underpin my practice. I outline the focus and aims of my action research project and explain the format of my thesis.

Chapter two addresses the relevant **literature** regarding children's social and emotional concerns in a contemporary society. It critically explores and examines a range of strategies

linked to supporting socioemotional development in the classroom. More specifically, it outlines the important role of social and emotional learning in nurturing, relational classroom environment that supports the holistic development of the child.

Chapter three provides descriptions and explanations for my choice in **methodology**; a self-study action research project. I summarise the data collection process, describing the tools utilised throughout this study. I outline the validation process and address the ethical considerations made while conducting this project. Finally, the data analysis process and criteria by which I evaluated my work is summarised.

Chapter four presents an **analysis of the data** gathered across both phases of the research, drawing together key findings to support an emerging claim to knowledge. Through the process of critical reflection, I begin to make sense of how the interventions influenced my practice and the children's experiences, forming the basis for my professional learning and contribution to knowledge. This chapter provides an insight into the 'messy' nature of action research, offering a narrative of the **research project** as it unfolded.

Chapter five discusses the **significance of this research** in terms of my own learning, the learning of others and its potential implications for policy. I present a synopsis of what I have learned on a practical and personal level, articulating the emerging understanding of my evolving role as a teacher. Drawing on the findings of my study, I make a justified claim to knowledge. To conclude, recommendations for future practice are considered, with a view of further developing the values of a caring, relational pedagogy and experiential learning in early years education.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

There is widespread consensus that education today must go beyond academic instruction to fully equip young people for life and work (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). A growing body of literature supports the notion that children require a balanced set of social, emotional and cognitive skills in order to achieve positive outcomes in school and life and navigate challenges of the 21st century (OECD, 2015; DES, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019). Consequently, the role of school is now understood to develop the 'whole child', adopting a more holistic approach to education that recognises the interdependence of social and emotional development, academic learning and overall wellbeing (DES, 2018). This chapter begins by examining the evolving social and emotional concerns of children within the context of contemporary society. It explores the place of social and emotional development in education while considering the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) in supporting the development of the whole child. The second part of this of this review focuses on relational pedagogy as an approach for teachers to attune to the social and emotional needs in the classroom. More specifically, it emphasises the significance of caring relationships for the enhancement of children's socioemotional, while addressing the role of the teacher in nurturing social and emotional skills through an attuned, relational practice.

2.2 Social and Emotional Concerns in the 21st Century

The modern era has witnessed times of drastic social change, dramatic demographic growth and major cultural shifts, all of which were escalated by a global pandemic (Hadar et al., 2020; Panthalookaran, 2022; Sarid and Levanon, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious challenge to society, particularly to children and young people, as prolonged school closures and physical distancing removed children from most social interactions (Hamilton and Gross,

2021). Children now aged five and six were brought into the world during a public health emergency of international concern, representing the World Health Organisation's (WHO) highest alert level (WHO, 2020). The pandemic severely impacted outcomes on children's social and emotional wellbeing due to prolonged school closures, social isolation and limited access to health services (OECD, 2024). Emerging Irish research documents children's feelings of social isolation, loneliness and anxiety, largely due to the sudden loss of social interactions during this time (O' Sullivan et al., 2021). Additionally, a national study that examined the negative socioemotional impact of school closures on young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, reported observations of increased boredom, under-stimulation, tantrums, anxiety and clinginess. Brooks et al. (2020) reveal the psychological stressors reported by children during the pandemic, including fear of illness, boredom and frustration, missing friends and teachers and a lack of personal space at home, indicating negative impacts on children's social and emotional functioning as a result of school closures. If anything, the pandemic highlighted major socioemotional concerns among children of all ages, alongside humanity's innate yearning for connection. These experiences serve as a powerful reminder of the centrality of schools in the development of social and emotional skills of children and the challenges that arise when it is disrupted.

As society continues to emerge from this crisis, the rapid expansion of globalisation and digital technologies raises further potential concerns for the socioemotional development and wellbeing of young children (Bohnert and Gracia, 2021; Smyth et al., 2023). The youth of today has unlimited access to the digital world, having grown up as 'digitods', or digital natives (Bohnert and Gracia, 2021: 630). International and national literature reveals the significant negative impact of digital screen-time on children's wellbeing and socioemotional welfare (Twenge et al., 2018; Bohnert and Gracia, 2021). For instance, children's involvement in social media and entertainment activities have been found to be associated with poor self-concept

(Kelly et al., 2018), distraction (Mascheroni and Olafsson, 2016) and depressive symptoms (George et al., 2018). The Growing up in Ireland (GUI) national longitudinal study highlights the progressively digitised world our children and young people are living in (Smyth et al., 2023). Bohnert and Gracia's (2021) comparative study compared the digital usage for media and leisure activities between children born a decade apart and found that twenty-eight percent of 1998 users increased to eighty-eight percent of 2008 users. This study concluded that high levels of screen time, more than 3 hours daily, lead to significant declines in socioemotional wellbeing (Bohnert and Gracia, 2021). This excessive, uncontrolled usage can detract from the quality of children's social and emotional wellbeing (Nutley and Thorell, 2022), raising important questions about how education systems can buffer these effects and prioritise social and emotional development.

The profound disruptions of contemporary society have laid bare the urgent need for intervention in schools to navigate the social and emotional needs of children today. As schools continue to transition from crisis response to long-term recovery, there is a growing consensus that nurturing the whole child, emotionally, socially, physically and academically, is essential to meeting these needs (NCCA, 2023, NCCA, 2024a, NCCA, 2024b). Research consistently confirms the value of schools as optimal settings in which to address the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people (Goldberg et al., 2019).

2.3 Social and Emotional Development in Education

Social and emotional development is increasingly recognised as an integral part of children's learning experiences in educational settings. According to Goldberg et al. (2019), international education systems have made recent shifts towards a more holistic approach that not only values academic achievement, but also the social and emotional competencies, which are essential to wellbeing and lifelong learning. Within the Irish context, this evolution is reflected

in recent curricular policy updates, such as the Wellbeing draft specification (NCCA, 2024a), the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2018) and the Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024b), all of which emphasise the importance of nurturing children's social and emotional wellbeing as part of a comprehensive approach to education.

The term *social and emotional development* refers to the ongoing process through which children learn to understand and manage emotions, navigate their social environments and engage in responsible decision-making (Goldberg et al., 2019). The DES (2018) and NCCA (2024a) explicitly outline the importance of having a deliberate focus on the development of these skills in order to equip children with the necessary skills to overcome challenges of the contemporary world. Additionally, the DES (2018) recognises the importance of social and emotional development in schools, identifying it as a key protective factor in the promotion of overall student wellbeing. As part of this, the DES (2018) emphasises the value of social and emotional learning opportunities in schools and aligns with CASEL's (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) (2025) core competencies to support a whole-school approach.

2.4 The Rise of Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Fundamentally, social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which children learn and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to understand and manage emotions, build healthy relationships and develop social awareness. While the term social and emotional learning (SEL) has been in use for over twenty years now, there has been a noticeable surge of interest in the area from policy makers and educators in recent times (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024; Bryan and Mochizuki, 2025). SEL has become embedded in international curricula in

countries such as America, Finland, Australia, and Canada (Goldberg et al., 2019). Extensive research increasingly supports the implementation of universal SEL programmes to foster emotional intelligence, regulation, positive relationships, empathy and responsible decision-making (Cipriano et al., 2023; CASEL, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2017, Durlak et al., 2011). Hamilton and Gross (2021) outline some of the concerning negative effects of COVID-19 on children's social and emotional wellbeing, further emphasising the need for SEL interventions in education. This supports the view that SEL is emerging as a leading evidence-based strategy to support social and emotional learning, health and wellbeing for young children.

2.4.1 The Affordances of Social and Emotional Learning

Research demonstrates that social and emotional skills are now widely considered as key assets to enhance both short and long-term outcomes for children and young people in the 21st century (Durlak et al., 2011; 2023; Greenberg et al., 2017; Cipriano et al., 2023; Orr and Lavy, 2024). Social and emotional learning has been proven to increase social skills, emotional regulation, positive relationships and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; 2023; Greenberg et al., 2017; Cipriano et. al., 2023). Ultimately, it can be claimed that social and emotional intervention can positively contribute to children and young people's overall wellbeing, in both the short and long-term. However, with over 136 frameworks and an abundance of SEL competencies within these, (Grant et. al, 2017 cited in Cipriano et al., 2023), clear goals of SEL vary throughout curricula, cultures and contexts. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) propose five core competencies that contribute to SEL outcomes (CASEL, 2020). These competencies act as key indicators of high-quality SEL and play a central role in supporting children's social and emotional development (CASEL, 2025).

2.4.2 Key Competencies of Social and Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) have created a framework for SEL, classifying significant SEL competencies into five categories, as identified below and in figure 2.1.

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

CASEL (2025) colour codes its five interrelated competencies, illustrating a relationship between them, as seen in figure 2.1 below. The first two competencies, self-awareness and self-management, are grouped as intrapersonal skills pertaining to the self. *Self-Awareness* refers to the ability to recognise one's emotions, thoughts and their impact on behaviour (CASEL, 2020). Developing this awareness can foster a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose through recognising one's strengths and limitations (CASEL, 2020). Skills that may fall under this competency include self-efficacy, emotional literacy and confidence (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

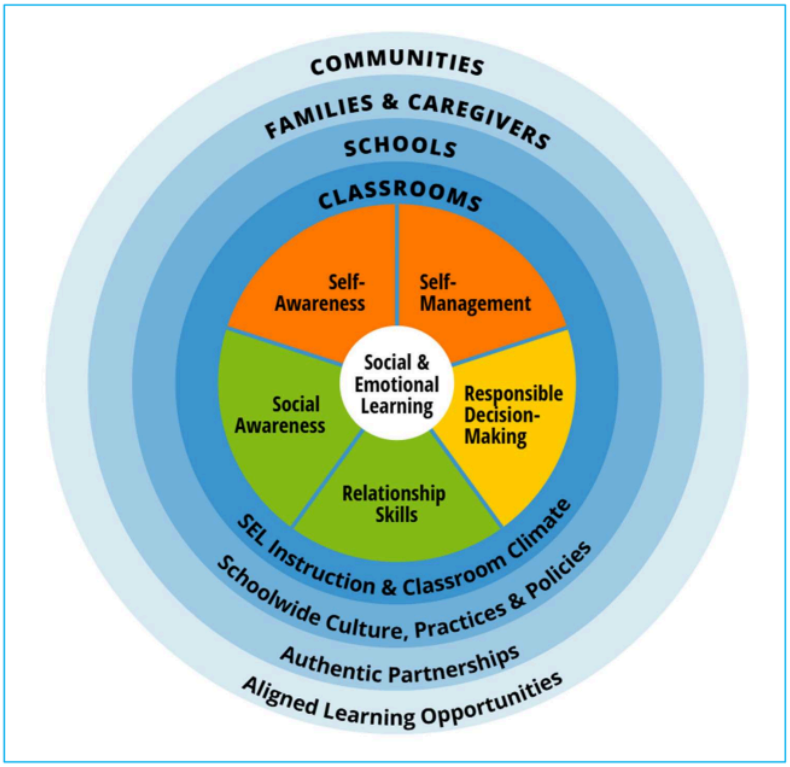


Figure 2.1 CASEL's (2025) Social and Emotional Learning Framework

A foundational level of awareness is essential for the development of self-management. *Self-management* extends beyond awareness as it involves the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours in response to different situations (Elliot et al., 2021). In an infant classroom this may be observed when a child takes a deep breath to calm down, waits patiently for a turn or asks for help rather than actively impulsively. These skills are often nurtured through consistent routines, explicit teaching of strategies and teacher modelling (Committee for Children, 2023; NCSE, 2025). Furthermore, emotional awareness and strong emotional regulation skills are positively associated with healthy peer relationships (Sarac et al., 2020; Gülay Ogelman and Fetihi, 2021; Qashmer, 2023).

In contrast, the third and fourth competencies, social awareness and relationship skills, centre on interpersonal skills. *Social awareness* relates to a child's ability to understand other's perspectives and demonstrate empathy. It includes perspective-taking, demonstrating compassion and showing concern for others (CASEL, 2020; Elliot et al., 2021). In early childhood settings, this might include recognising when a peer is upset with offering to share resources during play. *Relationship skills* are evident when children can form and maintain supportive relationships. These skills are demonstrated through collaborative problem-solving, practicing teamwork and resolving conflict constructively, critical skills in developing pro-social behaviour in the classroom (CASEL, 2020).

The fifth and final competency, responsible decision-making is shaped by the successful integration of the previous four (Alexander and Vermete, 2019). According to CASEL (2020: 2), this competency is evident when children can 'make caring and constructive choices' regarding personal behaviour and social interactions. It involves skills such as curiosity, open-mindedness, ethical reasoning and reflective thinking. In the infant classroom, this might look like choosing to include a peer in a game, recognising consequences of an action or brainstorming solutions during a disagreement.

2.5 The Significance of a Relational Pedagogy in Education

Pedagogy refers to the method and practices that guide teaching and learning. More specifically, a *relational* pedagogy places relationships at the heart of these teaching and learning experiences (NCSE, 2025). Prioritising a relational pedagogy in education affords a range of powerful opportunities that directly support children's sense of safety, along with their social, emotional and academic development (NCSE, 2025; Jones et al., 2021; Reeves and Le Mare, 2017). In early years education, meaningful relationships with others are central to

children's wellbeing, learning and identity formation (DES, 2018; NCCA, 2023; NCCA, 2024b). Egan et al. (2021: 931) maintain that positive, consistent relationships are key indicators of quality in early childhood education and care settings, which is further highlighted in Irish policy and legislation. The concept of a relational pedagogy is deeply embedded in the early childhood framework, *Aistear*. This framework affirms that 'relationships are at the very heart of learning and development' (NCCA, 2009: 14). This concept in mirrored in the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF), which acknowledges the role of relationships as a key principle of learning, teaching and assessment, highlighting that caring relationships within the school 'support and impact positively on children's engagement, motivation, and learning (NCCA, 2023: 6). In this way, the significance of relationships to children's overall development is both explicitly and implicitly woven throughout the curriculum and valued as essential for nurturing each child's full potential.

Yet, there remains a significant gap between stakeholders' aspirations and practical support for teachers (Phillippo et al., 2018; Chamberlain et al., 2020). While faculty in education programmes tend to stress the need for these caring relationships, there is often limited guidance and training on how to practically cultivate and sustain these relationships (Phillippo et al., 2018). As a result, teachers are left to rely on trial-and-error in developing relational pedagogies, which can be especially challenging in high pressure, curriculum loaded environments. With increasing concerns about the prevalence of children's social and emotional difficulties, educators are expected to assume pedagogical responsibility for learners' proficiency in the socioemotional domain (Selman, 2003, cited in Reeves and Le Mare, 2017: 85).

2.6 Relational Pedagogy as a Foundation for Social and Emotional Development

A growing body of research underscores the central role of relationships in supporting children's social and emotional development. A basic tenet of adopting a relational approach to SEL is that children's positive development is contingent upon the presence of supportive, reliable relationships in their environment (Noddings, 2002, 2005; Pianta, 1999). For instance, Osher et al. (2020) maintain that positive, trusting relationships create safe, supportive learning environments conducive to children's socioemotional development. Jones et al. (2021: 22) are echoic of this, noting that 'relationships are the soil in which children's SEL competencies grow', emphasising the foundational role of human connection in socioemotional learning. In the Irish context, the NCCA (2024a) identifies positive teacher-student and peer relationships, alongside intentional SEL opportunities, as key protective factors in promoting overall student wellbeing.

Central to these relationships is the presence of a nurturing adult, whose consistent care, attunement and responsiveness help foster emotional security and social development. This aligns with Noddings' (2012) ethics of care, which positions the teacher as a relational figure who meets the students' academic, social and emotional needs. Similarly, Froebelian principles emphasise the importance of loving, respectful relationships in early education, asserting that 'all aspects of the child's life, thoughts, feelings, actions and relationships, are interrelated' (Tovey, 2020: 6). In the Irish context, the Aistear framework recognises that secure, nurturing relationships are central to children's holistic development.

In this light, a relational approach to SEL does not merely complement instruction but becomes the very foundation through which meaningful social and emotional learning occurs. A relational approach is deeply aligned with Froebelian principles, which advocate for the

nurturing of the *whole child,* and promotes a 'balanced repertoire' of social, emotional and cognitive skills in order to 'effectively tackle the complexities and demands of the twenty-first century' (OECD, 2015, as cited in Chen, 2024: 1). Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that SEL cannot be separated from the relational context in which it is taught and experienced.

2.6.1 The Role of the Nurturing Adult in Supporting SEL

Tovey (2020: 6), drawing on Froebel's work, notes that 'the role of the adult is to support the unfolding of each unique child through the sensitive, loving guidance'. This vision is echoed in the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009), which identifies the 'key adult' as central to young children's social and emotional learning, highlighting the importance of nurturing, attuned relationships in early years settings. Grounded in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), the presence of a nurturing adult plays a pivotal role in fostering children's social and emotional development. A securely attached child is more likely to explore, learn and regulate emotions effectively, conditions that are reinforced by warm, attuned teacher-student relationships (Reeves and La Mare., 2017). Attunement, as described by Rajammal (2024: 11218), involves a deep awareness and alignment with another person's emotional and developmental needs. In educational settings, this translates to teachers cultivating supportive environments by 'accurately read[ing] and appropriately respond[ing] to children's cues' (Reeves and La Mare, 2017: 86). Teacher attunement involves the capacity to sensitively perceive and respond to children's social, emotional and cognitive needs through empathy and attunement (Rajammal, 2024; Mustafa, 2024; Reeves and La Mare, 2017).

Mustafa (2024: 1403) defines teacher attunement as 'a nuanced understanding and responsiveness to the individual needs, emotions, and development stages of students'. Attuned

teaching fosters emotional safety, builds connection and helps educators to respond in ways that support both learning and regulation, thus supporting SEL (Jones et al., 2021). Egan et al. (2021) advocate for a slow pedagogy, urging educators to move at the rhythm and pace of the child, listening deeply, observing attentively and connecting meaningfully. This aligns with relational pedagogy's core aim of meeting the child where they are at (NCCAb, 2024). Attuned teachers don't just teach SEL, they embody it (Reeves and La Mare, 2017). Through sustained, reciprocal interactions, they teach and model empathy, co-regulation and positive relationships. These everyday moments become the fertile ground in which CASEL's core competencies can develop, reinforcing the importance of the teacher-child relationship as both a pedagogy and an outcome for meaningful SEL.

2.7 Enhancing Social and Emotional Learning through a Relational Pedagogy

Research indicates that most effective SEL practices were those that aligned with the each of the four elements represented by the acronym SAFE: (1) *sequenced* activities that use a connected set of competencies to foster skill development over time, (2) *active* forms of learning that used real-life experiences to practice and apply SEL skills. (3) *focused* time and attention given to developing social and emotional competencies and (4) *explicit* teaching of specific SEL skills (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL interventions that incorporated this set of criteria were found to be more effective in enhancing socioemotional skills and promoting prosocial behaviour (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2023). In line with this, Jones et al. (2018) encourage teachers to engage in the following practices that align with a SAFE, relational approach to SEL. These are identified and outlined in further detail below.

- **Teach:** Clearly name and provide children with explicit instruction in SEL concepts, vocabulary and skills in developmentally appropriate ways.

- **Model:** Model and live the desired SEL skills and attitudes to children
- **Practice:** Provide real-life opportunities for children to apply SEL skills, integrating practice into daily lessons and interactions
- **Discuss:** Take time to talk, explore and reflect when challenges arise, making links to SEL skills

(Jones et al., 2021: 28).

Teach

Explicit social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction builds social and emotional skills in age-appropriate ways through explicit lessons or classroom routines and structures (Durlak et al., 2011; Dusenbery et al., 2015). One powerful method of explicit teaching is through the intentional use of storybooks. Carefully selected literature can initiate age-appropriate discussions around emotions, friendships, conflict and empathy, helping children to name and navigate their feelings as per the CASEL (2020) SEL competencies. As Chen and Adams (2023) found, storybooks that contain such social and emotional content, combined with guided discussion, are effective strategies to support children to identify and express their emotions. These conversations can be deepened through the use of visuals, targeted questioning and prompts that scaffold children's understanding. Tovey (2021) also advocates for the use of children's literature to build emotional resilience, thus improving socioemotional skills.

Model

In addition to explicit instruction, SEL is powerfully reinforced through teacher modelling. When teachers label their emotions, express empathy and demonstrate constructive responses to conflict, they provide authentic examples of SEL in action. Loizou and Loizou (2022) maintain that the teacher, acting as the more knowledgeable other, can guide and scaffold

learning by modelling, thinking aloud and posing questions. Regular emotion talk embedded in daily positive interactions not only strengthens children's social and emotional competence but builds relational trust. Alamos and Williford (2020) found that such interactions can enhance children's social skills in the classroom. In this way, the modelling of SEL becomes more than a strategy, it creates a classroom climate in which social and emotional growth is nurtured through everyday interactions and experiences.

Practice

Effective SEL implementation requires opportunities for children to actively practice SEL competencies in real-life contexts (Jones et al., 2021). One critical strategy to support emotional development is co-regulation, defined as warm, responsive interactions between an adult and child that scaffold the development of self-regulation skills (Murray et al., 2015). Co-regulations aligns with relational pedagogy by positioning the teacher as supportive, attuned figure who supports children in managing their emotional states through consistent guidance. In relation to social skill development, play-based learning offers a natural context for the rehearsal of socioemotional skills, including perspective-taking, negotiation and empathy (Akilovna, 2025). UNICEF (2020: 10) maintains that 'play sets the foundation for the development of critical social and emotional knowledge and skills' as children learn to connect with others, share, negotiate and resolve conflicts. Played-based learning harnesses children's innate tendency to engage in play, positioning it 'as a powerful medium for learning and development' (Akilovna, 2025: 87). Equally, Research highlights that unstructured play creates meaningful opportunities for children to co-construct knowledge and navigate social dynamics, thereby strengthening SEL competencies (NCCA, 2023; Weisberg et al., 2013). When underpinned by a relational pedagogy, play becomes a site of emotional and social connection

and growth, fostering intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies as per CASEL's (2025) SEL framework.

Discuss

Reflection and dialogue are central to SEL development (Jones et al., 2021). Whole-class discussions in response to emotional dysregulation or peer conflicts provide rich opportunities for children to reflect on experiences, share perspectives and make links to skill development (Jones et al., 2021). These reflective spaces are critical for transforming real-life challenges into teachable moments that can be transferred to the playground and other settings (Jones and Bouffard, 2012, Brown and Aber, 2008). The use of real-life scenarios can also support SEL by encouraging children to engage in responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2025). This aligns with the concept of 'causal talk', where teachers facilitate conversations about why emotions occurs and how they are expressed, enhancing emotional literacy and empathy (Salmon et al., 2013, Housman, 2017). Reflective questioning and problem-solving promote cognitive and emotional engagement, strengthening children's ability to apply SEL skills in both familiar and novel situations (Jones et al., 2021). Overall, these simple routines and interactions can promote the socioemotional development of the children and nurture a sense of belonging for every child, thus contributing to a more connected classroom.

2.8 Conclusion

In summary, understanding children's socioemotional wellbeing necessitates a recognition of their social contexts and the dramatic changes brought about by life-changing times with the pandemic. Covid-19 and the growing digitalisation of society is accelerating a critical reckoning; social and emotional learning must be central to education and can no longer take a

peripheral stance. Current socioemotional concerns highlight the unpredictable challenges facing contemporary society, particularly in relation to children's wellbeing and the pervasive influence of digital technology on young people's lives. Ongoing research is essential to equip educators with the necessary skills required to support children's social and emotional development in a rapidly evolving world. In the absence of widely validated Irish SEL programmes, my research seeks to explore the potential of a relational approach to social and emotional learning, in an effort to cultivate a more supportive, attuned classroom environment that prioritises the social and emotional needs of my pupils.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, consideration is given to the various methodological choices for this study, providing sound reasoning for action research as the chosen paradigm. I seek to demonstrate the influence of my values on these methodological choices and outline the fundamental role of critical reflection. A detailed evaluation of the research method is explored, with the inclusion of the data collection process. Equally, I narrate my personal research procedure, including an account of the preparation of the research project and research cycles. I outline descriptions and explanations of the interventions used during my cycles. Equally, I provide a description of the validation process and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a recount of my approach to the process of data analysis, which led to my overall findings.

3.2 Research Paradigms

According to McDonagh et al. (2020), the methodology chosen by a researcher should be informed by a research paradigm, rather than being determined solely by the research topic. Research paradigms refer to the underlying worldview that guides a researcher in their work (Cohen et al. 2018) and can underpin their patterns of thinking and research actions (Bassey, 2002). While multiple paradigms have been explored in educational research, Bassey (2002) proposes three main paradigms: positivist, interpretive and action research. The positive research paradigm functions on the belief that reality is fixed and objective (Bassey, 2002). In stark contrast, the interpretive researcher asserts that reality is subjective and socially constructed (Bassey, 2002). The final paradigm proposed is action research. The simplified purpose of this paradigm is to "improve action" and includes the researcher playing an active role as a participant in the research themselves. I chose a self-study action research approach as it stands apart from traditional paradigms in its emphasis on actionable change, collaboration

and a cyclical process that integrates action with reflection (Bassey, 2002). The values-laden element of self-study action research enabled me to investigate and evaluate my own practice in order to live closer to my values. Both Bassey (2002) and Cohen et al. (2018) stress that researchers must be aware of their chosen paradigm, as it shapes their understanding of the world and guides their methodological choices.

3.2.1 Educational Action Research

While interpretations and definitions of this evolving paradigm are countless, the literature consistently identifies one common thread; action research has the potential to generate change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). McDonagh et al. (2020:17) are echoic of this view when they assert, 'at its core, is a wish to enhance, change or improve' and arguably unlike other paradigms, 'not just to study it'. Perhaps the most distinguishable element of action research to traditional paradigms is that it includes the researcher as an active participant in the process, acknowledging the dual role of the 'practitioner-researcher' (McIntosh, 2010). The *self-study* approach to my action research project allowed me enhance my practice, validate my findings with my colleagues and critical friends and share these findings with other teachers (Hendricks, 2013). The self-study approach enabled me to 'be at the heart of the action and at the heart of the research' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 136). Furthermore, self-study action research cultivated a supportive, collaborative community through the form for critical friends, validation groups, colleagues and participants (McNiff, 2002; Samaras, 2011).

The integration of *action* and *research* has played a significant role in its appeal to the educational community (Cohen et al., 2018). Self-study action research resonated with me more than other paradigms, as I wish to play an active role in enhancing and transforming my own practice, my understanding of my practice and the conditions in which I practice (Kemmis,

2009: 463). I was most intrigued by self-study action research as a methodology due to its values-led approach and reflective process. A fundamental question to be explored in self-study action research is 'how can I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead, 1989: 95). This question is grounded in the desire to understand my practice and gain a deeper insight into the ways it can be enhanced. Through critical analysis of my values, I began to deconstruct this complex enquiry.

3.2.2 Values in Action Research

Cohen et al. (2018) assert that a researcher's paradigm is shaped by their ontological and epistemological values. My research is guided by my personal and professional belief that meaningful relationships are essential to early years education. My ontological commitment to caring relationships is a core principle that I aspire to live by and inform my daily practice. At the heart of my practice is the belief that children learn best when they feel safe, understood and connected, emotionally, socially and within their learning environment. I endeavour to nurture an emotionally safe classroom culture that is rooted in meaningful relationships, creating opportunities and space for holistic learning. My epistemological values are embedded in my belief that knowledge is co-constructed through a relational pedagogy and experiential learning, that promotes dialogue and demands reflexivity and reflection.

Prior to engaging in this project, I took considerable pride in my ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with my pupils, parents and colleagues. However, through critical reflection of my values during this self-study, I began to experience a sense of dissonance between my values and my practice. As I struggled to respond to the growing social and emotional needs in my classroom, I adopted a classroom management style that was increasingly authoritarian, one that unintentionally, began to damage relationships I had built with my pupils. My practice

emerged as a 'living contradiction', as I was enforcing discipline in ways that undermined the relational values I claimed to uphold (Whitehead, 1989). Navigating the balance between authority and empathy presented an ongoing tension in my practice. I often found myself torn between negotiating my authority while maintaining a supportive, relational environment. In trying to manage conflict, I struggled to share power with my pupils, and in the process, lost sight of the values that initially guided my teaching. Bradbury et al. (2019: 5) express action research as a potential catalyst for 'transformative action' due to its 'emphasis on the relational and emotional nature of the learners' and the 'willingness to practice more mutually transformative power'. I believe this drive for change was influenced heavily by my values and engagement with the reflective process.

3.2.3 Critical Reflection in Self-Study Action Research

Brookfield (2017: 3) defines critical reflection as the 'sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions'. The reflective process enabled me to recognise my own assumptions and challenge them accordingly. In order to seek validation and critically analyse my assumptions and daily practices, I examined myself and my practice from 'unfamiliar angles' (Brookfield, 2017: 61). Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of critical reflection include the students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory and personal experiences (see figure 3.1). These lenses guided my reflections and challenged my assumptions. Exploring my practice from the perspective of the children enabled me to examine if my actions aligned with my values. In inviting critical friends and my validation group to critique and interpret my work, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of my research within its context, which in turn, enlightened deeper insights and further understandings (McNiff, 2002). Despite differences in reflective frameworks, most theorists agree that action research is far from linear. For me, the reflective process involved continuous,

non-linear cycles that enabled me to critically engage with my own actions and values. Correspondingly, Pine (2008:30) claims that action research 'is a sustained, intentional, recursive, and dynamic process of inquiry'. Paradoxically, engaging in this recursive process daily enabled me to step back from my practice, and in doing so, brought me closer to it (Beauchamp, 2015).

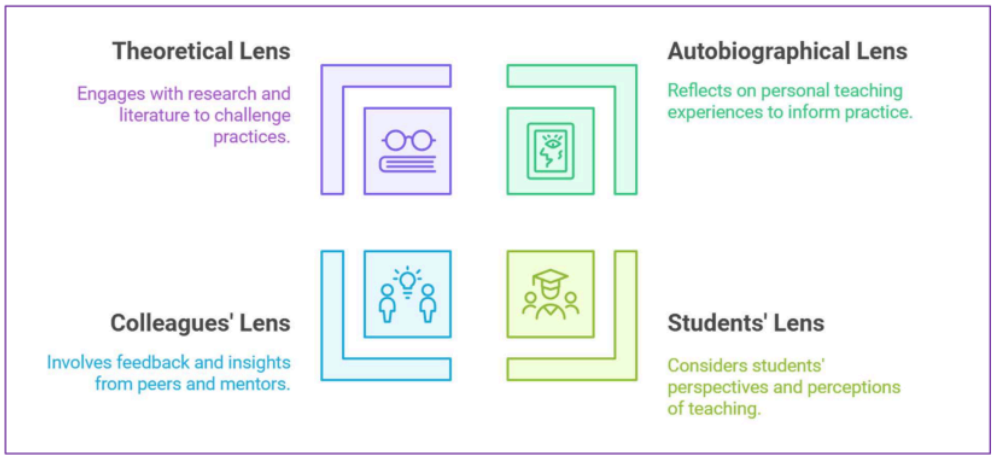


Figure 3.1 Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses of Critical Reflection

3.3 Research Method

I adopted a qualitative approach to my research as it aligned with the inherently relational aspects of my self-study project. Qualitative research places emphasis on subjectivity and descriptive accounts (Cohen et al., 2018). Its core purpose is to understand and interpret lived experiences as they naturally occur, while capturing the insider perspective (Hendricks, 2013). Despite criticisms of qualitative data due to its interpretive and arguably simplistic nature, Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) argue that underneath its simplicity, 'there is a good deal of complexity, requiring care and self-awareness from the researcher" (cited in Punch, 2014: 87). My data was centred on social interactions and the participants' lived experiences. Accordingly, qualitative research targets the social world (Scott and Morrison, 2006) and aims

to understand the perspectives of participants (Bell, 2014), which is central to my investigation. Wolcott (1992) suggests that qualitative research involves experiencing, enquiring and examining. In this way, the data tells a story of lived experiences with words, making it inherently subjective and interpretive (Blaxter, 2010; Watt, 2007). Throughout my study, the insights of my pupils, parents, critical friends and my validation group played an invaluable role in establishing credibility in my findings, as participants in my research. Qualitative data was gathered from four main sources, as illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 3.2 Data collection sources and tools

3.3.1 Data Collection

Throughout my action cycles, I checked the appropriateness of my data collection process on the three levels suggested by McDonagh et al. (2020). These included checking that my data collection methods were relevant and applicable on a practical level, ensuring they were relevant to the research context and finally, that they were aligned with my values base (McDonagh et al., 2020: 105). Reviewing the data and chosen methods against my values also avoided gathering excessive amounts of data, given time was in short supply. With this in mind, the data collection tools are outlined below.

3.3.2 Data Collection Tools

The data collection tools used throughout my research enabled me to record my learning journey in order to support any claims to knowledge. These tools comprise of a teacher reflective journal, observations, children's work samples, parent surveys and dialogue and are explored in more detail below.

Teacher Reflective Journal

I documented the story of my learning in my reflective journal over the course of the research, to demonstrate developments in my thinking, action and theorising (McNiff , 2013; Sullivan et al., 2016). I employed Gibb's Reflective Cycle (1988), to guide my reflective process throughout the study, as seen below in figure 3.3. This provided me with a structure to follow, avoiding the harsh, self-critique and negative internal power-dynamics that are partial to the reflective research process (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018; Walker and Oldford, 2020; Mohammed Idris et al. 2021). By questioning my emotional reactions to daily interactions (Gibbs, 1988) and their significance in shaping my actions and perspective (Moon, 2004), I was able to turn initial self-critique into valuable learning experiences that guided my practice in a transformative way.

Figure 3.3 Gibb's (1988) Reflective Cycle (adapted)

Journal entries included reflections on daily observations, interactions, conversations with all participants and events that took place in school, related to my research. These were shared in conversations with my critical friends and validation group for further discussion and critique (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). The use of a journal enabled me to "step back" from situations in order to develop a new awareness of patterns in my daily practice, allowing me to live more closely to my values (Sullivan et al., 2016: 41). I was fastidious in following the recommendations of Sullivan et al. (2016), in scheduling time for reflection each day so as to avoid the unreliability of memory.

Observations

Observations became an invaluable tool during my research process as they captured conversations, interactions and behaviours that occurred organically (McAteer, 2013, Marshall

et al., 2022). Throughout my study, observations focussed predominantly on my own practice, while taking the children's interactions, behaviours and feedback on interventions implemented into consideration. These observations enlightened me to areas of my practice that were either hindering or enabling connection, ensuring that I was living by my values. Observations taken in class were concise and later transcribed formally, in order to avoid distorting my interpretations of the them (McNiff, 2013). In order to alleviate bias, I endeavoured to take on the role of the detached observer when recording. Any names used were pseudonyms known only to myself.

Children's Work Samples

Considering the age and varying language abilities of the children in my class, I aimed to use children's work samples to represent their thoughts, feelings and potential new learning of some of the interventions. These included drawings and reflections that enabled some children to express their voice in a more developmentally appropriate way (Koller and San Juan, 2015).

Parent Surveys

Mukherji and Albon (2018) believe that surveys and questionnaires are valuable research tools as they are time efficient, use standardised questions to ensure consistency and provide a level of anonymity to promote more authentic responses from participants. Despite potential issues of bias and subjectivity, some researchers maintain that surveys function as an effective tool for gaining insight into emerging patterns or trends (Lowe and Zemliansky, 2010; McNiff, 2013). I distributed surveys to the parents of the children in my class at pre-intervention and post-intervention stages, seeking to consider how connection can be nurtured or hindered from their perspective. The responses were analysed and compared to record any attitudinal changes

following the implementation of my intervention and to examine any extent at which values were being lived out in practice (McNiff, 2013). I included a range of 'open and word-based' questions to enable the participants to 'explain and qualify their responses' (Cohen et al., 2007: 321) to suit the sensitivity of this study and gain rich insights (McNiff, 2013). I also included some closed questions in this survey so that comparisons could be made (Cohen et al., 2007).

Dialogue

Storybooks and play-based scenarios were used to stimulate dialogue at a whole class level with my pupils. Through these carefully constructed conversations, which I facilitated, through thoughtful questions, rather than controlled (Vaughan and Delong, 2019), I gained valuable insight into their social and emotional experiences, aligning with the relational ethos of the research. In parallel, ongoing dialogue with critical friends and my validation group supported reflexive meaning-making, helping me to interrogate and validate my interpretations and claims. These classroom and professional conversations were documented in my reflective journal and deepened my understanding of the children's learning (Tovey, 2020). This continuous dialogue among myself and the students and with critical friends created a feedback loop, as seen in the figure below, that informed my practice as a teacher and encouraged the 'learners' to think about their own learning (Baumfield et al., 2013: 26).

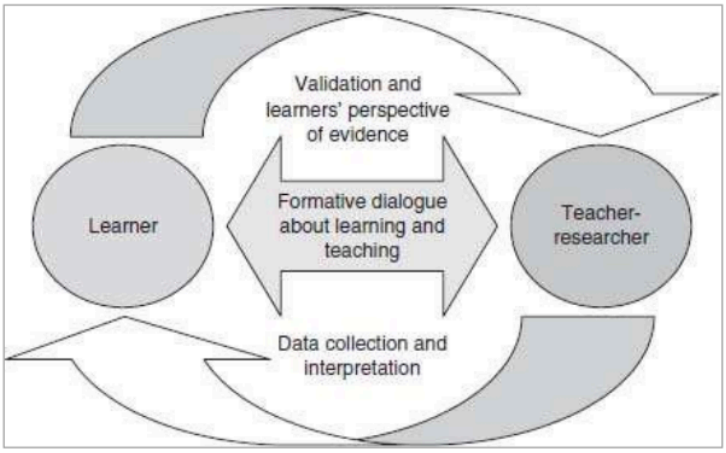


Figure 3.4 Formative Feedback Loop (Baumfield et al., 2013: 26)

In order to ensure my findings 'truly reflected the attitudes and beliefs of my respondents' (Baumfield et al., 2013: 26), I regularly reported my findings to all participants and critical friends and used them to later guide conversations.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

As young children participated in this study, it was essential that ethical issues were considered. Skånfors (2009) advocates for practitioners to employ their 'ethical radar' when conducting research with young children. The naturally complex setting of my Junior Infant classroom required me to use this 'radar' throughout all stages of the research process. This radar, along with other ethical actions taken, allowed me to mindfully consider the following ethical issues:

3.4.1 Informed Consent and Assent

It is vital to ensure that all participants are given accessible knowledge of the research intentions, understand that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any stage throughout the research process (Brooks et al., 2014). To safeguard this, all adult

participants, including parents, critical friends and colleagues in my validation group received information letters. I also provided all participating adults with my email address to answer any questions they had, ensuring open communication throughout the study. Parents received a written consent form to participate in an online, anonymous survey at the beginning and end of my data collection process. I invited parents to discuss my research with their child at home, before seeking written consent from the parents for their child to participate in my study. All information letters and consent forms can be seen in Appendices 1-6.

3.4.2 Child Assent

Dockett and Perry (2011) suggest that children's assent to partake in research should be understood as on ongoing negotiation rather than a one-time decision. It was imperative that I also built a relationship of trust with the children and parents in order to ensure the comfortability of participants and ensure that my research was carried out ethically (Dockett and Perry, 2011). Following approval from the Board of Management, I received parental consent to account for the assent of the children in my class. On receiving this, I verbally explained my project to the children, using child-friendly language and visuals, to the children in my class. I invited the children to express their 'written' assent using child-friendly language and visuals. Cocks (2006: 257-258) cautions that seeking assent 'is not something gained at the beginning of the research and then put aside' but requires constant vigilance from the researcher. With this in mind, I sought continued assent to detect any instances where the participants demonstrated any discomfort with the research process (Cohen et al., 2018) and employed my 'ethical radar' (Skånfors, 2009) at all times given the age of the participants. I continued to remind the children of their right to withdraw at any stage throughout my study and provided regular updates to participants regarding my research.

3.4.3 Data Storage and Confidentiality

Throughout my study, I adhered to the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, General Data Protection Regulation guidelines and the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy. I assured all participants that any data collected would remain anonymous and confidential, in line with my school's Acceptable Usage Policy and Data Protection Policy. I stored any hard documents, such as my reflective journal and children's work samples, in a locked filing cabinet in my classroom that only I had access to. All soft data was typed up and stored on a password encrypted folder on a USB stick, which was also kept in the locked filing cabinet in my classroom. When presenting data, I ensured anonymity by using pseudonyms for participants' names. All surveys remained anonymous. All data will be destroyed after ten years, following the university requirements.

3.4.4 Power Dynamics

Morrow and Richards (1996) assert that disparities in power between adults and children can be the greatest ethical challenge of all. This was particularly relevant in my research, working with young children. Throughout my research I remained conscious and vigilant to power dynamics that presented, due to my position of authority. I did my utmost to remain cognisant of potential bias presented by the children and the influence my role as a teacher may have on the children's actions or feedback. To mitigate this and the negative impact these inevitable dynamics can have on the quality of evidence (Halpenny, 2021), I prioritised trusting relationships with my pupils and ongoing assent. Furthermore, Walker and Oldford (2020) maintain that reflection cannot occur without risk to one's self-conception. Throughout the research process, power dynamics also surfaced internally, as I critically reflected on moments where I couldn't fully meet the social or emotional needs of every child in my class. This often evoked feelings of discomfort and guilt. To address this issue with care, I aimed to take on a

curious reflective role, engaging in critical analysis of my thoughts, emotions, behaviours and daily practices throughout the process in my reflective journal. As Farrell (2005: 76) notes, the imbalance of power becomes particularly delicate when the wellbeing of children is at stake. Recognising this, I approached the research process with care, humility and a commitment to the reflective process, trusting that 'with risk comes the possibility for reward' (Walker and Oldford, 2020: 288).

3.5 Research Plan

I recount the research plan and procedure specific to my project below, detailing my chosen research design and a projected timeframe of my project.

3.5.1 Research Design

While there is a plethora of frameworks to choose from, Sullivan et al. (2016: 75) describe action research as a set of actions; *plan, act, observe, reflect, revise the plan, act, observe, and reflect*, with these steps repeating in cycles. My research was conducted over two action cycles. I chose to engage with McNiff and Whitehead's (2009) model that includes five stages in each research cycle, as seen in figure 3.5 below. The questions raised and reflections documented while engaging with this model, along with the gathering of data in the first cycle, enabled me to implement changes to my practice during the second cycle.

Figure 3.5 Action Research Cycle (based on McNiff and Whitehead, 2009)

3.5.2 Timeframe of the Research

The timeframe of my project was subject to change given the evolving, non-linear and messy nature of action research (Johnson, 2008). Following ethical approval, data collection began from January 2025 and concluded in May 2025. In preparation for action cycle one, once ethical approval was granted, I organised a meeting with my validation group and critical friends to discuss my concerns and educational values. Combining this data, with relevant literature and an analysis of my reflective journal to date, I developed a set of intervention strategies ahead of cycle one, while keeping Durlak's (2011), essential SAFE elements of effective SEL instruction in mind. An outline of my timeline can be seen in appendix 7.

3.6 The Intervention

My intervention took place over a 12-week period and included two cycles. Cycle one was conducted for five weeks, while cycle two was seven weeks in length. Research shows that sequenced interventions that teach intrapersonal skills, such as self-awareness and self-management *before* interpersonal skills, such as relationship-building or conflict resolution, lead to enhanced outcomes for children's socioemotional learning (Cipriano et al., 2023). Consequently, my intervention in cycle one addressed the development of children's emotional skills, prioritising emotional awareness and regulation skills, while cycle two focused on the development of the children's social skills.

3.6.1 Action Cycle One

The intervention strategies implemented in cycle one can be seen in figure 3.6 and are outlined in further detail later in section 3.6.3. A detailed overview of the lessons can be seen in appendix 8.

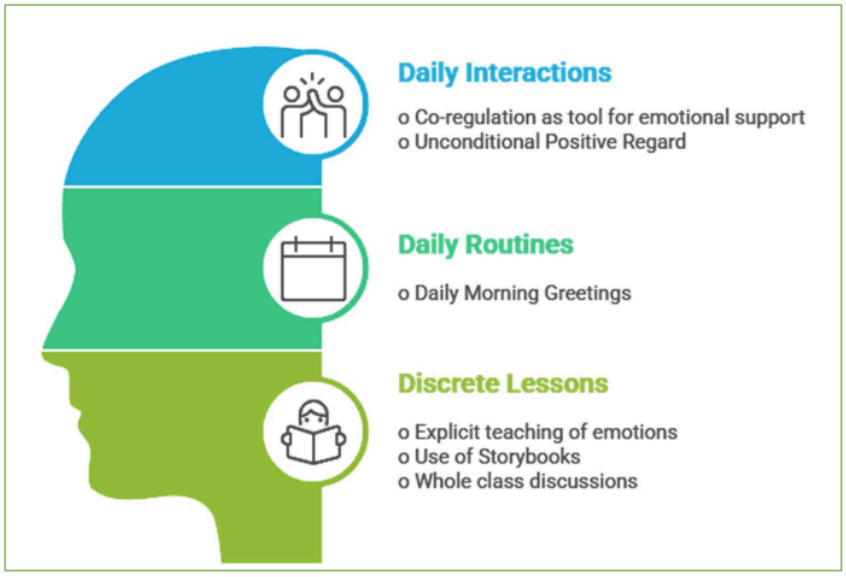


Figure 3.6 Intervention Strategies for Cycle One

3.6.2 Action Cycle Two

Changes in cycle two were made to address the insights gained from cycle one, as per McNiff and Whitehead's (2009) action research model and to better meet the social and emotional needs identified during the initial phase. The strategies used in cycle two can be seen in figure 3.7 below. A detailed overview of the interventions for cycle two can be seen in appendix 9.

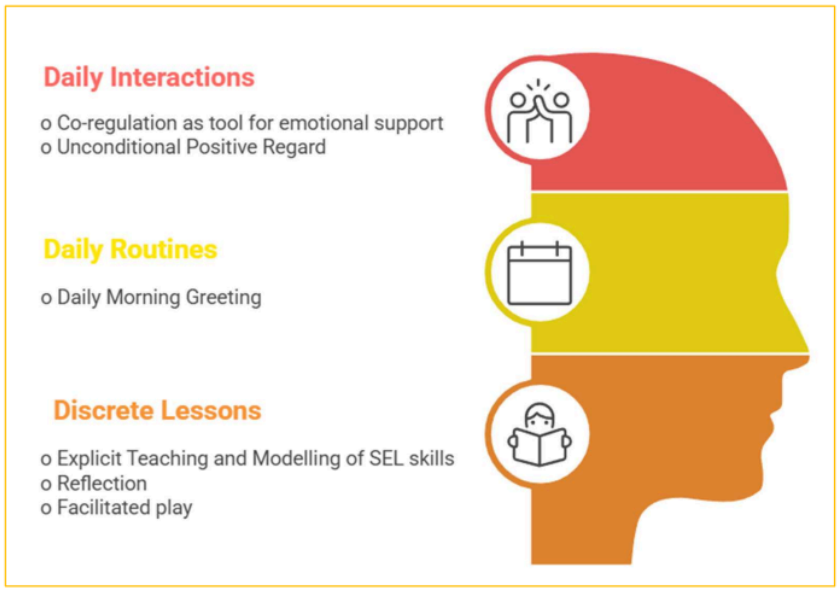


Figure 3.7 Intervention Strategies for Cycle Two

3.6.3 A Narrative of the Intervention

In both cycles, social and emotional competencies were nurtured through a combination of direct and indirect strategies, as suggested by Chen (2024). Both cycles adopted a similar structure, using the four elements of effective SEL instruction, referred to as S.A.F.E, as proposed by Durlak et al. (2011); *sequenced, active, focused* and *explicit*. These steps enabled me to organise the children's learning activities and environment to support the development of their social and emotional competencies, without being overly prescriptive.

Sequenced Instruction

CASEL's (2025) framework for SEL supported me in planning a series of connected steps to progressively build and strengthen the children's social and emotional skills over time, reflecting the sequenced element of the SAFE approach (Durlak et al., 2011). Cipriano et al. (2023) also advocate for the sequenced teaching of SEL, maintaining that children's intrapersonal skills should be developed *before* interpersonal skills. Accordingly, the first cycle of my intervention focused on CASEL's (2025) intrapersonal competencies. These skills sought to develop children's self-awareness and self-management, by supporting children to recognise and manage their emotions (CASEL, 2025). According to the NCSE (2025: 18) 'co-regulation is one of the first processes of learning how to self-regulate'. When children experienced moments of dysregulation., such as shouting, withdrawing or crying, I used Perry's (2019) Three R's, *regulate, relate, reason,* as a scaffold to guide the process of co-regulation with my pupils (appendix 10). I taught and modelled various ways to regulate by demonstrating regulation strategies to the children, such as taking deep breaths, taking a drink, doodling, talking it out, using a fidget (appendix 11). These practices were embedded in daily routines and grounded in unconditional positive regard, valuing and accepting each child without judgement. As such, they demonstrated the importance of the attuned role of the teacher and reflected my values of a relational pedagogy. After placing an emphasis on emotional skills in cycle one, the children began to show increased confidence and age-appropriate ability to recognise and manage their emotions. This intrapersonal foundation enabled more effective development of social skills in cycle two, building on what they had already learned (Cipriano et al., 2023).

Active Instruction

These skills may not have been developed meaningfully without regular opportunities for children to apply them in real-life situations throughout the school day (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). To ensure effective SEL instruction, I incorporated active forms of learning, when possible, which required children to engage directly with the skills being taught through real-life application (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) maintain that active learning, such as modelling, real-life scenarios and reflection, is essential for supporting the internalisation of social and emotional competencies. Similarly, CASEL (2025) propose that children learn SEL skills most effectively when given meaningful opportunities to apply them. In cycle one, during moments of dysregulation, I prompted children to use regulation strategies that had been explicitly taught and modelled, such as deep breathing, talking about it or having some quiet time. Storybooks also served as powerful tools for active learning as children connected emotionally with characters feelings and reflected on their own similar experiences (Denham, 2006).

In cycle two, in order to provide further opportunities to practice developing social and emotional competencies, I facilitated play-based interactions in the hope to improve children's regulation skills, strengthen social skills and develop greater empathy (Akilovna, 2025). I introduced problem-solving scenarios (appendix 13) and facilitated opportunities for play-based interactions, encouraging children to practice empathy, turn-taking and conflict resolution (CASEL, 2025). Facilitating targeted discussion (Chen and Adams, 2023) on These strategies enhanced the meaningful integration of SEL into authentic classroom experiences.

Focused Instruction

The *focused* element of the SAFE framework involved dedicating specific time and facilitating activities that targeted the development of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). Throughout both cycles, I intentionally designed activities that concentrated on building children's emotional and social competencies. Cycle one took on a more structured approach as I explicitly modelled emotional language and regulation skills and explicitly taught these skills through the use of storybooks. Each morning, I also dedicated time to greet children individually at the classroom door, offering a smile, wave, high five, or letting them choose how they would like to connect. These greetings helped establish a sense of predictability and ritual, allowing each child to feel noticed and valued as they entered the learning space, contributing to a safe classroom culture conducive to the socioemotional development of the children (NSCE, 2025).

Although cycle two adopted a less structured approach based on findings that emerged from cycle one, opportunities for SEL application remained intentionally focused. In order strengthen teacher-student relationships with "hard-to-reach" children, I adopted the two-by-ten strategy (NCSE, 2025) during facilitated play times, dedicating two minutes of uninterrupted, relationship-focused interaction with a targeted child for ten consecutive days. This approach enabled me to foster positive teacher-student relationships through consistent, individualised interactions (NCSE, 2025) promoting mutual respect and positively influencing student behaviour (Smith and Lambert, 2008). The use of conflict resolution scenarios, as advocated by Durlak et al. (2011), before playtime promoted whole-class discussions in which the children problem-solved together to create solutions to common conflicts during play time. During the pre-play phase, I implemented a structured approach that included independent thinking time, peer discussion and collaborative planning. This scaffolded process allowed children to first reflect individually, then negotiate with peers about play partners and shared

intentions and finally co-construct plans with their chosen group. This approach aimed to foster a more harmonious play environment that fostered peer relationships and collaboration, building on the interpersonal SEL skills as outlined by CASEL (2025). These interactions enabled children to apply the interpersonal SEL competencies in real time (Jones et al., 2021), practicing social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2025) as they naturally engaged in perspective-taking, developed positive peer relationships, collaborated and problem-solved with one another in a safe environment (CASEL, 2020).

Explicit Instruction

In both cycles I ensured that each activity clearly targeted a specific emotional or social skill and ensured that the children were aware of what they were learning and why, as advised by Durlak et al. (2011). As mentioned, storybooks were used as a tool to explicitly introduce and discuss "big" feelings (sadness, anger, happiness and fear), in an effort to create a relaxed atmosphere in which children felt safe to engage in discussions and make personal connections. As Tovey (2021) notes, the narrative and visuals in storybooks help scaffold children's emotional understanding. Whole-class discussions following the exploration of each storybook afforded opportunities for children to connect their own emotional experiences and coping strategies to those of the characters. I used question prompts pitched at an appropriate level for the children, adapted from Reid et al. (2012) Kid's Empathic Development Scale (KEDS) (Appendix 15). This use of questioning ensured I was facilitating, rather than controlling the conversation, as encouraged by Vaughan and Delong (2019: 79). These sessions concluded in the co-construction of a personalised "coping toolbox" for each emotion explored, scaffolding the children's emerging self-regulation skills (Appendix 11).

In cycle two I continued to scaffold the children's learning through explicit modelling and teaching, while focusing on social skills in response to gaps identified during the previous cycle. I adapted Perry's (2019) regulation framework to the C.A.L.M (Connect, Acknowledge, Limit, Move) approach, as I found it more effective to first connect with the children emotionally before supporting them in regulating. The 'limit the behaviour' element proved valuable in setting clear behavioural boundaries, helping to maintain a sense of safety and predictability in the classroom (Appendix 12). Visual prompts and sentence stems were introduced to support the explicit teaching of these skills, serving both as an instructional tool during lessons and as ongoing visual cues for the pupils, reinforcing appropriate language and concepts such as showing we care and giving an apology, ultimately nurturing positive social interactions and developing peer relationships.

3.7 Validation Process

Shipman (2014) contends that one must demonstrate replicability, reliability, credibility and generalisability as requirements for rigour and validity when conducting social research. Conversely, McDonagh (2017) acknowledges that 'the validation process has to be even more stringent' to the personal and reflective nature of action research (cited in Glenn et al., 2023: 89). Consequently, I employed personal and social validity processes in my study. I endeavoured to reach personal validity by keeping my values at the core of my research and my practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). I gained social validity through comprehensible, authentic, truthful and appropriate discourses (Habermas, 1976). Winter (2002: 145) claims that this authenticity can be strengthened through the 'genuine voice' of the researcher which 'belongs to those whose life-worlds are being described'. Much of this authentic and truthful dialogue unfolded in conversations with the children, colleagues, critical friends and my validation group.

3.7.1 Validation Group and Critical Friends

At the beginning of the research project, I convened a validation group in order to strengthen the rigour of the validation process as recommended by Sullivan et al. (2016). Three colleagues that I worked alongside, as well as the wellbeing lead in our school formed my validation group. Two formal meetings with this group were conducted throughout the research process to ensure the accuracy and reliability of my data throughout the research process. This ensured collaborative and dialogical approaches were engaged with throughout the research process (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Glenn et al., 2023). This group created a space for me to present an account of my findings, which the members critically assessed and analysed, in terms of whether the data supported a claim to generating new knowledge (Glenn et al., 2023: 83). Throughout the entirety of this study, I liaised closely with my critical friends, who shared their critique and advice, key elements of the critically reflective process (McNiff, 2013; Brookfield, 2017). I was thorough in meeting my critical friends throughout my study to consider and review my research and ideas, ensuring these were aligned with my values (Feldman et al., 2018).

3.7.2 Triangulation

I used triangulation to enhance the credibility of my qualitative data, by drawing on multiple sources of data (Cohen et al., 2018) that were dated and signed in my reflective journal. The use of children's work samples and recorded observations of pupil interactions conveyed the perspective and voice of the children, while parent questionnaires documented different perspectives. My teacher journal recorded conversations with critical friends and my validation group and also narrated my own learning journey throughout the research process. Finally, my engagement with literature throughout the process extended my learning and continued to

inform my practice. The process of triangulation enhanced the authenticity and validity of my work as it empowered me to view the situation through the eyes of others (LaBoskey, 2004: 847).

3.8 Analysis of Data

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis was used to examine my qualitative data, catering for the flexibility required for the complex nature of my research. During the data collection process, I filtered through the data gathered, using codes to identify any patterns and connections, allowing themes to naturally emerge from various lenses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially, I assembled codes into basic candidate themes, extracting 3 main themes and 20 sub-themes from the data, as seen in figure 3.6 below.

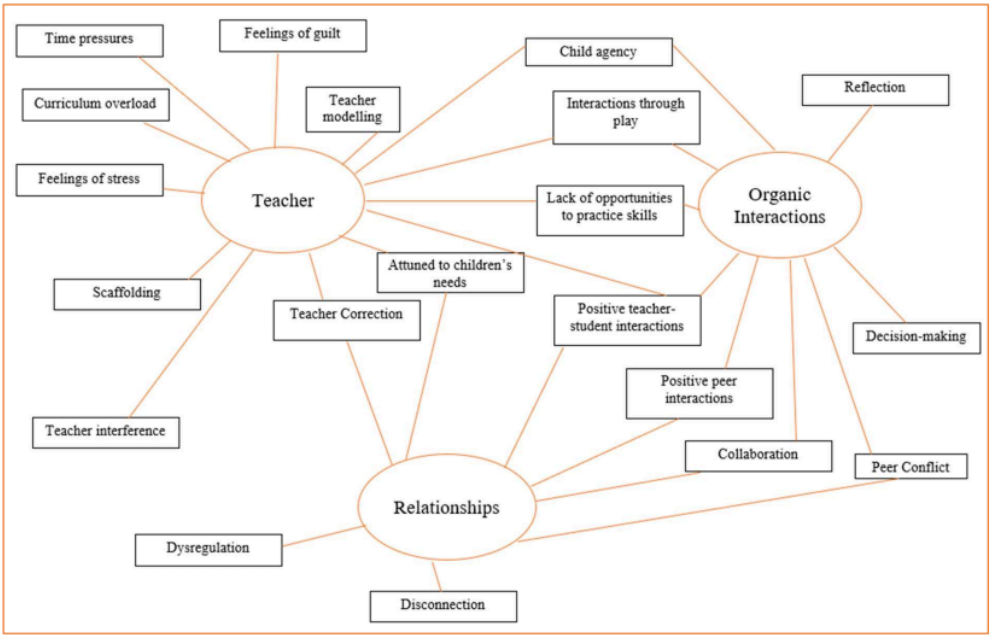


Figure 3.8 A Thematic Map of Sub-Basic Themes

From here, I revised these themes to 'facilitate the most meaningful interpretation of the data' (Byrne, 2021: 1406). As seen in figure 3.7 below, I extracted two central themes and related sub-themes that contributed 'to the overall narrative of the data' (Byrne, 2021: 1404). I identified names for each theme and sub-theme at the write-up stage accordingly (Appendix 14), in the hope that they would coalesce 'to create a lucid narrative that is consistent with the content of the dataset and informative in relation to the research questions' (Byrne, 2021: 1407).

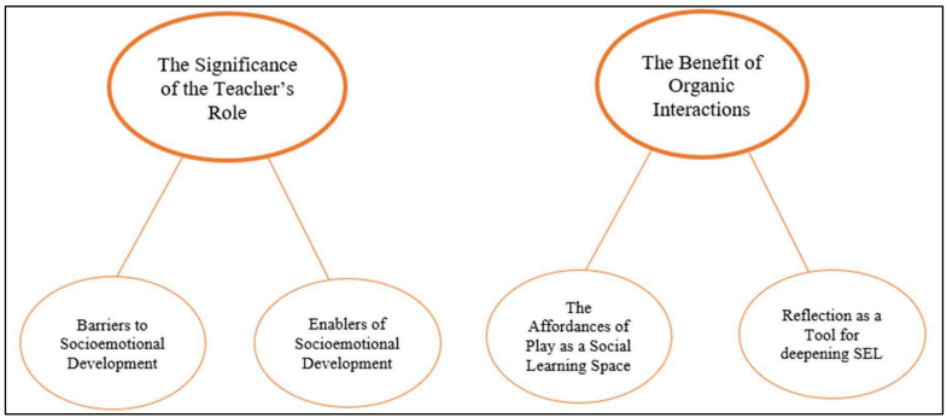


Figure 3.9 Final Themes and Sub-Themes

3.9 Conclusion

Self-study action research was the methodology chosen for this project to enable me to explore the disconnect between my values and my practice. I recognised that addressing this dissonance could lead to lasting, transformative change in my practice and identity as a teacher. Ethical approval was obtained prior to collecting qualitative data throughout the research. Data was analysed thematically, allowing me to construct a coherent narrative of my research journey and make sense of the evolving relationship between my practice, values and professional growth.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This study found that a combined approach of prioritising a relational pedagogy, integrating explicit social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction and leveraging organic interactions, effectively supports the social and emotional development of young children. Central to this approach was the teacher's role in becoming attuned to the needs of the children in order to facilitating such opportunities for growth. As such, *The Significance of the Teacher's Role* and *The Benefit of Organic Interactions* emerged as main themes from the study. Meanwhile, sub-themes served to explore my ancillary questions, enabling me to explore my role in supporting social and emotional development, identifying key barriers and enablers, and examining how teachable moments can be used to foster SEL. This chapter presents a synthesis of the data analysis process and discusses the emerging themes in relation to the research question. Pseudonyms are used in place of the children's names to assure the anonymity of all participants.

The story of how these findings emerged is presented below.

4.2 The Significance of the Teacher's Role

The teacher's role was found to be critical in shaping children's social and emotional development with the potential to either support or impede the growth of their socioemotional skills.

4.2.1 Barriers to Socioemotional Development

During the initial phase of research, I encountered various challenges that impeded the development of children's social and emotional skills, including a lack of regulation skills, teacher correction, an over-reliance on the teacher and time constraints.

A Lack of Regulation Skills

From the outset, I aimed to create a classroom atmosphere rich in opportunities for social and emotional development. As I commenced the data collection process, the objective for cycle one was to cultivate an environment where 'emotions are welcomed and discussed' (Garcia Peinado, 2024) in order to support the emotional, and subsequently, social, needs in the class. Early observations revealed that many children struggled to cope with the prevalence of "big" emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear and excitement. According to the NCSE (2025: 20), dysregulation occurs 'when a pupil's stress level becomes too much to manage'. These moments of dysregulation presented as behaviours such as shouting, withdrawing or physical outbursts in my classroom and generally appeared to be triggered by peer conflict and teacher correction, creating significant barriers to connection:

> *'I want to connect with the children but I feel like the lack of regulation skills are hindering connections between me and the children and the children themselves… They are getting so frustrated at each other especially during play time"*
>
> (Reflective Journal (RJ), 16th January 2025).

From the beginning, it was evident that while all children were able to identify basic emotions (angry, sad, scared, happy) in structured lessons (Appendix 16), and reasons for these emotions (Appendix 17), many experienced difficulties in applying this knowledge without adult intervention, to real, social contexts in which they were involved.

One parent commented:

> *"Often times while my child can technically name feelings and reasons behind feelings it might take a lot of questions to lead her to identify the correct feeling and reason in that instance"* (Parent Participant (PP), 22nd January 2025).

In January, I recorded multiple social instances that portrayed a disconnect among the children in the classroom. These occasions appeared to be more prevalent during unstructured play-time.

One child commented after a play session:

> *"That wasn't fun. Ryan was screaming at me"* (Danny, 28th January 2025).

> *"When I intervened in an attempt to solve the conflict for the children, correcting Ryan for shouting at Danny, Ryan exclaimed to Danny, 'I'm never doing anything with you ever again!' and withdrew from lessons for the remainder of the day"*

(RJ, 28th January 2025).

Another observation recorded a child comment on Ryan's behaviour:

> *"I'm not playing with Ryan 'cause he's always shouting at us and he gets really mad"*

(Joe, 5th February 2025).

suggesting that Ryan's dysregulated behaviour was beginning to impact his social connections within the class group. These instances illustrate how dysregulated behaviour hindered peer relationships (Porter and Ingram, 2021; Cameron-Whiting and Tekell, 2021), behaviours that often stemmed from a lack of socioemotional skills, including emotional overwhelm, the limited ability to manage emotions, or resolve conflict independently. However, it also became clear that my own reactions could unintentionally reinforce this disconnect, leading me to

reflect more critically on the impact of teacher-led correction in moments of perceived conflict or emotional difficulty.

Correction *over* Connection

As the study progressed, I began to notice how my instinctive responses to challenging behaviour, involved giving corrective feedback to the children, sometimes creating further distance between myself and the child, and ultimately, hindering classroom relationships (Endedijk et al., 2021). One journal entry noted:

> *"I prompted Jack to improve his colouring… Jack tore up his page and exclaimed 'I'm never coming to school again! I felt so guilt for how I made him feel. A later conversation revealed that he felt hurt by my comment and his peer's reactions as he felt his 'colouring was bad'"* (RJ, 13th January 2025).

A critical friend reassured me that:

> *"Revisiting the incident shows your commitment to restoring the relationship and understanding the emotional impact it had on the child. You acknowledged that your intention didn't match the impact and shows you were tuning in to his needs"*
>
> (Critical Friend Feedback (CFF), 28th January 2025).

acknowledging that:

> *"Sometimes we react to situations without thinking rather than responding with compassion... but what seems like a thoughtless comment to us can be interpreted as them feeling not good enough"* (CFF, 28th January 2025).

These moments emphasised how a focus on control and corrective feedback, even when well-intentioned, could undermine the trust and sense of safety essential to a supportive learning environment that supports the social and emotional needs of the children.

An Over-Reliance on the Teacher

Up to this point in the research process, I frequently assumed responsibility for resolving social and emotional challenges, inadvertently reducing the children's agency to apply and internalise the skills.

During a whole-class discussion, one child remarked:

> *"If there's a problem and someone is being mean to me I just tell you* (the teacher) *and you fix it for me"* (Jack, Whole Class Discussion (WCD), 4th February 2025).

While another child observed:

> *"Oh this boy's upset cause she ripped his picture do you see that? I'd feel sad and he crying if that was me. And that's it and I'd just tell you. You could tell her not to do that again"* (Isabelle, WCD, 23rd January 2025).

Additionally, when asked if their child can use strategies to resolve conflict with others without adult support, four parents noted "rarely", while six noted "sometimes" (Parent Questionnaire, 22nd January 2025).

Meanwhile, a critical friend noted that

> *"we often jump in too soon and resolve the conflict for them, which makes them just depend on us"* (CFF) 19th March 2025).

suggesting that instead,

> *"we need to teach these soft skills directly so that they can try to figure it out for themselves before we intervene"* (CFF, 19th March 2025).

Although conflict management is a typical aspect of the junior infant classroom, given the children's stage of development, I recognised that my interference in dealing with emotions and conflict, appeared to result in escalated tensions and further frustration, hindering socioemotional development in the classroom:

> *"When I intervened in an attempt to solve the conflict for the children, correcting Ryan for shouting at Danny, Ryan exclaimed to Danny 'I'm never doing anything with you ever again!' and withdrew from lessons for the remainder of the day"*
>
> (RJ, 28th January 2025).

While well-intentioned, my response in this situation lacked emotional attunement to the needs of the child and may have instilled a sense of shame on the child, thereby undermining the safe learning environment crucial to social and emotional development (Haas, 2023; Jones et al., 2021). Furthermore, this response contradicted my core value of fostering caring, supporting relationships in the classroom.

Time Constraints

Time constraints also presented a major obstacle during cycle one. While storybooks proved to be powerful tools for emotional literacy, the limited time available to explore them meaningfully was noted by both myself and critical friends:

> *"There's so little time to do these meaningful lessons effectively in depth, between stay safe, RSE and all the other subjects"*
>
> (Critical Friend Feedback (CFF) 4th February 2025).

Another critical friend added:

> *"It's hard because they need to be explicitly taught these skills but how do factor in time for everything?"* (CFF, 4th March 2025).

The workload required to address the social and emotional needs of the children felt unsustainable within the current structure of the school day. I encountered what Dadd's (2001: 49-53) refers to as the pressure of the 'hurry-along-curriculum'. This internal conflict is conveyed in a journal entry:

> *"I feel like my priorities are totally askew. I feel so under pressure to reach all the curricular outcomes and get these lessons done for my research but I just want to stop, pause and actually connect with my children"*
>
> (Reflective Journal (RJ), 7th February 2025).

I recognised that I was slipping back into my old, habitual practice that no longer aligned with my values. I began to feel overwhelmed by the complexity of socioemotional needs in the classroom. The layered nature of social and emotional learning, combined with the demands of the daily classroom, caused me to lose sight of my original vision at times. I found it necessary during these stages to revisit and reflect on my core value of meaningful relationships to assess whether it was being fully realised in my practice (Sullivan et al., 2016: 114). This realisation became a turning point in my research, prompting me to adjust my approach in cycle two and strive more consciously to live in accordance with the values I set out to uphold.

4.2.2 Enablers of Socioemotional Development

Identifying these barriers early in the study allowed me to become aware of the tensions between my practice and my values. I interpreted these insights as a chance to shift my practice towards a more facilitative role, in order to effectively scaffold social and emotional learning (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024). Equally, I took it as an opportunity to become more attuned to the children's needs and adopt a more relational approach that supported the social and emotional learning of my pupils (Reeves and La Mare, 2017). This section examines how social and emotional learning can enhanced when teachers prioritise relationships and model the appropriate language, tools and strategies to support children's socioemotional development (Jones et al., 2021). The section concludes by exploring how the intentional withdrawal of adult scaffolding revealed children's growing social and emotional abilities.

Positive Relationships

Prioritising a relational pedagogy provides a strong foundation for socioemotional development (NCCA 2023; NCCA, 2024a), The Guidance for Good Practice Aistear document states that 'unhurried routines create time and space for… young children to be in the present moment, enjoying each other's company' (NCCA, 2024: 13). Daily routines became a powerful vehicle for building and nurturing relationships in the junior infant classroom, providing space for social and emotional learning to occur. These routines created moments of consistent, warm interactions that supported children's emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging (NCSE, 2025). Daily greetings and one-to-one moments enabled strong, supportive relationships between the teacher and children, improving children's relationship-building competency, as per CASEL's (2025) framework for SEL.

Daily morning greetings had a notable impact on social development in the classroom. Children came to expect and look forward to this moment, often initiating the greeting themselves.

My reflective journal noted:

> *"These morning greetings feel like a literal doorway to connection. Alice, who had been initially withdrawn on arrival, was lined up first at the door today to do her 'Say Hey, Your Way"* (RJ, 4th February 2025).

A critical friend commented:

> *"It seems to set the tone for the day. It gives a chance for the children to be seen and connect with you from the very start of the day"* (CFF, 8th April 2025).

An appreciation of the benefit of morning greetings was evident in feedback from the children:

> *"Teacher we forgot to do Say Hey Your Way, I want to do a dance with you today"* (Evan, 13th March 2025).

with one child suggesting:

> *"Can we do a big class group hug today for say hey your way?"* (Cara, 10th April 2025).

This appreciation emphasised the impact of this small but consistent act on relationships in the classroom and was aligned with my values. As Kriete (2003) acknowledges, 'the way we begin each day in our classroom sets the tone for learning and speaks volumes about what and whom we value'.

One-to-one moments occurred during play time and were led entirely by the child's interests. I asked open-ended questions and only engaged with the play when invited by the child. Initially, I identified two children from the outset, Ryan and Elaine, who demonstrated challenges with relationship-building skills (CASEL, 2025). Over the ten-day period, observational data indicated that both children responded positively to these one-to-one moments, demonstrating increased in positive engagement in social interactions

A critical friend noted a change in Ryan's behaviour commenting that:

> *"Giving him that time and space to connect and share his thoughts has been so crucial to the school day. It has transformed the morning routine, maybe he knows that he can look forward to that time with you now, rather than looking for it* [connection] *in… maybe a more negative way"* (CFF, 7th March 2025).

Similarly for Elaine, a child who appeared to be more socially withdrawn in the classroom, teacher reflections recorded improvements in social interactions with the teacher and peers. During the intervention, Elaine initiated conversation with the teacher on five occasions during play time in week two, compared to zero instances in the first week of the intervention:

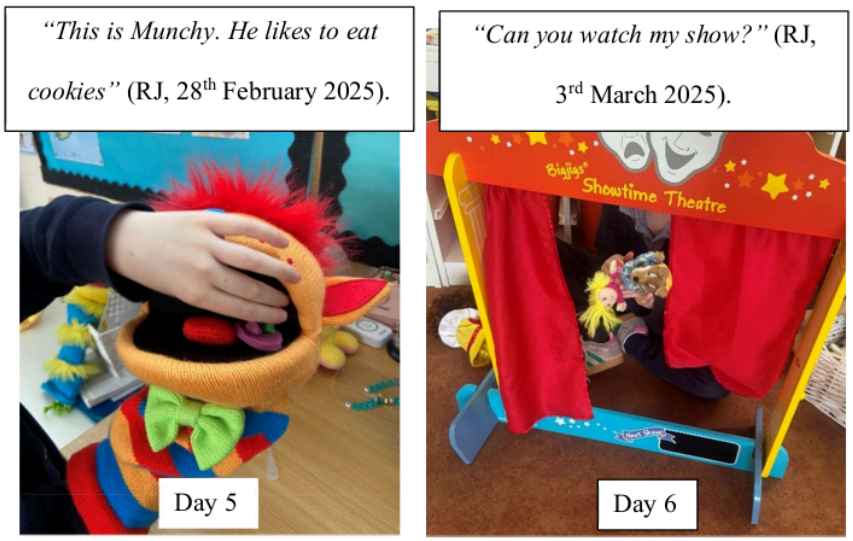


Figure 4.1 Elaine initiating interactions with the teacher

On the seventh day, Elaine expressed a need to me:

> *"I have no one to play with"* (RJ, 4th March 2025).

This shift indicated that these one-to-one interactions and consistent presence of the teacher provided a secure relational base for the child, reinforcing feelings of trust and safety, while demonstrating the child's increased self-awareness (CASEL, 2025). I interpreted this as an opportunity to support Elaine to meet her social needs, offering some advice:

> *"You could ask: Can I play with you?"* (RJ, 4th March 2025).

The following day, Elaine asked two other children in the class who were playing with the puppets if she could join in with them:

Figure 4.2 Collaborative Play: Elaine's Puppet Show with two other children in the class

The intentional integration of these routines significantly strengthened teacher-child relationships. They created a sense of safety, predictability, and belonging, (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024), especially for children who found it difficult to connect in a positive way. These findings align with existing research on relational pedagogy, which underscores the importance of consistent, affirming adult interactions in fostering a sense of belonging and trust in early childhood setting (Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Focusing on relational pedagogy not only increased social interactions, deepened relationships and supported emotional needs, but also prompted a shift in my own role as an educator, becoming more attuned with the needs of my learners.

Explicit Modelling of Socioemotional Skills

Teacher modelling of the social and emotional competencies was found to make a profound impact on the development of the children's social and emotional skills (Jones et al., 2021).

Modelling my own emotions and coping strategies to the children proved challenging at times, due to the nuanced power dynamics within the classroom.

> *"As a teacher I've noticed I sometimes hold back in saying sorry when I've made a mistake. I think I was worried I would come across as incompetent when I'm supposed to be the more knowledgeable one. But as the most influential model in the room, it's important the children hear it from me"* (RJ, 10th December 2025).

This was related to Vaughan and Delong's (2019: 72) view that in order 'to make learners feel safe and trusted, the facilitators need to be vulnerable themselves'. I began to explicitly teach the children about apologies as a way of showing that we care. I made a conscious effort to model repairing connections when they were damaged and emphasising the reconnection and release of this feeling afterwards:

> *"Whoops! Are you okay? I'm sorry for bumping into you. Next time I'll watch where I'm going! Do you forgive me? Awh I feel so much better for saying sorry*"
>
> (RJ, 14th February 2025).

I also demonstrated times when I was experiencing big feelings:

> *"Boys and girls, I'm feeling frustrated because the classroom got really loud, which is alright, but I've got a bit of a headache. I think I need to take some deep breaths. Could you help me? Thank you, I feel so much better now"*
>
> (RJ, 25th February 2025).

Although, a critical friend reminded me that

> *"...apologising even for me as an adult is hard, you have to tap into remorse to say sorry genuinely and that's not always easy"* (CFF, 29th January 2025).

This difficulty was evident when a child told me

"I'm not ready to say sorry to her yet I need time. I think I need to do my breaths first"

(RJ, 4th March 2025).

I was taken aback by the level of awareness and agency taken by the child in a time of heightened emotions, key indicators of self-awareness and self-management (CASEL, 2025). These insights reminded me to adapt my expectations to suit the developmental stage of the children in front of me, in order to allow them to 'take risks, experiment, and exercise agency' (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024: 6). As encouraged by Meland and Brion-Meisels (2024), I adapted sentence stems posters to include alternative ways of saying sorry or "showing we care" which helped the children to exercise a sense of empathy in their own way and at their own stage of development as seen in the figure below.

Figure 4.3 Showing We Care

'I'm writing a card for mum. I'm showing I care. I hurt her feelings'

(Ryan, CWS, 11th April 2025).

Modelling prosocial behaviours played a key role in developing the children's social and emotional skills (Jones et al., 2021). Specifically, the children's deepened sense of empathy and forgiveness led to increased social awareness, a key SEL competency (CASEL, 2025).

Reframing the expectation from a verbal apology to tangible acts of care fostered more authentic relational repair and nurtured the children's understanding of empathy in action, while demonstrating my shift towards a more attuned practice that supported the children's needs (Reeves and La Mare, 2017). This shift in my role contributed to stronger peer connections and a more attuned, supportive classroom environment, and allowed me to reduce the scaffolding for some children.

Gradual Release of Scaffolding

As the children's confidence and competence in emotional awareness grew, it became evident that my role needed to shift accordingly. This gradual shift of power allowed me to nurture 'developmental relationships', gradually shifting power and agency to the developing skills of the children (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024). Initially characterised by high levels of scaffolding, my practice transitioned toward a more facilitative stance, one that supported autonomy while maintaining emotional safety. The gradual release of scaffolding was also found to promote independence with regulation in the classroom. Co-regulation occurs when a trusting adult can transmit a sense of safety, trust and comfort to a child (Murray et al., 2015:14) and occurs mostly through the use of non-verbal communication including facial expression, tone of voice, gestures and body language (Cameron-Whiting & Tekell, 2021).

Insights from parents revealed a need for further scaffolding to guide children through their emotional experiences with support. Six parents noted the importance of co-regulating and talking the emotions through with their child:

> *"She finds it difficult to communicate the emotion and this adds to her frustrations. Engaging quickly and trying to identify the emotion, and reasons for it, before the emotions intensify are key. Then talking it through with her mostly helps"*
>
> (PP, 22nd January 2025).

By the middle of cycle two, I observed that the children had begun to internalise many of the co-regulation strategies, showing greater independence in managing their emotions. Modelling these strategies appeared to help children articulate their needs and understand others better. Before long, I began to hear children implement these skills organically throughout the day:

> *"Today I overheard Cara say to Rachel after play time "Cara I feel angry because you threw the puppet at me and it hurt me" to which Rachel replied "oh I'm sorry for throwing it. Are you okay? I won't do it again"* (RJ, 27th February 2025).

> *"I made Joe a fidget 'cause he was sad this morning and when I'm sad the fidgets help me"* (RJ, 10th April 2025).

leading to enhanced peer connections within the classroom:

> *"Their ability to regulate is not only reducing conflict but promoting empathy and deepening their connections, they're looking out for each other more, and showing they care"* (CFF, 30th April 2025).

However, the different stages of development were also evident in the data, with some children indirectly expressing their needs

> *"Today Jack came in appearing angry. I prepared myself for his usual defiant behaviour however was met by something he hadn't done before. He asked 'will I tell*

you how I'm feeling?' We chatted it through, and he decided on a quiet moment as his coping tool" (RJ, 20th March 2025).

Children's differing expression of emotions, illustrates the nuanced ways in which children regulate and reflected the varied stages of social and emotional development. These moments underline the critical importance of teacher attunement and the need to adjust scaffolding to support regulation, ensuring children feel "felt" (Siegel, 2010). This facilitative approach, empowered children not only to regulate but to connect, demonstrating both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, as outlined in CASEL's (2025) SEL framework.

While the teacher's explicit teaching and modelling of social and emotional skills in order to enhance such relationships (Hosokawa et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2021) was found to be necessary, prioritising a relational pedagogy provided a strong foundation for socioemotional development (NCCA 2023; NCCA, 2024a). Furthermore, the teacher's ability to tap into the 'emotional environment' of the classroom to engage in 'conscious teaching' attuned to the needs of the children, was imperative (hooks, 2003: 133). As a result, cycle two shifted focus towards these emerging social skills, building on the foundation of children's growing self-awareness and self-management (CASEL, 2025).

4.3 The Benefit of Organic Interactions

Teacher-facilitated play-based interactions were found to deepen children's social and emotional competencies, in particular, relationship-skills and responsible decision-making, as per CASEL's (2025) framework. These organic interactions were used as teachable moments that afforded children with active, real-life opportunities to practice SEL skills (Durlak et al.,

2011), while dedicated time for reflection and discussion, deepened their understanding of situations.

Bridging the Gap: Emotional Awareness and Practice

At this point in the research process, while foundational work on emotional awareness had been established, the data also revealed ongoing barriers to social skill development within the classroom, particularly in the context of peer interactions. Opportunities for children to apply these skills to authentic social contexts, as advised by Cipriano et al. (2023), were underdeveloped. This oversight had implications for nurturing connection in the classroom. My reflective journal captures my frustration:

> *"I feel more like a referee than a teacher at times. The children are so capable of discussing emotions of the characters and offering them coping tools, but it seems much more difficult to apply these strategies during times of conflict"*
>
> (RJ, 6th March 2025).

My validation group acknowledged that the most meaningful application of the children's emerging emotional knowledge occurred in real-time situations, particularly when addressing big feelings and conflicts as they arose in the classroom, acknowledging that

> *"the interventions are only purposeful when we put the practice in place, in those teachable moments when conflict or the big emotion arises"*
>
> (Validation Group Discussion (VGD), 4th March 2025).

Furthermore, critical friends affirmed this perspective, also noting the limited time available to effectively address the ongoing social and emotional needs of pupils. This led me to adapt my

practice in cycle two, facilitating interactions that afforded the children with opportunities to put these socioemotional competencies into practice (Jones et al., 2021).

4.4.1 The Affordances of Play as a Social Learning Space

Opportunities for unstructured and guided play emerged as fundamental teachable moments that supported the development of children's social and emotional skills and subsequently, enhanced classroom relationships. Bruce (2023: 3) maintains that play is intrinsically linked to what it means to be human, asserting that play is a vehicle in which to support 'children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences' (Bruce, 2023: 3).

Enhanced Peer Relationships

The data revealed that shared play experiences afforded the children opportunities to engage with and initiate organic interactions, in which children learned to collaborate;

> *"When we didn't know how to play the game, Saoirse showed us how to play"*
>
> (Ross, WCD, 28th April 2025).

negotiate;

> *"Too many people wanted to play at the flower shop and we were all sad. We used the timer and we taked turns doing it"* (Rachel, WCD, 2nd April 2025).

and empathise with others (UNICEF, 2020):

> *"Chloe had no one to play with so I asked if she wanted to join in with us"*
>
> (Jenny, WCD, 9th May 2025).

evidently leading to a sense of deepened peer relationships, that even the children themselves were noticing:

> *"Team work makes the dream work that's what I say"*
>
> (Jack, RJ, 7th May 2025).

> *"Yeah cause we're really good at sharing and playing now. We weren't so good at the start* [of junior infants] *when we were only 4 cause we practiced a lot"*
>
> (Isabelle, WCD, 28th April 2025).

Critical friends acknowledged that these organic moments of connection

> *"couldn't have developed without the time spent on building relationships, exploring and teaching emotional awareness and modelling regulating strategies"*

highlighting that

> *"the relational and emotional foundations that were built created that safe space for the children to feel secure enough to feel all their feelings and frustrations, knowing that it was okay and that they would be supported through it"*
>
> (CFF, 11th March 2025).

Facilitating these safe and purposeful spaces during play for children to apply their learned skills into practice during organic interactions, demonstrating increased social awareness and relationship skills (CASEL, 2025). These enhanced skills led to more meaningful collaboration, despite initial hesitations that a critical friend and I had about the "unstructured" element of child-led play, particularly the concern that it

> *"would lead to more conflict"* (CFF, 19th March 2025).

On the contrary, observational data and feedback from critical friends and my validation group agreed that the unstructured child-led play sessions

> *"Actually reduced tensions and conflict"* (VGD, 30th April 2025).

One critical friend observed that the children were

> *"so calm and content when I come in during their play sessions"*
>
> (CFF, 10th April 2025).

Providing the children with a sense of agency during play-time, letting them choose who and what to play with, shifted the power balance, giving the children a sense of 'voice and choice' in these interactions (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024). The children's interactions were not only spontaneous but also deeply meaningful, providing natural contexts for problem-solving and cooperation. Children were becoming active meaning-makers in the construction of their social lives (James and Prout, 1990):

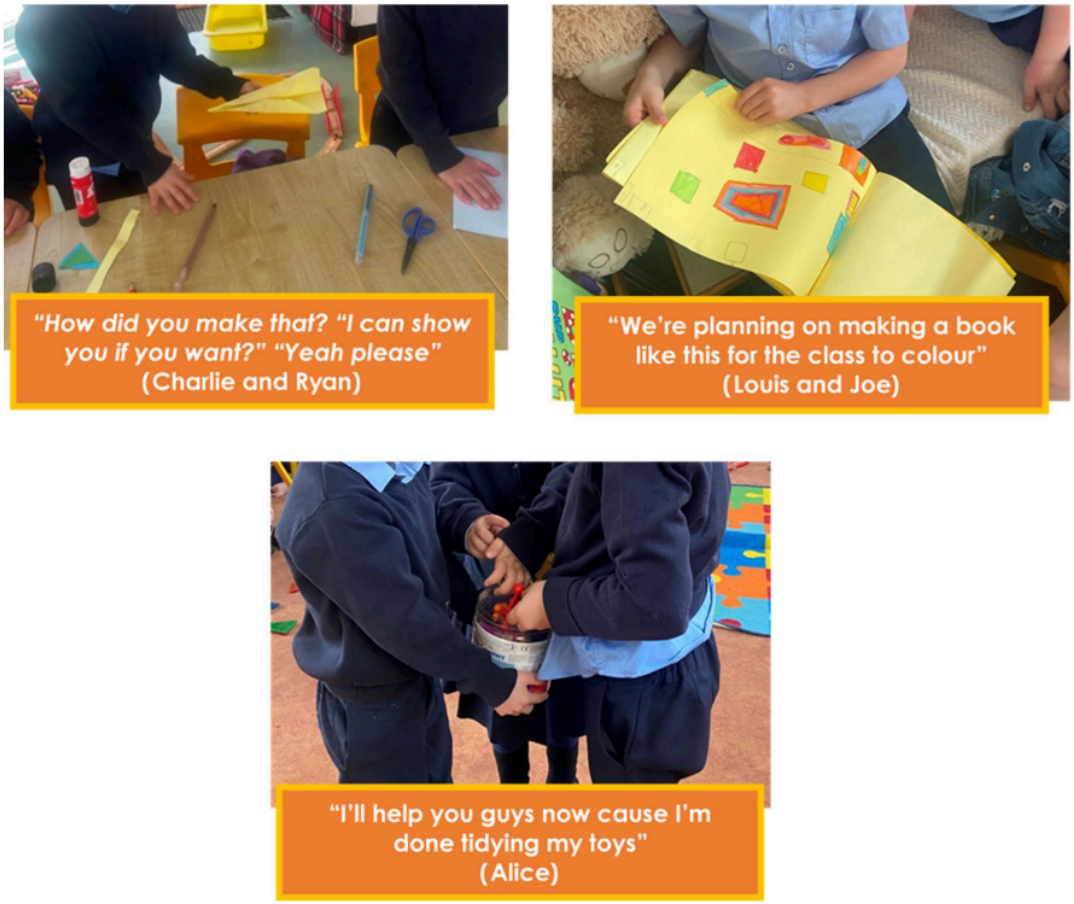


Figure 4.5 Photos of children as active agents during play (RJ, 2nd May 2025).

Additionally, the co-construction of a play contract (Appendix 13) with shared expectations positioned the teacher and children as active agents in the co-creation of skill development and the classroom environment (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024). This tool, facilitated by the teacher with the children, reinforced a sense of collective ownership over expectations and behaviour during play times.

> *"Children are not simply following rules, they created them with you, and that means mutual accountability"* (CFF, 10th April 2025).

Children referred to the play contract, using language from the contract

> *"how about we work together like a team"* (Chloe, RJ, 7th May 2025).

> *"I liked playing with someone new cause I didn't want to play with arts and crafts* (where her best friend was playing) so I choosed my own thing"
>
> (Isabelle, RJ, 4th April 2025).

to which another child responded

> *"that's a good idea 'cause that's in our Play Promise"* (Jack, RJ, 4th April 2025).

Children also reminded peers of agreed terms:

> *"you're not using your kind hands and you're throwing"* (Megan, 4th April 2025).

> *"Come on Elaine you gotta tidy up with me"* (Cara, RJ 29th April 2025).

The children appeared to internalise the meaning of the play promise because they had a say in it. They were simply not complying with rules, but upholding a promise they believed in. As a result, children held each other accountable, reflecting a deepening sense of social awareness and relationship-building skills (CASEL, 2025).

The Teacher's Role in Enhancing Peer Relationships

Although many play sessions were entirely child-led, the teacher's role and presence in facilitating safe, playful experiences remained significant. While organic peer interactions began to naturally emerge during unstructured play sessions, the emotional safety underpinning these interactions was grounded in the initial relational and emotional work facilitated by the teacher. Critical friends recognised this, commenting that

> *"*[the teacher's] *presence in the play is an essential ingredient. It's that safe feeling. They know you're there if something goes wrong"* (CFF, 16th May 2025).

while also acknowledging the meaningful ways of facilitating validation and connection:

> *"they have a desire to show you what they've created in their play, seeking your praise and they look to celebrate those feelings of pride with you"*
>
> (CFF, 2nd May 2025).

These insights demonstrate how the role of the teacher served as a relational anchor, scaffolding autonomy and connection through shared understanding and mutual agreements. The co-creation of contracts and learning pathways helped to cultivate a classroom culture where peer relationships were developed through shared understanding, scaffolded autonomy and a sense of safety.

Enhanced Teacher-Student Relationships

The facilitation of play-based interactions was found to also strengthen teacher-child relationships. My ongoing presence provided a secure backdrop, offering children reassurance that support was available if needed. As children developed increasing independence to negotiate play, resolve minor conflicts and express boundaries, my role shifted from leading these interactions, to facilitating and supporting them adequately, based on individual

children's needs. Furthermore, on many occasions my role became more collaborative, as children invited me into their imaginative worlds for connection and validation:

Figure 4.6 Teacher-Student Connections through Invited Play

As children invited me into their play worlds, casting me as a customer in their restaurant or pharmacy, or as the live model for their artwork, I found myself more connected to them. A critical friend acknowledged that

> *"those invitations to play are like the blueprint for connection in the infant classroom"*
>
> (CFF, 28th May 2025).

These organic interactions signified the fluidity of learning through play, where 'unexpected and emerging learning arise' (NCCA, 2023: 25). Such moments fostered a sense of mutual respect and relational care, as the boundaries between teacher and learner softened (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024). Being welcomed into their imaginative spaces offered authentic opportunities to build further trust and deepen connection, qualities firmly rooted in a relational practice. Many of these insights were collected through teacher-facilitated reflection.

4.4.2 Reflection as a Tool for Deepening SEL

Teacher-facilitated reflection before and after play sessions, centred around emotions and conflict resolution, appeared to enhance children's capacity to connect with others through increasing awareness of themselves and others. Pre- and post-play reflections, in the form of dialogue and children's work samples, created meaningful opportunities for children to process their experiences, articulate their thoughts and engage in shared problem-solving.

Pre-Play Reflections

According to Bohm (2004) dialogue is aimed at gaining a shared understanding and collective meaning-making. Promoting dialogue based on daily social interactions was found to enhance responsible decision-making, a key competency for social and emotional learning (CASEL,

2025). The outcome was a noticeable reduction in peer conflict, as children were afforded the time and space to make thoughtful, mutually agreed-upon decisions:

> *"Don't help me I want it to be my work"* (Louis, RJ, 26th February 2025).

Turned into

> *"How about we build a tower taller than us!"* (Louis, RJ, 2nd May 2025).

This reflection time before play acted as a preventative tool for conflict, as

> *"the children have ways of solving minor conflicts, fresh in their heads"*
>
> (CFF, 13th May 2025).

The increased agency and thinking-time was

> *"allowing them to make their own micro decisions and letting them mutually agree on who they want to play with and what they want to create together"*
>
> (CFF, 28th May 2025).

Ultimately,

> *"...cutting out the tensions that are at play when we* [the teacher] *decide everything for them"* (CFF, 28th May 2025).

Teacher-facilitated discussions with conflict resolution scenarios before playtime opened up a space for intentional dialogue in which the children problem-solved together to create solutions to common conflicts during play time. Eventually, they were equipped to create their own "problem-solving toolbox":

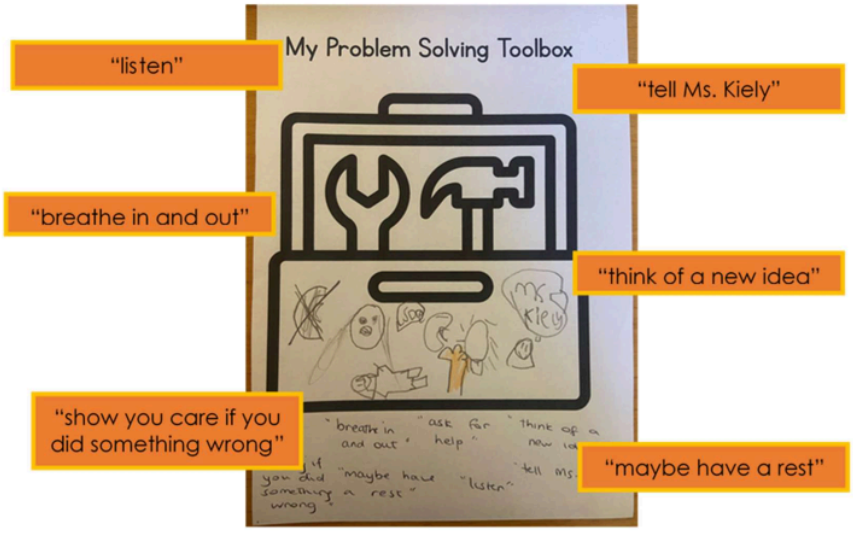


Figure 4.7 Problem-solving Toolbox (Chloe, CWS, 24th April 2025).

With time, the children were applying these tools to real-life contexts:

> *"we decided we can change the rules a little bit when the game has a problem"*
>
> (Cara, CWS, 2nd May 2025).

Offering advice to others in the class in moments conflict:

> *"you should breathe in and tell them your feelings"* (Joe, RJ, 9th May 2025).

Critical friends commented:

> *"having that toolbox of coping strategies is so key and is something they'll use going forward"* (CFF, 13th May 2025).

This approach, along with analysing play sessions through reflection, fostered a more harmonious and inclusive play environment that fostered connection and collaboration.

Post-Play Reflection

Reflections that took place *after* play appeared to be equally as impactful on the children's socioemotional development. The children began to apply their problem-solving skills during

times of conflict, demonstrating their ability to engage in responsible decision making (CASEL, 2025). For some, a child's reflective journal was a space to document their emotions:

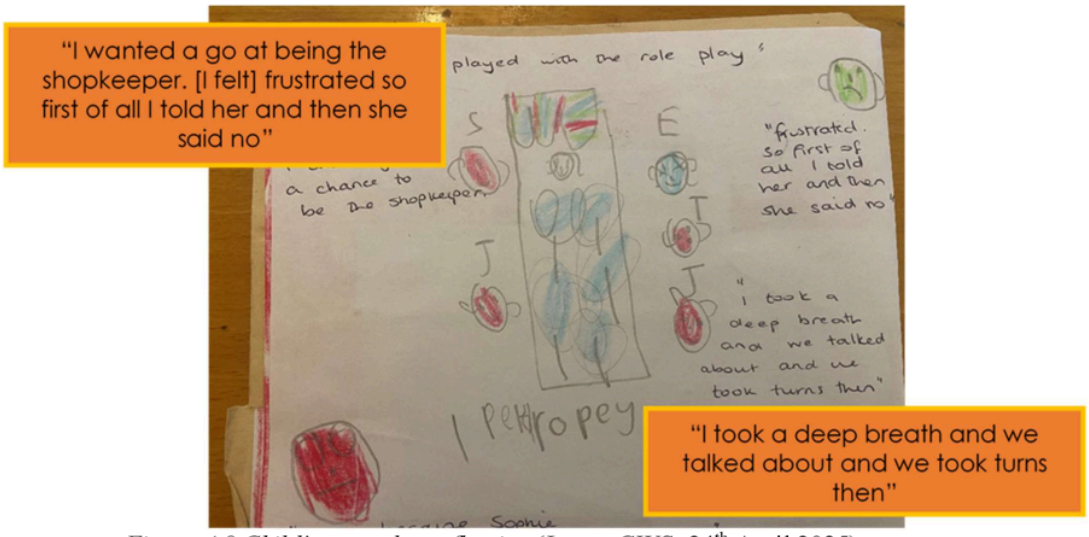


Figure 4.8 Child's post-play reflection (Jenny, CWS, 24th April 2025).

While reflections that occurred in the form of whole class discussions, gave the children time to talk about conflict in their play and ways they overcame it:

> Teacher: *"What went well?"* Louis: *"We worked together and had fun"*
>
> Teacher: *"Was there anything that was tricky?"* Louis: *"We didn't have enough magna-tiles"*
>
> Jack: *"The real truth is we were annoyed cause they had all the tiles and we needed a big one but then we told them and they gave is four small squares to make a big one. We did a swap. It worked so we even did it again"* (WCD, 2nd April 2025).

Even the children themselves were appreciative of the reduced conflict during playtime:

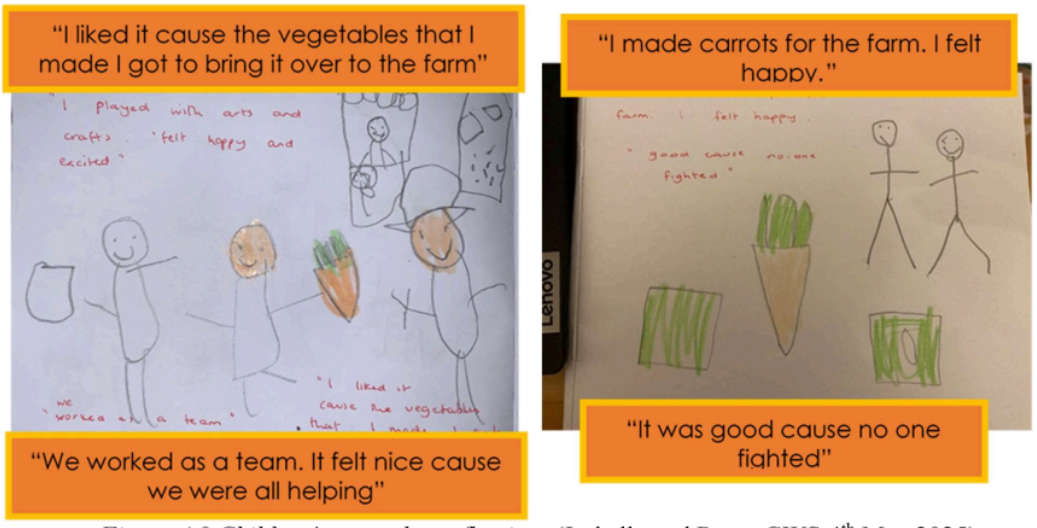


Figure 4.9 Children's post-play reflections (Isabelle and Ryan, CWS 4th May 2025).

This section emphasises the importance of teacher-facilitated reflection as a bridge between play and deeper social learning. This intentional reflective space not only reduced conflict in the classroom, but enriched peer collaboration and fostered a sense of agency and voice, empowering children to take ownership over their interactions and emotions. Opportunities for pre- and post-play reflection further strengthened their ability to negotiate, problem-solve, and work inclusively. Most importantly, these opportunities enriched children's interactions and awareness of others, and ultimately, strengthened peer and teacher-student relationships (UNICEF, 2020).

Challenging my Assumptions

While the use of facilitated reflection often enriched connection and supported children's social and emotional learning, it was not without its limitations. At times, the structured element to play times became

"a bit drawn out" (CFF, 28th May 2025).

as reflected in a child's comment:

> *"can we just play straight away instead of talking about the problems"*
>
> (Ross, RJ, 4th May 2025).

These insights echoed moments in my own journal where I questioned whether I was

> *"over-framing their play with too much talk?"* (RJ, 6th May 2025).

These insights served as important reminders of the delicate balance between supporting reflection and preserving the spontaneity and intrinsic motivation that lies at the heart of a playful pedagogy. The personal learning gained through challenging my assumptions are discussed in chapter five.

4.5 Conclusion

My research highlights the importance of a relational and playful pedagogy in nurturing connection, and the significance of the teacher's role in facilitating both. Once strong relationships were nurtured, a regulation-first approach was found to establish an emotionally safe environment for the children. By centering play as both a pedagogical tool and a relational practice, the classroom became a more connected and inclusive environment. By shifting the traditional role of the teacher to a more facilitating, supportive role, children demonstrated increased motivation, engagement, and agency. The emotional climate established provided a rich, relational space where every child could belong, contribute and thrive. This study reinforces the critical role of the teacher in nurturing social competence and emotional literacy. The findings affirm the transformative potential of a responsive, relational and playful pedagogy, that empowers children to become active agents in the connection-building process.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This self-study action research project sought to enhance my practice of developing children's social and emotional skills by implementing a combination of direct and indirect social and emotional learning strategies. This concluding chapter will address the significance of my research in relation to my own learning, on a practical, personal and theoretical level (Sullivan et al., 2016: 121), while outlining how this learning led me to generate a living theory (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). Finally, I explore the implications of my learning on future practice, potential implications for policy and provide recommendations for future research.

5.2 Practical Learning

At a practical level, CASEL's (2025) social and emotional learning (SEL) framework provided me with a range of direct and indirect strategies to effectively integrate SEL into the classroom. The SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, explicit) elements guided me in planning quality SEL activities that supported the development of children's self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2025). However, my research taught me that fostering children's social and emotional skills cannot be achieved in isolation. The teacher's role in prioritising a relational pedagogy was vital for the success of the intervention. Through an attuned, relational practice, characterised by a supportive classroom environment (Jones et al., 2021), children grew more capable of developing both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. By stepping back and 'teaching from behind' (Kong and Pearson, 2003: 85), I enabled the children to take greater ownership over their social and emotional learning. Equally, the use of organic interactions served as teachable moments, where children were given space to practice these skills in real-life situations (Jones et al., 2021). Facilitated play emerged as a powerful vehicle for social and emotional

development (Akilovna, 2025), creating a context in which safe, organic interactions led to increased empathy, collaboration and problem-solving. Nevertheless, none of these developments would have been possible without a responsive, intentional adult to model and facilitate an emotionally safe space and caring relationships. The deliberate release of scaffolding empowered children to become active agents in the connection-building process, demonstrating initiative and agency when navigating their social and emotional worlds.

While these outcomes are affirming, they also brought emotional and professional challenges. Tuning into the emotional climate of the class, responding empathetically and supporting children through moments of dysregulation occasionally took a toll on my own wellbeing. I often found myself stepping into the role of, what Claxton (2005: 20) describes as an 'emotional mentor', constantly attuned to the affective needs of the children. While essential to supporting the children's social and emotional skills, the sustained emotional demands could, at times, feel overwhelming. Holmes (2005) reminds us that teacher wellbeing is central to the wellbeing of our pupils, and my research emphasised this. I now understand the significance of supportive professional relationships and the value collaborative conversations that ensue a 'sense of belonging' (Feldman, 1999: 143), where care is not extended solely to children, but also to teaching staff.

5.3 Personal Learning

The most profound learning I gained from this research is my potential for change. Critical reflection was a valuable tool that enabled this transformation and in turn played a vital role in shaping my teacher identity.

5.3.1 Reflection as a Tool for Transformation

Critical reflection, as the pillar of self-study action research, became the tool through which I examined, challenged and reshaped my practice as a teacher. As Walker and Oldford (2020: 280) remark, 'to reflect is to make seen', and this idea captures the essence of my journey of action research. Through this reflective lens I came to view my classroom as a 'living laboratory' for personal understanding and growth (Samaras, 2011: 9). Drawing on Dewey's (1933: 30-32) dispositions for reflective practice; open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and intellectual responsibility, I learned to approach reflection with a sense of curiosity rather than judgement. Instead of asking *'what did I do wrong?',* I began to ask *'what can I learn from this?'.* In this way, I embraced the dual role of 'the learner and the one who teaches' (Holly, 1991: 4). This mindset shift allowed me to move from a place of self-criticism to self-inquiry, strengthening my ability to act with purpose and authenticity in the classroom. In doing so, I unveiled barriers within my practice that limited the development of children's social and emotional skills and ultimately, conflicted with my professional values. As Walker and Oldford (2020: 288) maintain, reflection requires risk, although, 'in sharing our experiences and learning and reflecting upon them, we become more capable of taking greater risks. Engaging in sustained reflection enabled a transformation in how I understood my role as a teacher and my evolving teacher identity

5.3.2 A Greater Understanding of Teacher Identity

According to Beauchamp (2015:132), purposeful reflection on one's own practice may lead to the emergence of teacher identity. I resonate with this, as reflection afforded me the opportunity to develop a stronger sense of my professional identity, which I realised is closely bound to my personal and professional values (Nias, 1989). At the beginning of this project, when reflecting on my teaching values, I unearthed a myriad, wrestling with the desire to wrap them up neatly

with a bow. Initially, I interpreted this as a lack of clarity about what I truly believed in. However, through deeper, critical reflection, I came to understand that this complexity was not confusion, it was, in fact, coherence. I learned that my values are not hierarchical or easily compartmentalised, rather, they are inextricably intertwined, forming the foundation of both my practice and my identity as a teacher. I cannot separate care from compassion, or relationships from experiential learning. These are not merely professional values, they are personal, ethical, pedagogical and emotional, woven tightly into the fabric of who I am. As Loughlan (2006: 112) observes, 'it seems unlikely that the core of the personal will not impact the core of the professional.' I now see my teacher identity as a kind of quilt or tapestry, each value a vital thread. If one is removed, the integrity of the whole begins to unravel. This interweaving of values is what makes me a whole teacher. My professional practice is not something I step into; it is an expression of my values in motion.

5.4 Theoretical Learning

According to Sullivan et al. (2016: 121) improvement in practice at a theoretical level can enable one to develop a new theory of practice. Through self-study action research, I generated a practice-informed framework for effective social and emotional learning in my classroom (see figure 5.1). My framework builds on existing SEL models (CASEL, 2025; Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024) by integrating internal teacher practices; reflection, attunement and scaffolding, with external structures; SEL frameworks, routines and organic interactions. While I make no claim that my findings can be generalised to all classrooms, using my model for SEL in the classroom may act as a framework to guide teachers in enhancing children's socioemotional learning. This contributes new theoretical understanding to how SEL can be enacted, highlights the importance of teacher competencies with explicit frameworks, and represents a living theory of my evolving practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006).

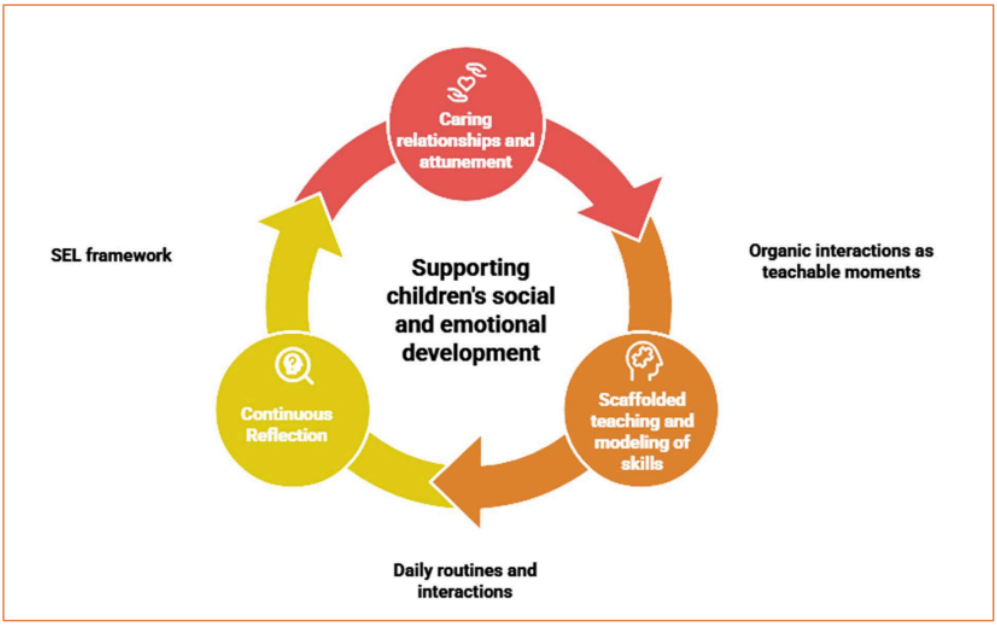


Figure 5.1 Model for SEL in the Classroom

I can claim that when I intentionally live out my values of relational pedagogy and experiential learning, I enable the conditions for the children's social and emotional learning to emerge organically. Equally, I can claim that social and emotional learning cannot be "delivered" as content, but must be lived through relational, emotionally attuned teaching, where I embody the values I seek to promote. These claims to new knowledge are grounded in my self-study action research and supported by evidence from pupil interactions, reflective journal entries and validation from critical friends and my validation group.

5.5 Implications for Future Practice

This research has reshaped how I view my role as a teacher. It has deepened my understanding of social and emotional learning not as a set of strategies, but as a way of being in the classroom. My future practice will centre relational pedagogy, experiential learning and ongoing reflection as essential components of socioemotional learning. I also recognise my growing

responsibility, and ability, to advocate for these practice within my school community and beyond. I am not just a deliverer of curriculum, but a guide, a coach, model and co-regulator. Future practice will be grounded in creating safe, emotionally responsive learning environments. Future practice will continue to be shaped by daily reflection, through journaling, observing and engaging in dialogue, as methods of professional inquiry and realignment with my living values. I seek to prioritise being attuned to the everyday moments in my classroom, using them intentionally as opportunities to model and scaffold SEL, rather than relying solely on teacher manuals, or frameworks. I wish to design my classroom environment, using daily routines, interactions and language, making SEL a living part of how the class functions. Continue to align my practice with my values, knowing that when they are lived, my teaching is more authentic, ethical and impactful.

5.6 Potential to Influence Policy

Within the evolving landscape of educational policy in Ireland, SEL has emerged as a critical area for development. Yet, few SEL programmes have been thoroughly developed and evaluated in the Irish context (Dowling and Barry, 2021: 1). My own professional conversations in over the past year reflect a persistent gap between policy intentions and teachers' confidence and competence in enacting SEL in practice. For policy to effect meaningful change, it must be matched with practical support. In light of this, I suggest that teachers be afforded the time, autonomy and professional learning opportunities needed to teach, model and facilitate the development of socioemotional competencies in order to ensure high-quality implementation of SEL (Dowling and Barry, 2021). Equally, if socioemotional development is seen to be foundational to future success in school (Bierman et al., 2023), it should be reflected in curricular aims, assessment policies and whole-school ethos. While my research focused primarily on my individual classroom, it became increasingly clear that the

sustainability and impact of SEL depends on a wider, whole-school commitment (Durlak et al., 2011; Goldberg et al., 2018; Cipriano et al., 2023). Such approaches complement the evolving priorities of Irish educational policy, particularly the Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023), Wellbeing Specification (NCCA, 2024a) and NCSE (2025), all of which advocate for child-centred, relational and responsive pedagogies, that create the conditions for meaningful SEL.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may explore how the new Primary Curriculum Framework provides a pedagogical basis for embedding social and emotional learning through a playful pedagogy, as recently advocated in Irish educational policies (NCCA, 2023: 25). In particular, it would be valuable to examine how whole-school approaches foster a culture where SEL and play coexist naturally and sustainably to support children's socioemotional competencies. Equally, there is a growing need to explore the specific competencies that teachers require in order to effectively implement SEL (Meland and Brion-Meisels, 2024), particularly within the evolving context of contemporary society. Longitudinal studies may offer deeper insight into the long-term impact of these approaches on children's socioemotional development.

5.8 Conclusion

This project has illuminated that complex questions necessitate equally complex answers. What began as an attempt to enhance pupil's socioemotional development evolved into a deeper understanding of the power of a slow, relational pedagogy and the significance of the teacher's role in facilitating social and emotional learning through organic experiences. I have come to understand that relationships are the invisible thread that holds the learning environment together and it is through our experiences where most meaningful learning occurs. I discovered

that when connection is prioritised over correction, the classroom becomes a safe space where children can thrive holistically. Through small meaningful acts of care, an invitation to play, a shared joke or a moment of silliness, I came to see that social and emotional learning often emerges in organic, unplanned ways. My research does not offer a single formula for delivering SEL. Rather, it illuminates the relational, reflective and responsive dimensions of teaching that make SEL meaningful and sustainable. My findings suggest that SEL is not merely an "add-on", but must be embedded in the everyday classroom life.

The most transformative aspect of this journey was the evolution of my role as a teacher. The 'chaos, uncertainty and messiness' of action research catapulted me into a space of total discomfort, surrendering to the many 'partially addressed and partially resolved' messes that it ensues (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). However, this discomfort was a driving force for personal and professional growth, pushing me to critically reflect on my practice in order to ground my work in my values. We must respond with curiosity and compassion to meet the needs of our pupils *and* ourselves. My findings affirm that while relational and experiential teaching and learning is a pedagogical choice, it is also a moral and professional commitment that fosters a classroom climate conducive to children's social and emotional growth.

However, this work does not exist in isolation from the wider educational landscape. While recent curriculum developments in Ireland place greater emphasis on socioemotional wellbeing of our learners, there is a risk, cautioned by Farrell et al. (2024), of reducing it to a checklist shaped by neoliberal conceptualisations and individualist and capitalist values. Socioemotional learning for both pupils and teachers must be grounded in authentic, relational experiences, not policy compliance. Teachers do not need more policy documents, they need space, time and support to enact these values meaningfully. My research has reinforced the urgent need to slow

down, to become attuned, and to offer, practical guidance for navigating this vital but complex terrain. As L.R. Knost so poignantly reminds us,

> *"Every day in a hundred small ways our children ask,*
> *'Do you hear me?'*
> *'Do you see me?'*
> *'Do I matter?'*
> *Their behaviour often reflects our response."*
>
> \- L.R. Knost

This serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of our role as educators to be present, responsive, and emotionally attuned to the needs of the children in our care. This research has reminded me that the most powerful tools we hold as educators are not the strategies or structures we implement, but our capacity to be present, attuned and real in the connections we share with children. In the end, it is through the profound power of relationships, that education becomes a truly transformative force.

Bibliography

Acar, I. H., Hong, S. Y., and Wu, C. (2017) Examining the role of teacher presence and scaffolding in preschoolers' peer interactions. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal,* 25(6), 866–884. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1380884 (accessed 23 June 2025).

Ailwood J. (2022). Communities of care: A collective writing project on philosophies, politics, and pedagogies of care and education in the early years. *Policy Futures in Education*. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14782103211064440 (accessed 10 October 2024).

Akilovna, E, M. (2025) The Impact of Play-based Learning on Socio-Emotional Development in Preschoolers, *The Bioscan*, *20*(Special Issue-2), 87–91. Available at: https://thebioscan.com/index.php/pub/article/view/3407 (accessed 17 June 2025).

Akyol, K. A., and Aslan, D. (2014) *The development of empathy scale for children (ESC).* In Yasar, M., Ozgun O. & Galbraith, J. (eds), Co*ntemporary Perspectives and research on early childhood education*, 113-123. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing

Alamos, P., and Williford, A. P. (2020). Teacher-child emotion talk in preschool children displaying elevated externalizing behaviors, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 67,* Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.101107 (accessed 5 March 2025).

Alexander, K. and Vermette, P. (2019) Implementing Social and Emotional Learning Standards by Intertwining the Habits of Mind with the CASEL Competencies. *Excelsior*: *Leadership in Teaching and Learning*, 12, 1-16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2019.12.1.03 (accessed 17 July 2025).

Atkins, L., & Wallace, S. (2012) *Action Research for Educational Change*. Open University Press.

Bassey, M. (1990) *Three Paradigms of Educational Research* In: Pollard, A. (2011) Readings for Reflective Teaching, London: Continuum,.37 – 39.

Bassey, M. (2002) *Three Paradigms of Educational Research.* In Pollard, A. Readings for Reflective Teaching, London: Continuum, 37-39.

Baumfield, V., Hall, E. and Wall, K. (2013) *Action Research in Education: Learning Through Practitioner Enquiry*, 2nd Ed [e-book]. London: SAGE Publications. Available at: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526402240 (accessed 4 January 2025).

Beauchamp, C. (2015) Reflection in Teacher Education: Issues Emerging from a Review of Current literature. Reflective Practice, 16(1), 123-141.

Bell, J. (2014) *Doing your research project: a guide for first time researchers in education, health and social science.* 5th edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bethune, A. (2023). *Wellbeing in the Primary Classroom: The Updated Guide to Teaching Happiness and Positive Mental Health.* Bloomsbury Education: London.

Bierman, K.l., Stormshak, E.A., Mannweiler, M.D. and Hails, K.A. (2023) Preschool Programs that Help Families Promote Child Social-emotional School Readiness: Promising New Strategies, *Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev,* 26(4), 865-879. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11154596/pdf/nihms-1995557.pdf (accessed 27 August 2025).

Blaxter, L. (2010) *How to research*. 4th Ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press [e-book]. Available at: https://books.google.ie/ (accessed: 21 December 2024).

Bloom, B.S. (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook: The Cognitive Domain*. David McKay, New York.

Bohm, D. (2004) *On Dialogue* [e-book]. Oxon: Routledge. Available at: https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.4324/9780203822906 (accessed 7 August 2025).

Bohnert, M., & Gracia, P. (2021). Emerging digital generations? Impacts of child digital use on mental and socioemotional well-being across two cohorts in Ireland, 2007–2018. Child Indicators Research, 14(2), 629–659. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09767-z (accessed 3 October 2024).

Bolton, G. and Delderfield, R. (2018) *Reflective Practice*. 5th Ed. SAGE.

Bradbury H., Waddell S., O'Brien K., Apgar M., Teehankee B. and Fazey I. (2019) A call to action research for transformations: The times demand it. *Action Research Journal*, 17(1), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319829633 (accessed 3 March 2025).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology [online]. 3, 77-101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa (accessed 3 July 2025).

Brookfield, S. D. (2015) *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher,* San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass.

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

Brooks, S.K., Webster, R.K., Smith, L.E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N. and Rubin, G.J. (2020) The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid

review of the evidence, *The Lancet*, 365, 912-920. Available at: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext (accessed 6 August 2025).

Bruce, T. (2023) *Empowering learning: Play, symbols and creativity*. Froebel Trust. Available at: https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT_Empowering_Learning_Pamphlet_INTERACTIVE.pdf (accessed 7 May 2025).

Bryan, A. and Mochizuki, Y. (2025) Class Divided: Social and Emotional Learning and the Erosion of Solidarity, *Development Education and Class,* 119-135. Available at: https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-40/class-divided-social-emotional-learning-and-erosion-solidarity (accessed 9 July 2025).

Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D. and Maguire, P. (2003) Why Action Research? *Action Research*, 1(1), 9-28. London: Sage Publications. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/14767503030011002 (accessed 13 July 2025).

Burns, T. and F. Gottschalk (eds.) (2019), *Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-being in the Digital Age*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/b7f33425-en. (accessed 7 November 2024).

Cameron-Whiting, C., and Tekell, L. (2021) Trauma and Occupational Therapy's Role in Schools and Education. *Trauma, Occupation, and Participation: Foundations and Population Considerations in Occupational Therapy*. AOTA Press.

Cassidy, C. (2017) Wellbeing, being well or well becoming: Who or what is it for and how might we get there? In: Thorburn, M. (2018) *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling.* New York: Routledge. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/110689449.pdf (accessed 5 October 2024).

Central Statistics Office (CSO). (2022). *Census 2022*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

Chamberlain, R., Scales, P. C., and Sethi, J. (2020) Competing discourses of power in teachers' stories of challenging relationships with students. *Power and Education*, *12*(2), 139-156. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1757743820931118 (accessed 5 January 2025).

Chen, J. J., and Adams, C. B. (2023) Drawing from and expanding their toolboxes: Preschool teachers' traditional strategies, unconventional opportunities, and novel challenges in scaffolding young children's social and emotional learning during remote instruction amidst COVID-19. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(5), 925–937. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01359-6 (accessed 24 April 2025).

Chen, J.J. (2024) An Integrated Approach to Social and Emotional Teaching (SET): A Qualitative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Preschool Teachers in the United States, *Early Childhood Education Journal.* Available at: https://link-springer-com.may.idm.oclc.org/article/10.1007/s10643-024-01803-9 (accessed 15 April 2025).

Children's Society (2022) *The Good Childhood Report*. London: Children's Society. Available at:

https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/well-being/mental-health-statistics (accessed 19 October 2024).

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (2019). *Operational Guideline*. Available at: https://assets.hse.ie/media/documents/ncr/camhs-operational-guideline-2019.pdf (accessed 31 October 2024).

Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L.H., Ha C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., Zieher, A.K., Eveleigh, A., McCarthy, M., Funaro, M., Ponnock, A., Chow, J.C. and Durlak, J. (2023) *The State of Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning: A Contemporary*

Meta-Analysis of Universal School-Based SEL Interventions. Child Development, Vol. 94, No. 5. Available online: https://go.exlibris.link/Js0Lyg34 (accessed 19 October).

Claxton, G. (2005) *An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence,* London: ATL.

Cocks, A. (2006) *The ethical maze: Finding an inclusive path towards gaining children's agreement to research participation.* Childhood, 13(2), 247-266.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education*, 6th Ed, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

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

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020) *What is SEL?* Available at: https://casel.org/what-is-sel/ (accessed 19 October 2024).

Powell, B., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K. and Marvin, R.S. (2014). The circle of security intervention: Enhancing Attachment in early parent-child relationships. Guilford Press. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285137640_The_circle_of_security_intervention_Enhancing_Attachment_in_early_parent-child_relationships_Order_from_Guilford_Press (accessed 7 December 2024).

Cozolino, L. (2013) *The Social Neuroscience of Education: Optimizing Attachment and Learning in the Classroom*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Crean, M., Devine, D., Moore, B., Sainz, G.M., Symonds, J., Sloan, S. and Farrell, E. (2023) Social class, COVID-19 and care: Schools on the front line in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44:3, 452-466. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2023.2174077 (accessed 5 November 2024).

Dadds, M. and Hart, S. (2001) *Doing Practitioner-based Research Differently*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Darling-Hammond, L. and Cook-Harvey, C.M. (2018*) Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success.* Learning Policy Institute. [online] Available at: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606462 (Accessed 5 July 2025).

Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A. C. W., Wojcikiewicz, S. K. and Flook, L. (2023) Educating teachers to enact the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, *28*(1), 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2022.2130506 (accessed 25 November 2024).

Darmody, M., Smyth, E. and Russell, H. (2020) *Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Young People: A Research Review:* ESRI. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT94_3.pdf (accessed 9 October 2024).

Delong, J. (2020) 'Raising Voices Using Dialogue as a Research Method for Creating living-educational-theories in Cultures of Inquiry', *Educational Journal of Living Theories,* 13(2), 71-92. Available at: https://web-cdn.org/s/1445/file/node/13-10.pdf (accessed 15 January 2025).

Denham, S.A. (2006) The Emotional Basis of Learning and Development in Early Childhood Education. In B. Spodek and O.N. Saracho (Eds.), *Handbook of research on the education of young children,* 2nd Ed, 85-103. Available at: https://denhamlab.gmu.edu/Publications%20PDFs/Denham%202005.pdf (accessed 30 July 2025).

Department of Education and Skills (2015). Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion, Well Being in Primary Schools [online]. Available at:

https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/resources/wellbeinginprimaryschools.pdf (accessed 4 October 2024).

Department of Education and Skills (2018) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice: 2018-2023* [Online]. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf#page=null (accessed 20 September 2024).

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, Chicago: Henry Regnery.

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

Diliberti, M.K., and Schwartz, H. L. (2024) *Districts' Pandemic Recovery Efforts as COVID-Relief Aid Expires: Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey,* RAND Corporation, RR-A956-23, 2024. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-23.html (accessed 5 October 2024).

Dowling, K. and Barry, M. (2021) *Implementing School-based Social and Emotional Learning Programmes: Recommendations from Research: Health Promotion Research Centre.* Available at:

https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/policybriefs/HPRC-Practice-Brief_k.dowling.pdf (accessed 29 October 2024).

Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2002). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. In *What research has to say about reading instruction* A. E. Farstup & S. J. Samuels, 205–242. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P. and Pachan, M. (2010) A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45,(3–4).

Durlak, J. A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., Weissberg, R. P., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011) The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. *Child Development*, *82*(1), 405–432. http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782838 (accessed 2 October 2024).

Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., & Boyle, A. E. (2022) What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: A review of meta-analyses and directions for future research. *Psychological Bulletin, 148*(11-12), 765-782. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000383 (accessed 2 October 2024).

Dusenbery, L., Calin, S., Domitrovich, C. and Weissberg, R.P. (2015) What Does Evidence-Based Instruction in Social and Emotional Learning Actually Look Like in Practice? A Brief on Findings from CASEL's Program Reviews. CASEL. *Evidence-Based Instruction in Social and Emotional Learning* [online]. Available at: https://casel.org/pdf-25-casel-brief-what-does-sel-look-like-in-practice-11-1-15/ (accessed 17 January 2025).

Edwards, A. (2009) From the systemic to the relational: Relational agency and activity theory, *Learning and Expanding with Activity Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 197–211. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809989.013 (accessed 3 May 2025).

Egan, S.M., Pope, J., Moloney, M., Hoyne, C. and Beatty, C. (2021) Missing Early Education and Care During the Pandemic: The Socio-Emotional Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis

on Young Children, *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 49, 925-934. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01193-2 (accessed 17 November 2024).

Farrell, A. (2005) *New possibilities for ethical research with children.* Ethical research with children. New York: Maidenhead, 176-178.

Farrell, E., Symonds, J., Devine, D., Sloan, S. Crean, M., Cahoon, A. and Hogan, J. (2024) "What does well-being mean to me?" Conceptualisations of well-being in Irish primary schooling: *Health Education,* 124(1-2), 49-62. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-03-2024-0023 (accessed 2 August 2025).

Feldman, A (1999) The role of conversation in collaborative action research, *Educational Action Research*, 7(1), 125-147, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799900200076 (accessed 23 March 2025).

Feldman, A., Altrichter, H., Posch, P. & Somekh, B. (2018) *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An Introduction to Action Research across the Professions*. 3rd Ed. London: Routledge.

Fisher, D., and Frey, N. (2013) *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility,* 2nd Ed. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Foster, J. (2023) *Behaviour: The Lost Modules*. Sage Publications.

Fullan, M. (1993) Why teachers must become change agents. *Educational Leadership.* 50(6), 12–17. Available at: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ459419 (accessed 4 July 2025).

Fullan, M.G (2011) *Change Leader: Learning to do what matters most.* San Fransisco, Jossey-Bass/Wiley. Available at: https://jacl.andrews.edu/change-leader-learning-to-do-what-matters-most/ (accessed 2 August 2025).

Garcia-Peinado. R. (2024) The impact of classroom climate on emotional development in childhood. *Environment and Social Psychology,* 9(1). Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375913039_The_impact_of_classroom_climate_on_emotional_development_in_childhood (accessed 3 February 2025).

Gay, G. (2000). Culturally responsive teaching: *Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gehlbach, H., Brinkworth, M.E., King, A.M., Hsu, L.M., McIntyre, J. and Rogers, T. (2016) Creating birds of similar feathers: leveraging similarity to improve teacher–student relationships and academic achievement, *Journal of Education Psychology,* 108, 342-352.

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

Gilbert, L. (2024) 'Promoting social and emotional learning (SEL) in settings through emotion coaching practice: a model of engagement for practitioner use', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 1–26. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02643944.2024.2402735 (accessed 17 October 2024).

Giroux, H. (2011) *The Promise of Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Globalisation, Towards a Pedagogy of Democratization.* In: Giroux, H. (2011) On Critical Pedagogy. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. Ch. 4.

Glenn, M. (2006) Working with Collaborative Projects: My Living Theory of a Holistic Educational Practice [online]. Available at: https://www.actionresearch.net/living/mairinglennphd.pdf (accessed 16 July 2025).

Glenn, M., Roche, M., McDonagh, C. and Sullivan, B. (2017) *Learning Communities in Educational Partnerships*, London: Bloomsbury.

Glenn, M., Sullivan, B., Roche, M. and McDonagh, C. (2023) Act*ion Research for the Classroom: A Guide to Values-Based Research in Practice*, Taylor & Francis Group, Oxford. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central (accessed 1 January 2025).

Goldberg, J.M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T.R., Schreurs, K.M.G., Bohlmeijer, E.T. and Clarke, A.M. (2019) Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development, *European Journal of Psychology of Education,* 34(4), 755-782. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48698248 (accessed 30 June 2025).

Goodnough, K. (2010) The role of action research in transforming teacher identity: modes of belonging and ecological perspectives, *Educational Action Research*, 18(2), 167-182, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09650791003740725 (accessed 6 January 2025).

Government of Ireland. (1999) *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*. Dublin, Stationery Office.

Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning as a Public Health Approach to Education. *The Future of Children*, *27*(1), 13–32. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219019 (accessed 18 October 2024).

Gülay Ogelman, H. G., and Fetihi, L. (2021). Examination of the relationship between emotional regulation strategies of 5-year-old children and their peer relationships. *Early Child Dev. Care* 191, 49–57. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1600513 (accessed 6 February 2025).

Haas, B. (2023). Education: From Shame-based to Brain-based. *Children's Voice*, *32*(1), 20–21. [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/48744718 (accessed 6 November 2024).

Habermas, J. (1976) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. McCarthy (1979), London: Beacon Press.

Hadar, L. L., Ergas, O., Alpert, B. and Ariav, T. (2020) 'Rethinking teacher education in a VUCA world: student teachers' social-emotional competencies during the Covid-19 crisis', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 573–586. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1807513 (accessed 6 November 2024).

Haidt, J. (2024), *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*, Penguin Press.

Halpenny, A. (2021) *Capturing Children's Meanings in Early Childhood Research and Practice: A Practical Guide.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Hamilton, L. and Gross, B. (2021) *How Has the Pandemic Affected Students' Social-Emotional Well-Being? A Review of the Evidence to Date*, Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Hanley, A., Symonds, J. E. and Horan, J. (2022) COVID-19 School closures and children's social and emotional functioning: the protective influence of parent, sibling, and peer relationships, *Education 3-13*, 52(8), 1452–1463. Available at: https://www-tandfonline-com.may.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2022.2154615 (accessed 25 November 2025).

Hargreaves, A. (2012). Changing teachers, changing times. *Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. Cassell.

Hayes, N and Filipović, K. (2018) 'Nurturing "Buds of Development": From Outcomes to Opportunities in Early Childhood Practice'. *International Journal of Early Years Education,* 26(3), 220–32. [online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1341303 (Accessed 8 June 2025).

Hendrick, C. (2013) Improving Schools Through Action Research. A reflective approach. 3rd Ed. New York: Pearson.

Holmes, E. (2005) *Teacher well-being: Looking after yourself and your career in the classroom*. Routledge. [online] Available at: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203465400/teacher-well-beingelizabeth-holmes (accessed 10 July 2025).

Holly, M. (1991) *Keeping a Personal-Professional Journal*. Deakin University Press, Victoria.

hooks, b. (2003) Teaching Community, a Pedagogy of Hope. New York: Routledge. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780203957769 (accessed 12 October 2024)

Hosokawa, R., Matsumoto, Y., Nishida, C., Funato, K. and Mitani, A. (2024). Enhancing social-emotional skills in early childhood: intervention study on the effectiveness of social and emotional learning. BMC Psychology. Available at: https://doi:12.10.1186/s40359-024-02280-w (accessed 5 April 2025).

Housman, D.K (2017) The importance of emotional competences and self-regulation from birth: a case for the evidence-based emotional cognitive social early learning approach, *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy,* 11(13), Available at: https://ijccep.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40723-017-0038-6 (accessed 19 July 2025).

Hue, M.T. and Kennedy, K. J. (2013) Building a connected classroom: teachers' narratives about managing the cultural diversity of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong secondary schools, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 31(4), 292–308. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02643944.2013.811697 (accessed 2 November 2024).

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (2015) Curriculum: A Discussion Paper [Onleine]. Available at: https://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/Conferences/EducationConsultativeConference/EducationConsultativeConference2015/EdConf2015_Curriculum.pdf (accessed 1 November 2024).

James, A. and Prout, A. (1980) *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*, London: Falmer Press.

Johnson, A.P. (2008) *A short guide to action research.* 3rd Ed. Allyn and Bacon.

Jones, S. M., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children*, *27*(1), 3–11. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018 (accessed 17 October 2024).

Kelchtermans, G. (2018) *Professional Self-Understanding in Practice: Narrating, Navigating and Negotiating.* In Schutz, P., Hong, J. and Cross Francis, D. (2018) Research on Teacher Identity, Mapping Challenges and Innovations. New York: Springer International Publishing. Ch. 20.

Kemmis, S. (2009) Action research as a practice-based practice. *Educational Action Research,* 14 (4), 459-76.

Kemmis, S. (2010) 'What is to be done? The place of action research', *Educational Action Research,* 18(4), 417-27

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*. Waurn Ponds: Deakin University Press.

Kiely, S. (2024) *Reflective Journal.* Unpublished. August 2024 to December 2024.

Kiely, S (2025) *Reflective Journal.* Unpublished. January 2025 to May 2025.

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

Koller, D. & San Juan, V. (2015) Play-based interview methods for exploring young children's perspectives on inclusion. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 28(5), 610-631.

Köksal Akyol A., & Aslan D. (2014) The development of Empathy Scale for Children (ESC). In Yasar, M., Ozgun O. & Galbraith J. (Eds), *Contemporary Perspectives and Research on Early Childhood Education*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 113-123.

Kong, A., and Pearson, P.D. (2003). The road to participation: The construction of a literacy practice in a learning community of linguistically diverse learners. *Research in the Teaching of English,* 38(1), 85–124.

LaBoskey, V.K. (2004) The Methodology of Self-Study and Its Theoretical Underpinnings In: Loughran J.J., Hamilton M.L., LaBoskey V.K. & Russell T., eds. (2004) *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices.* Dordrecht: Springer, 817-869.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream-keepers: Successful teachers of African American children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., & Staksrud, E. (2018). *European research on children's internet use: Assessing the past and anticipating the future*. New Media and Society, 20(3), 1103–1122 Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68516/1/Livingstone_European%20Research%20on%20Children_2018.pdf (accessed 25 October 2024).

Loughran, J. (2006). A response to 'reflecting on the self'. Reflective Practice, 7(1), 43–53. Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lowe, C. and Zemliansky, P. (2010) *Writing spaces: Readings on writing*. Parlor Press, 2.

Malik, P. and Behera, S. (2024) The Transformative Power of Experiential Learning: Bridging Theory and Practice, *The International Journal of Indian Psychology,* 12(2). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387057017_The_Transformative_Power_of_Experiential_Learning_Bridging_Theory_and_Practice (accessed 19 May 2025).

Marshall, C., Rossman, G. B. and Blanco, G. L. (2022) *Designing qualitative research.* 7th Ed. California: SAGE Publications.

Mashford-Scott, A., Church, A. & Tayler, C. (2012) Seeking Children's Perspectives on their Wellbeing in Early Childhood Settings. *IJEC* 44, 231–247. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-012-0069-7 (accessed 10 October 2024)

Maslow, A. H. (1943) 'A theory of human motivation'. *Psychological Review,* 50 (4), 430-437. Available at: http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1943-03751-001 (Accessed 26 September 2024).

McAteer, M. (2013) *Action Research in Education.* London: Sage Publications.

McDonagh, C. (2017) *'Validity',* Presentation at NEARIMeet , [video], available: https://youtu.be/tLs_ItgxeUw (accessed 1 January 2025).

McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B. and Glenn, M. (2020) Enh*ancing Practice through Classroom Research: A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development.* 2nd ed. Abingdon UK: Routledge.

McIntosh, P. (2010) *Action Research and Reflective Practice: Creative and Visual Methods to Facilitate Reflection and Learning*, Taylor & Francis Group, Oxford. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (2 January 2025).

McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research for Professional Development. Concise advice for new action researchers.* 3rd ed. Retrieved from http://jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.arp (accessed 4 February 2025).

McNiff, J. (2013) Action *research: Principles and practice.* 3rd ed. Routledge.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2006) All You Need to Know About Action Research. London: SAGE Publications.

McNiff, J., and Whitehead, J. (2009) *Doing and writing action research.* London, SAGE.

Meland, E.A, and Brion-Meisels, G. (2024) An integrative model for culturally sustaining SEL in the classroom, *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 3, Available at: https://www-sciencedirect-com.may.idm.oclc.org/science/article/pii/S2773233924000160 (accessed 14 April 2025).

2024,Mohammed Idris, K., Eskender, S., Yosief, A. and Demoz, B. (2021) Learning to teach self-study in improving data management practices of student-teachers during an action research course. *Education Inquiry*, 13(3) 1-18. [online] Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1892332 (Accessed 6 July 2025).

Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* [e-book]. Available at: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nuim/detail.action?docID=181972 (accessed 9 January 2025).

Morrow, V., and Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children & Society,* 10(2), 90-105.

Mukherji, P. and Albon, D. (2018) *Research methods in early childhood: An introductory guide*. Sage.

Mulkey, S.B., Bearer, C.F. and Molloy, E.J. (2023) Indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children relate to the child's age and experience. *Pediatric Research* **94**, 1586–1587 (2023). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-023-02681-4 (accessed 15 November 2024).

Murray, D.W., Rosanbalm, K., Chrisopoulos, C. and Hamouudi, A. (2015) *Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation from an Applied Perspective*. Office of Planning Research and Evaluation (OPRE) Report 2015-21. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/report_1_foundations_paper_final_012715_submitted_508_0.pdf (accessed 9 May 2025)

Mustafa, G. (2024) Teacher Attunement: Concept, Challenges, and the Way Forward, *Jahan e Tahqeeq* 7(1), 1403-1411, Available at: https://jahan-e-tahqeeq.com/index.php/jahan-e-tahqeeq/article/download/1702/1579 (accessed 15 April 2025).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education:* Audit: Similarities and Differences. [online] Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/4152/aistear_siolta_similarities_differences_.pdf (accessed 3 October 2024).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2021) *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines*. [online] Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/5062/updated-guidelines-2021_en.pdf (accessed 7 May 2025).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/84747851-0581-431b-b4d7-dc6ee850883e/2023-Primary-Framework-ENG-screen.pdf (accessed 20 March 2025).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2024a) *Draft Wellbeing Specification: For All Primary and Special Schools. For Consultation.* [online] Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/csmh55u0/draft_primary_wellbeing_specification_2024.pdf (accessed 20 April 2025).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2024b) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* [online] Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/1e9e4eff-5d44-4950-bfa6-a28f43895d3f/Aistear-FW-ENG.pdf (accessed 5 May 2025).

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2025) *Relate: A Regulation-First Approach to Reframing Behaviour and Supporting Student Engagement and Participation* [online] Available at: https://ncse.ie/relate (accessed 25 February 2025).

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). (2015) *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion: WellBeing in Primary Schools: Resources for Promoting Well-Being in Primary Schools*. [Online]. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/25111/35c956d4d15a41e4a82ccd36ce37db4b.pdf (Accessed 13 September 2024).

Nias, J. (1989) Primary teachers talking: A study of teaching as work. London, England: Routledge. Olsen, B. (2010). Teaching for success: Developing your teacher identity in today's classroom. Boulder, CO: Paradigm

Noddings, N. (2003) *Happiness and Education*, Cambridge University Press. [e-book] Available at: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nuim/detail.action?docID=218054 (accessed 7 March 2025).

Noddings, N. (2005) The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education. 2nd ed. *Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought Series*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2012) *The Caring Relation in Teaching*, Oxford Review of Education, 38(6), 771-781.

Noddings, N. (2013) *Caring: A relational approach to ethics & moral education.* 2nd Ed. [Online]. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nohilly, M., & Tynan, F. (2019). Well-being: Bridging the gap between the language of policy and the culture of schools. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership,* 15(12). Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1236380.pdf (accessed 18 November 2024).

Nohilly, M., & Tynan, F. (2022). The evolution of wellbeing in educational policy in Ireland: Towards an interdisciplinary approach. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 12(1), 42-53. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v12i1.1663 (accessed 7 November 2024).

Nutley, S. and Thorell, L. (2022) *Digital media and mental health problems in children and adolescents: A research overview*. English summary.

OECD (2018), *Children and Young People's Mental Health in the Digital Age*, OECD, Paris, Available at: http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/Children-and-Young-People-Mental-Health-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf. (accessed 6 January 2025).

OECD (2021), "Children in the digital environment: Revised typology of risks", *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 302, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/9b8f222e-en. (accessed 6 January 2025).

OECD (2024), "Mental health and digital environments", in *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2024 (Volume 1): Embracing the Technology Frontier*, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/596e067d-en. (accessed 6 January 2025).

Orr, S. and Lavy, S. (2024) Teaching who you are: Preliminary findings linking teachers' and students' social-emotional skills, Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy, 4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2024.100062 (accessed 16 October 2024).

Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D. and Irby, M. (2020) Thriving, Robust Equity and Transformative Learning & Development: A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment.

Page, J. (2018) Characterising the principles of Professional Love in early childhood care and education, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), 125-141. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2018.1459508 (accessed 20 June 2025).

Panthalookaran, V. (2022) Education in a VUCA-driven World: Salient Features of an Entrepreneurial Pedagogy, *Higher education for the future,* 9(2), 234-249.

Pearson, P.D., & Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317–344. Available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/0361-476X(83)90019-X (accessed 6 July 2025).

Perry, B (2016) Creating an Emotionally Safe Classroom. *Early Childhood Today* [online]. Available at: https://makingsenseoftrauma.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Creating-an-Emotionally-Safe-Classroom.pdf (accessed 15 May 2025).

Perry, B (2019) The Three R's: Reaching the Learning Brain. Beacon House. [online] Available at: https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf (accessed 6 November 2024).

Perry, B. (2020) *4. Regulate, Relate, Reason (Sequence of Engagement): Neurosequential Network Stress & Trauma Series*. Info NMN. [video online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNuxy7FxEVk (accessed 12 November 2024).

Phillippo, K., Brown E.L. and Blosser, A. (2018) Making sense of student-teacher relationships: Teacher educator and candidate engagement with the relational practices of teaching. *Action in Teacher Education* 40(2): 169–185.

Pianta, R.C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Pianta, R.C., Hamre, B.K., Allen, J.P. (2012). Teac*her-Student Relationships and Engagement: Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Improving the Capacity of Classroom Interactions.* In: Christenson, S., Reschly, A., Wylie, C. (eds) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. Springer, Boston, MA. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_17 (accessed 6 October 2024).

Pine, G.J. (2008) *Teacher Action Research: Building Knowledge Democracies*, SAGE Publications, Incorporated, Thousand Oaks. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (2 January 2025).

Pine, G.J. (2009) *Teacher Action Research: Building Knowledge Democracies*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Porter, J. and Ingram, J. (2021) Changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream secondary schools: the experience of girls with SEND,'I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 26(1), 60-77. Available at: https://doi:10.1080/13632752.2021.1900999 (accessed 7 December 2024).

Punch, K. (2014) *Introduction to social research: quantitative & qualitative approaches*, 3rd Ed. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Qashmer, A.F. (2023) Emotion regulation among 4–6 year-old children and its association with their peer relationships in Jordan. *Front. Psychol* (14). Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1180223 (accessed 9 January 2025).

Rajammal, T.S. (2024) A Role of Attunement In The Teaching-Learning Process Among Prospective Teachers, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5), 11218-11222. Available at: https://kuey.net/index.php/kuey/article/view/4926 (accessed 6 August 2025).

Reid, C., Davis, H., Horlin, C., Anderson, M., Baughman, N., and Campbell, C. (2012) The Kids' Empathic Development Scale (KEDS): A multi-dimensional measure of empathy in primary school-aged children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 31(2), 231–256. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12002 (accessed 2 December 2024).

Reeves, J. and Le Mare, L. (2017) Supporting Teachers in Relational Pedagogy and Social and Emotional Education: A Qualitative Exploration, *The International Journal of Emotional Education,* 9(1), 85-98. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319099307_Supporting_Teachers_in_Relational_Pedagogy_and_Social_Emotional_Education_A_Qualitative_Exploration (accessed 18 April 2025).

Riddle, S. and Hickey, A. (2024) *Unlocking the Potential of Relational Pedagogy: Reimagining Teaching, Learning and Policy for Contemporary Schooling* [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381337318_Unlocking_the_Potential_of_Relational_Pedagogy_Reimagining_Teaching_Learning_and_Policy_for_Contemporary_Schooling (accessed 26 August 2025).

Sabol, T. J. and Pianta, R. C. (2012) Recent trends in research on teacher–child relationships, *Attachment & Human Development*, 14(3), 213–231. Available at: https://doi:10.1080/14616734.2012.672262 (accessed 5 February 2025).

Salmon, K., Evans, I.M., Moskowitz, S., Goruden, M., Parkes, F. and Miller, E. (2013) The components of young children's emotion knowledge: Which are enhanced by adult emotion talk? *Social Development,* 22(1), 94-110. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sode.12004 (accessed 21 July 2025).

Samaras, A. P. (2011) S*elf-Study Teacher Research: Improving Your Practice Through Collaborative Inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230481 (accessed 2 January 2025).

Sarac, S., Abanoz, T., and Ogelman, H. G. (2020) *Self-regulation predicts young childrens' peer relations.* Turk. Int. J. Spec. Educ. Guid. Counsel. 10, 56–65.

Sarid, A. and Levanon, M. (2022) Embracing dualities: Principles of education for a VUCA world, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55(12), 1375–1386. Availbale at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2162384 (accessed 2 November 2024).

Schiepe-Tiska, A., Dzhaparkulova, A and Ziernwald, L. (2021) A Mixed-Methods Approach to Investigating Social and Emotional Learning at Schools: Teachers' Familiarity, Beliefs, Training, and Perceived School Culture, *Frontiers in Psychology,* 12, Available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.518634/full (accessed 17 July 2025).

Scott, D, and Morrison, M. (2006) *Key ideas in educational research*. London: Continuum International Publishing.

Shanker, S. (2010). Self-Regulation: Calm, alert, and learning. Education Canada, 50(3), 4-7.

Sharan, Y. (2015) Meaningful Learning in the Cooperative Classroom, *Education* [online]. 43 (1), 83-94. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.961723 (accessed 1 March 2025).

Shipman, M. D. (2014) *The Limitations of Social Research*, 4th Ed, London: Routledge.

Sir Ken Robinson. (2007) *Do schools kill creativity?* TED [video online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY (accessed 9 January 2025).

Sjøberg, S. (2019) The PISA Syndrome - How the OECD has Hijacked the Way We Perceive Pupils, *Schools and Education*. Confero, 7 (1), 12 - 65.

Skånfors, L. (2009) Ethics in Child Research: Children's Agency and Researchers' 'Ethical Radar'. *Childhoods Today*, 3(1).

Skoog-Hoffman, A., Miller, A. A., Plate, R. C., Meyers, D. C., Tucker, A. S., Meyers, G., Diliberti, M. K., Schwartz, H. L., Kuhfeld, M., Jagers, R. J., Steele, L., & Schlund, J. (2024) *Social and Emotional Learning in U.S. Schools: Findings from CASEL's Nationwide Policy Scan and the American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel Surveys*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-2.html (accessed 23 January 2025).

Sloan, S. and Martinez-Sainz, G. and Devine, D. and Symonds, Jennifer and Ioannidou, O. and Moore, B. and Davies, A. and Bohnert, M. and Stynes, H. and Senior, J. and Osborne, K. and Crean, Margaret and Barrow, N. and Grieves, M. and Gleasure, S. and Donegan, A. and Samonova, Elena and Farrell, E. and O'Giobuin, R. and Smith, A. and Farrell, J. (2024) *Children's School Lives: Children's Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools (2019-2023).* Project Report. UCD, Dublin. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/rspn05qa/csl-report-number-7.pdf (accessed 26 September 2024).

Smith, A. (2011) Respecting children's rights and agency: theoretical insights into ethical research procedures. In Harcourt, D., Perry, B. & Waller, T. (eds) Researching Young Children's Perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children [e-book]. Oxon: Routledge. Available at: ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nuim/reader.action?docID=668819 (accessed 5 January 2025).

Smith, R and Lambert, M. (2008) Assuming the Best, *Educational Leadership,* 66(1), 16-21. Available at: https://pdo.ascd.org/lmscourses/PD11OC110/media/CM-Diverse_M1_Reading_Assuming_the_Best.pdf (accessed 5 February 2025).

Smyth, E., Murray, A., McNamara, E., O'Mahony, D., Nolan, A., and Duggan, B. (2023). *Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings: Cohort '08 at 13 years old,* [online] Available

at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/growing-up-in-ireland-key-findings-cohort-08-at-13-years-old (accessed 5 November 2024).

Soutter, A.K. (2011) What can we learn about wellbeing in school? Journal of Student Wellbeing [online]. 5(1), 1-21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.21913/JSW.v5i1.729 (accessed 8 October 2024)

Sullivan, B., Glenn, M., Roche, M., & McDonagh, C. (2016). Introduction to Critical Reflection and Action for Teacher Researchers (1st ed.). Routledge. Available at: https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781315693033 (accessed 4 May 2025)

Teaching Council (2016) *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers*. 2nd ed. The Teaching Council. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/assets/uploads/2023/09/code-of-professional-conduct-for-teachers1.pdf (accessed 4 May 2025).

Thompson, K. (2017) The Hidden Curriculum and School Ethos [online]. Available at: https://revisesociology.com/2017/11/09/the-hidden-curriculum-and-school-ethos/ (accessed 6 September 2024).

Tovey, H. (2020) *A Froebelian Approach: Froebel's principles and practice today*. Froebel Turst [online] Available at: https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Froebels-principles-and-practice-today.pdf (accessed 29 May 2025).

Tovey, S. (2021) Building Resilience Skills Using Children's Literature, *The Reading Professor*: 44(1), Article 7. Available at: https://scholar.stjohns.edu/thereadingprofessor/vol44/iss1/7 (accessed 4 October 2024).

Twenge, J., Joiner, T., Rogers, M., & Martin, G. (2018) Increases in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates among U.S. adolescents after 2010 and links to increased new media screen time. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 6(1), 3–17.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2020) *Covid-19 and children.* UNICEF data hub. Available at: https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/ (accessed 26 July 2025).

van Bel, D.T., Smolders, K.C.H.J., Ijsselsteijn, W.A. and de Kort, Y.A.W. (2009). Social connectedness: Concept and measurement, *Intelligent Environments,* 2, 67-74. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220992602_Social_connectedness_Concept_and_measurement (accessed 5 June 2025).

Vaughan, M. and Delong, J. (2019) Cultures of inquiry: a transformative method of creating living-theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*. 12(2), 65–88. Available at: https://web-cdn.org/s/1445/file/node/12-13.pdf (accessed 1 August 2025).

Walker, J. and Oldford, S. (2020) Risk and Reflection in the Academic Workplace, *Advances in Developing Human Resources,* 22(3), 278–290. [online] Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1523422320927297 (Accessed 4 July 2025).

Watt, D. (2007) On becoming a qualitative researcher: the value of reflexivity. The Qualitative 12(1), 82-101. http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR12-1/watt.pdf [online]. Available (accessed: 2 January 2025).

Wentzel, K. (2024). Student well-being: In search of definitions, measures, and research designs. *Learning and Instruction*, *94*, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2024.101990 (accessed 10 October 2024).

Whitehead, J. (1989) Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, "How do I improve my practice?", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1), 41–52.

Whitehead, J. (2009) Generating Living Theory and Understanding in Action Research Studies. *Action Research* [online]. 7 (1), 85-99. Available at: https://doiorg.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1177/1476750308099599 (accessed 7 January 2025).

Whitehead, J. (2021) Teachers as educational professionals contributing their living-educational-theories to the creation of the future. In: SY.N.THE.SI. *The Heuristic Teachers' Society Conference: An Outlook in the Future: Education in 2030 and the Role of the Teacher as a Professional,* September 2021, Online. [unpublished] Available at: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9644-0785 (accessed 1 August 2025).

Whitehead, J. and McNiff, J. (2006) *Action Research: Living Theory*, London: Sage.

Winter, R. (2002) Truth or fiction: problems of validity and authenticity in narratives of action research. *Educational Action Research*, 10(1), 143–154.

Wolcott, H. F. (1992) *Posturing in qualitative research*, In M. LeCompte, W. L. Millroy and J. Preissle (eds) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education.* London: Academic Press Ltd, 3-52.

World Health Organisation (2013). Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020. Available at: https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/89966/9789241506021_eng.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 11 October 2024)

World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) *Situation report – 10, Novel Coronavirus* (2019-nCoV), Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200130-sitrep-10-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=d0b2e480_2%3E (accessed 4 October 2024).

Zinsser, K.M., Shewark, E.A., Denham, S.A., and Curby, T.W. (2014) A mixed-method examination of preschool teacher beliefs about social–emotional learning and relations

to observed emotional support. *Infant and Child Development*, 23(5), 471–493. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/icd.1843 (accessed 24 July 2025).

List of Appendices: Appendix 1: Information Letter to Parent

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

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

Dear Parent(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 **how I can improve my practice** to **nurture connection** in our classroom, and whether this leads to **empowering the emotional wellbeing of your child**. My study is entitled "*Connection over Correction: How Can I Nurture Connection in my Junior Infant Classroom through Restorative Practices?*

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom through my teaching of **Social, Personal and Health Educations (SPHE)** as part of the new Wellbeing Curriculum, and through **daily routines and interactions** with the children. I intend to use a range of **restorative practices** that enhance relationships and promote connection and a sense of belonging as part of our classroom culture. **Restorative practice is a way of learning how to build, repair and maintain connection and relationships between people.** These practices might include daily check-ins, proud post, picture books to develop emotional literacy as well as emotion coaching techniques to explore big feelings and coping tools with the children.

The data will be collected using a teacher reflective journal noting children's feedback, teacher observations of children's responses and reactions to activities, teacher-designed checklists recording teacher's own daily practices, children's work samples such as drawings and parent surveys. I will invite parents to participate through a digital, anonymous survey to gain your insight on connection, relationships and strategies used in school. **The anonymity of all participants will be protected.**

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. Should you wish to participate, you or 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. Unless in the event of a disclosure, which would be brought to the attention of the Designated Liaison Officer (DLP) in the school. 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 **sarah.kiely.2025@mumail.ie**

Yours faithfully,

Appendix 2: Child Consent Form

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Child's name: _____

I am trying to find out how I can help children to feel their best in school and how we can care for each other and work as a team. I want to know more about how we can all feel like we belong in school and in our classroom. I would like to find out more about these things. We will be doing some drawing, talking and playing. We can share our feelings if we would like. I would like to watch how we talk to each other and listen to you when you are in school. I might write down some notes about these things. Would you be ok with that? Pick a face:


I have asked your grown up 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 or make a mark on the form that I have sent home?

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

Appendix 3: Parent and Child Consent Form (For Child's Participation)

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_____

Parent / Guardian Signature_____ Date: _____

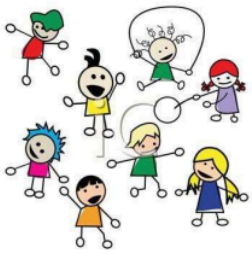
Name of Child _____

Your child can sign their first name below if they can write their name. If not, that is ok, we are still practising! Your child can make a mark in the box below.

Child's signature/mark: Date: _____

Appendix 4: Child Assent Form

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth



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):

_____

Child's signature or mark: Date: _____
in box below)

Signature of Witness: _____

Appendix 5: Parent Consent Form (for Parent Participation in Surveys)

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 participate in this study through the use of surveys. I understand that all information will be kept anonymous and that the feedback I provide may be used in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature_____ Date: _____

Parent / Guardian Signature_____ Date: _____

Contact details: Sarah Kiely ***Email:*** sarah.kiely.2025@mumail.ie

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Appendix 6: Information Sheet for Parents

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-researcher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes, samples of work and surveys. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting how this action research has enhanced their own practice as a teacher.

What are the research questions?

- *What does connection look like in my classroom?*
- *What are the barriers and enablers to connection in the classroom?*
- *What restorative strategies might be effective in repairing and maintaining connection in the classroom?*
- *What effect does the teacher-student relationship have on connection in my classroom?*
- *What skills as a teacher can I implement to nurture connection in my classroom through the physical and emotional environment I create?*

What sorts of methods will be used?

The data will be collected using a teacher reflective journal noting a summary of feedback and contributions, teacher observations of children's responses and reactions to activities, teacher-designed checklists recording teacher's own daily practices, children's work samples such as drawings and surveys.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself, Sarah Kiely, 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'Keeffe and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

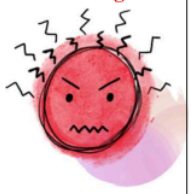
What are you being asked to do?

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. The thesis may be published in accordance with University guidelines and findings may be presented at conferences or submitted in academic journals. If this is the case, the confidentiality and anonymity of the research will be strictly adhered to. A copy will be made available to you upon request.

Appendix 7: Timeline of Research Action Plan

Appendix 8: Intervention Lessons for Cycle One

CYCLE ONE		
Week	**Intervention**	**Data Collection**
Week 1: January 20th – 24th **Emotion: Sadness** 	○ **Emotional Literacy: Explore and connect** **Tuesday:** • Teacher collects **initial word bank** from whole class discussion on *sadness* and records on poster paper in black. • **Children draw** what *sadness* looks like for them in their wellbeing copy. • **Use of Story:** Class explore *sadness* via picture book: *'The River'* while teacher prompts through questioning. • **Character profile:** Whole class complete character profile collaboratively based on character from *'The River'* with teacher as scribe. • **Connect and Reflect:** Pupils connect with the story and reflect on a time when they felt *sad* by drawing about it in their wellbeing copy. Teacher scribes. ○ **Emotional Regulation: Emotional Toolbox** **Thursday:** • **Whole class discussion:** During circle time, children are invited to orally recall previous lesson and story. • **Coping Toolbox:** Pupils create individual coping toolbox for *sadness.* • Teacher adds any further words offered by children to the *sadness* **word bank** using new colour. ○ Send **Parent Survey** (Monday 20th)	○ **Checklist: Baseline established** using ***Empathy Scale for Children*** **(ESC)** ○ **Children's work samples:** Coping Toolbox ○ **Teacher observation** during whole class story discussion using **question prompts** adapted from **KEDS** ○ **Teacher reflective Journal** will be used to reflect after intervention lessons using **Gibbs reflective model.** ○ Surveys
Week 2: January 27th – 31st **Emotion: Happiness** 	○ **Emotional Literacy: Explore and connect** **Tuesday:** • **Initial word bank** for *happiness* • **Children draw** what *happiness* looks like for them in their wellbeing copy. • **Use of story:** Explore *happiness* via picture book: *'Where Happiness Begins'* • Complete Character profile • **Connect and reflect:** Pupils draw about a time when they felt *happy* in their wellbeing copy. Teacher scribes. ○ **Emotional Regulation: Emotional Toolbox** **Thursday:** • **Whole class discussion:** Recall of previous lesson. • **Coping Toolbox:** Pupils create individual coping toolbox for *happiness.* • **Word bank:** Further words added.	○ **Children's work samples:** Coping Toolbox ○ **Teacher observation** during whole class story discussion using **question prompts** adapted from **KEDS** ○ **Reflective Journal** will be used lessons using **Gibbs reflective model.**
Week 3: February 3rd – 7th	○ **Emotional Literacy: Explore and connect** **Tuesday:** • **Initial word bank** for *anger*	

Emotion: Anger 	• **Children draw** what *anger* looks like for them in their wellbeing copy. • **Use of story:** Explore *anger* via picture book: *'Ravi's Roar'.* • Complete Character profile • **Connect and reflect:** Pupils draw about a time when they felt *angry* in their wellbeing copy. Teacher scribes. ○ **Emotional Regulation: Emotional Toolbox** **Thursday:** • **Whole class discussion:** Recall of previous lesson. • **Coping Toolbox:** Pupils create individual coping toolbox for *anger.* • **Word bank:** Further words added.	○ **Children's work samples:** Coping Toolbox ○ **Teacher observation** during whole class story discussion using **question prompts** adapted from **KEDS** ○ **Reflective Journal** will be used lessons using **Gibbs reflective model.**
Week 4: February 10th – 14th **Emotion: Worry** 	○ **Emotional Literacy: Explore and connect** **Tuesday:** • **Initial word bank** for *worry* • **Children draw** what *worry* looks like for them in their wellbeing copy. • **Use of story:** Explore *worry* via picture book: *'The Worrysaurus'.* • Complete Character profile • **Connect and reflect:** Pupils draw about a time when they felt *worried* in their wellbeing copy. Teacher scribes. ○ **Emotional Regulation: Emotional Toolbox** **Thursday:** • **Whole class discussion:** Recall of previous lesson. • **Coping Toolbox:** Pupils create individual coping toolbox for *worry.* • **Word bank:** Further words added.	○ **Children's work samples:** Coping toolbox ○ **Teacher observation** during whole class story discussion using **question prompts** adapted from **KEDS** ○ **Reflective Journal** will be used lessons using **Gibbs reflective model.**
Strategies used during Intervention Cycle as part of daily routine: ○ **Morning Routine:** • Meet and Greet • Wellbeing Check-in ○ **Physical Environment:** • Calm Corner (with feelings chart, regulation tools and connection box) • Positive Pathways: Teacher references the *Positive Pathways* visual on a daily basis to "track" progress for class goal: "We can name and tame our emotions". ○ **Emotional Environment:** • Teacher using Emotion Coaching as tool to support big emotions as they arise during the day • Teacher modelling "name and tame" technique regularly for children		○ Reflective Journal ○ Teacher observation ○ Children's work samples
○ Informal meetings with **critical friends** will occur throughout cycle one. ○ Meeting with **validation group** will take place at the end of cycle one.		○ Reflective Journal to summarise conversations and feedback.

Appendix 9: Intervention Lessons for Cycle Two

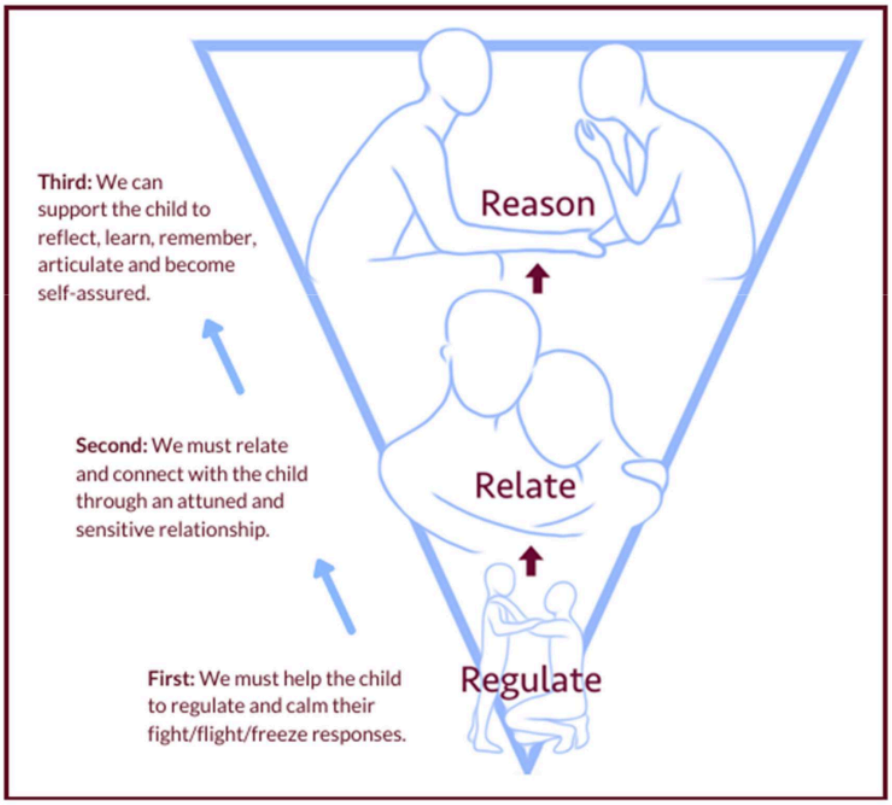
Week 1 18th – 21st March • Observe current play structure • Explicitly teach conflict resolution and problem-solving • Create class play agreement: Play Promise (WCD)	**Week 2: 24th – 28th March** • Introduce new play structure • Collaborative mind-map for the garden centre • Introduce new pathway • Discuss how to report and record play (explore different ways)
Week 3: 31st March – 4th April Play Sessions: 45 minutes • Class discussion: Conflict scenario (Think, Pair, Share: 3 mins) • Planning our play (2 minutes) (Think time, talk time – who, what, how) • Play (30 minutes) (Observing play, engaging when invited) • Reporting our play (5 minutes) (Using visualiser, recording in copies, taking photographs to use as stimulus for next play session/other learning area)	**Week 4: 7th – 11th April** Play Sessions: 45 minutes • Class discussion: Conflict scenario (Think, Pair, Share: 3 mins) • Planning our play (2 minutes) (Think time, talk time – who, what, how) • Play (30 minutes) (Observing play, engaging when invited) • Reporting our play (5 minutes) (Using visualiser, recording in copies, taking photographs to use as stimulus for next play session/other learning area)
Week 5: 28th April – 2nd May Play Sessions: 45 minutes • Class discussion: Conflict scenario (Think, Pair, Share: 3 mins) • Planning our play (2 minutes) (Think time, talk time – who, what, how) • Play (30 minutes) (Observing play, engaging when invited) • Reporting our play (5 minutes) (Using visualiser, recording in copies, taking photographs to use as stimulus for next play session/other learning area)	**Week 6: 5th – 9th May** Play Sessions: 45 minutes • Class discussion: Conflict scenario (Think, Pair, Share: 3 mins) • Planning our play (2 minutes) (Think time, talk time – who, what, how) • Play (30 minutes) (Observing play, engaging when invited) • Reporting our play (5 minutes) (Using visualiser, recording in copies, taking photographs to use as stimulus for next play session/other learning area)

Appendix 10: The Three R's: Reaching the Learning Brain (Perry, 2016)

Beacon House
Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



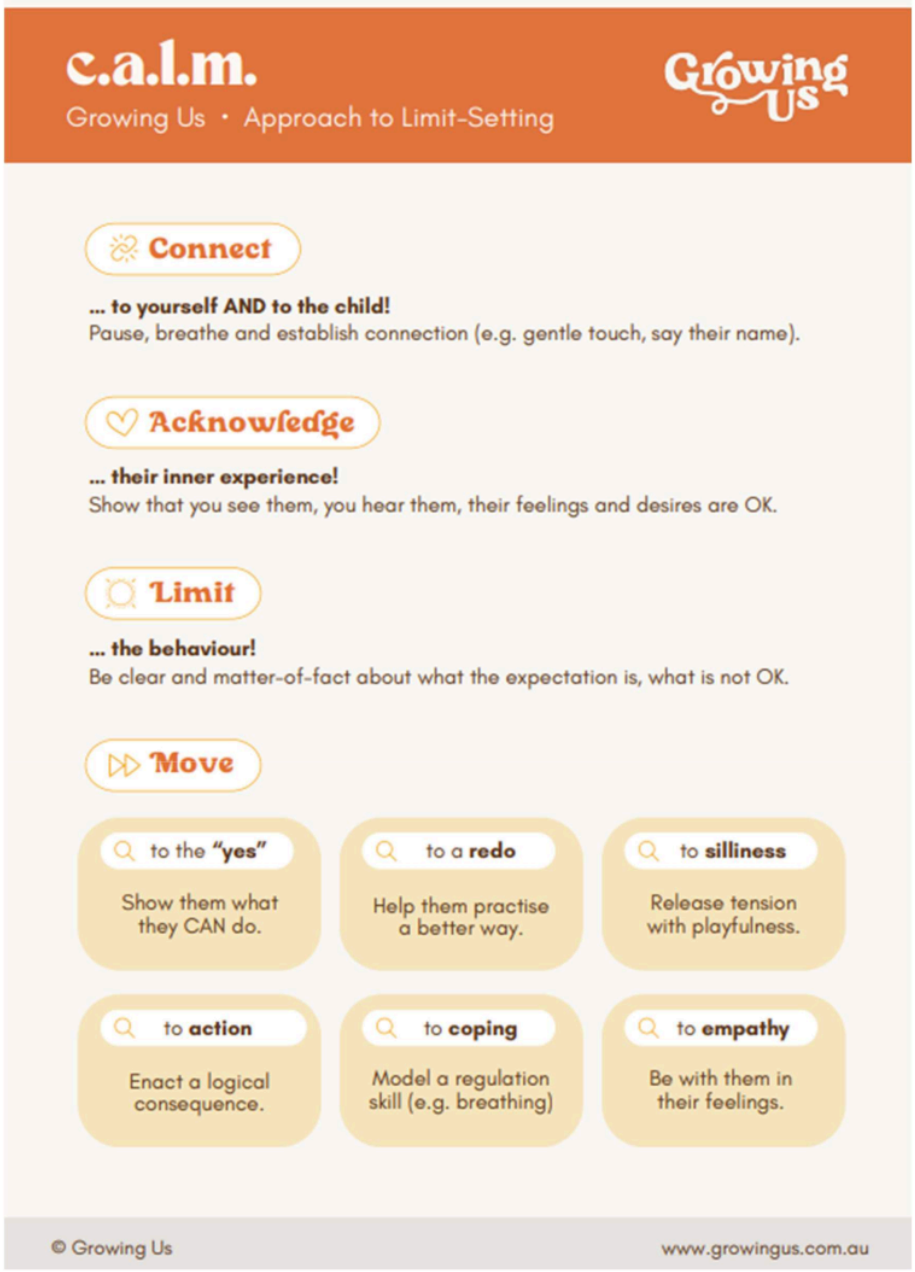
Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.

Appendix 11: Cycle One Intervention Resources

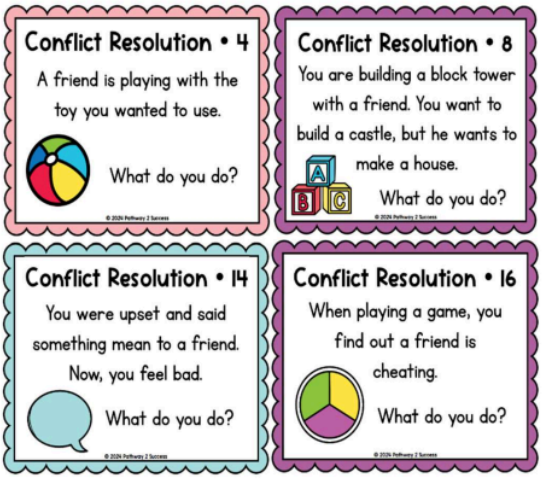
Regulation Strategies – 20 ways to find your calm © TGMC

Coping Toolbox: Child's Anger Toolbox (teacher-designed)

Appendix 12: CALM Script for Limit-Setting © Growing Us



Appendix 13: Cycle Two Intervention Resources



Conflict Resolution Scenarios © Pathway 2 Success

Daily Structure of Play

Class Play Promise

Showing We Care – Teacher Designed Script

Appendix 14: Final Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme 1	**The Significance of the Teacher's Role**
Sub-theme	Barriers to Socioemotional Development
Sub-Section	*A Lack of Regulation Skills*
	Correction over Connection
	An Over-Reliance on the Teacher
	Time Constraints
Sub-theme	Enablers of Socioemotional Development
Sub-Section	*Positive Relationships*
	Explicit Modelling of Socioemotional Skills
	Gradual Release of Scaffolding

Theme 2	**The Benefit of Organic Interactions**
Sub-theme	The Affordances of Play as a Social Learning Space
Sub-Section	*Enhanced Peer Relationships*
	The Teacher's Role in Enhancing Peer Relationships
	Enhanced Teacher-Student Relationships
Sub-theme	Reflection as a Tool for deepening SEL
Sub-Section	*Pre-Play Reflections*
	Post-Play Reflections
	Challenging My Assumptions

Appendix 15: Question prompts adapted from KEDS (Reid et al., 2013)

Question Prompts during Story Discussion
Affective
How do you think the character is feeling?
Cognitive
Can you tell me why they feel like this?
Tell me more about what is happening in this picture?
Behavioural
What would you do if you were this character?

Appendix 16: Emotions Vocabulary Checklist

Emotion Vocabulary Checklist		
Images from ESC*	**Emotion identified**	**Sample Comments**
Excluding facial expression of main character		
1. Girl celebrating birthday with friends (happy)	18/18	*"She's happy. Wait they're having a party, yeah cause it's her birthday".*
2. Girl with broken doll (sad)	18/18	*"Upset 'cause this part broken."*
3. Girl whose hair is being pulled by friend (angry)	18/18	*"Upset or maybe angry. The boy is hurting her. That's rude. He's a bold boy."*
4. Boy being barked by dog on leash (scared)	18/18	*"That's definitely scared. He has sharp teeth."*
5. Boy being read story to in mother's lap (happy)	18/18	*"Happy 'cause his mam reading him"*
6. Girl excluded by friends who are playing a game (sad)	18/18	*"She's sad. She can't play and they're all happy, they're playing without her. Isn't that a good answer."*
7. Boy whose drawing is being wilfully torn by a friend (angry)	18/18	*"This boy is annoyed cause she ripped his picture and I'd just tell a teacher and you'd tell her not to do that again"*
8. Boy chasing his ball in street who suddenly realises car is coming towards him (scared)	18/18	*"Scared cause what about the ball gets squished by the car. The man should stop driving. I'm so good at this aren't I?"*
9. Boy being presented with gift by a friend (happy)	18/18	*"Happy cause the girls giving his a present. That's kind"*
10. Girl who has dropped her ice cream (sad)	18/18	*"Sad. She dropped her ice cream. I'd feel upset if that happened me"*
11. Boy whose toy is being forcefully taken from him by a friend (angry)	18/18	*"Maybe a little mad"*
12. Girl about to fall off her bike (scared)	18/18	*"Upset 'cause she thinks she's gonna fall. Do you know I'm scared of cuts with blood?"*

**Checklist adapted from Empathy Scale for Children (Köksal Akyol and Aslan, 2014)*

Appendix 17: Sample Contributions during Whole Class Discussions

"Maybe it started to rain and he can't go outside and he's sad 'cause of that. That makes me sad too" (Saoirse, Whole Class Discussion (WCD) 21st January 2025).

"I feel frustrated like that when someone breaks my tower in magna-tiles"

(Cara, WCD, 28th January 2025).

"She's feeling scared maybe cause she's gonna fall off the bike, do you know what I'm scared of? Cuts with blood" (Jack, WCD, 4th February 2025).

"She just needs a hug because she's scared of the dark like me"

(Jenny, WCD, 6th February 2025).

"I was always happy when I was three 'cause you don't think of all the stuff in your head when you're littler…but now I sometimes get sad or worried cause I'm bigger. You notice more stuff when you're bigger and when your littler you don't know or understand as much stuff" (Rachel, WCD, 11th February 2025).