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An Exploration into Teachers' Perceptions of Drama Education and its Potential

Influence on Children's Literacy Skills.
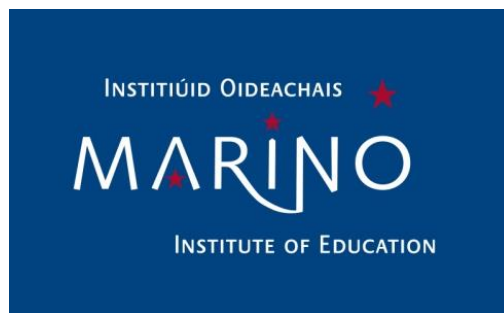
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Abstract

Despite the rise of technology in today's day and age, research has indicated that traditional literacy is a fundamental requirement for societal participation in the twenty-first century. Although Ireland may be ahead of several of its neighbouring European countries, with regard to literacy levels, statistics reveal that there is still a need for change, with 45% of young people having low literacy skill levels in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2013).

In recent years, the value of drama education as a pedagogy has become increasingly popular in primary education. The study carried out was a qualitative study, in the form of semi-structured interviews with mainstream primary school teachers. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth insight into teachers' perceptions of drama education and the influence they feel it may have on the literacy skill development of children.

The study found that although the cohort of teachers believed that Drama had a place in the Primary Language Curriculum, they nonetheless felt ill equipped to teach or integrate the subject, with several teachers feeling as though a background in Drama is necessary, in order to have the confidence to teach it. This highlights the vital need for more training and CPD in the area of drama education, in order to tackle the issue at hand. Future studies could focus on teacher training colleges in detail. This could be executed by investigating if the root of the confidence problem stems from the quality and quantity of training that teachers receive in the subject of Drama, while in college.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to investigate if drama education has an influence on children's literacy skill development in primary education, with particular focus on children's fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Through analysing existing data on literacy skill levels in Ireland, such as The Positive Ageing 2016 National Indicators Report, findings presented will imply that the Irish schooling system has not equipped children with the necessary literacy skills that they need in order to fully participate in society.

It is evident that the Irish Government and Department of Education have recognised this issue and have attempted to resolve it. 'The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011' states that high quality professional development courses of at least twenty hours in literacy, numeracy and assessment should be provided for teachers, in order to maintain their professional skills. "This strategy is focused on the actions that the education system can take to ensure that early childhood care and education (ECCE) and primary and second-level schools provide the best possible opportunities for young people to acquire good literacy and numeracy skills" (The Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The strategy suggests that teachers could provide these extra hours of literacy through integrated subjects, such as Drama. In order to explore this issue, I will be asking teachers about their perspectives, and on their opinion of integrating Drama with literacy in terms of reaching literacy success.

Through analysing drama education in primary schools, I will investigate if this creative pedagogical approach has any effect on children's literacy skills, with regard to motivation, participation and productivity. Currently, with a rapidly evolving literacy landscape, it is unrealistic to expect children to focus primarily on traditional reading

and writing practices (Wells and Sandretto, 2017). However, it has been stated that certain teachers are hesitant with amending their teaching methodologies when it comes to integrating the drama pedagogy into the literacy programme as they "…can find it difficult to challenge well-established, traditional literacy pedagogies" (Wells & Sandretto, 2017, p.190). This thesis aims to discover, through qualitative data, teachers' confidence levels when it comes to integrating drama pedagogy, and what they believe is required in order to improve this, if necessary.

The literature review will explore the literacy skill levels in Ireland. The chapter will highlight the strategies that have been put in place by the Department of Education, in order to improve literacy levels in the Irish schooling system, with focus on the new Primary Language Curriculum , 'The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011' and the Aistear framework. It will look at coming to a definition for literacy. Statistics from the International Adult Literacy Survey will be revealed, in order to indicate the low level of literacy in Ireland.

Furthermore, the literature review will focus on defining drama in education, with particular focus on how drama in education operates, the skill and social development through drama, the role of the teacher in drama education and the link between drama pedagogy and literacy levels in education.

The study will be carried out through collecting qualitative data, using semi-structured interviews. The interviews will specifically be semi-structured as they allow for a high level of flexibility of coverage and they capture the richness of the answers given by the respondents (Drever, 1995). A semi-structured interview will have a prepared interview schedule, however most questions will be open ended.

Literature Review

Technology affecting literacy levels

With the rise of technology, literacy is no longer solely defined as the ability to read with comprehension and write with clarity (Smith, 2011). From a very young age, children are literate in decoding meaning from sophisticated forms of symbolic communication (Hilton, 1996). They are instructed to use technological advancements within the schooling system across a range of subjects, from mathematics to language arts (Smith, 2011). This raises the concern that there is less of an emphasis on pen and paper, and more emphasis on technology. As Smith states, "Typically, students are walking into today's classroom digitally armed with an arsenal of technological trends and trick of the trade" (2011, p.4).

Valentine Cunningham, a professor of English language and literature at the University of Oxford, is of the belief that as the role of reading in society changes, the reader holding a book in her hand becomes an increasingly smaller phenomenon and libraries will soon become places that store computers, rather than books (Cox, 1998). However, both Bill Gates and Steve Jobs restricted the 'screen-time' that they allowed their children to have, despite their well-known careers in technological inventions. In 2007, Gates, the former CEO of Microsoft implemented a cap on screen time, not allowing his children to have a phone until the age of fourteen. While, Jobs, who was the CEO of Apple, did not allow his children to use an iPad (Weller, 2017). The two biggest tech figures limiting the amount of exposure that their children have with technology should be telling that it certainly should not become a replacement for traditional literacy.

Although technology may be becoming a dominant aspect of children's lives, research indicates that literacy is a basic requirement for societal participation in the twenty-first century. "Literacy not only enhances career prospects, but also reduces the chance of being unemployed" ("Literacy in the Information Age", 2000). John W Miller, the president of Central Connecticut State University, has spent forty years examining the world's literacy levels and in 2016 carried out a study in order to rank over sixty countries worldwide. The study focused on a number of variables to rank how literacy achievement could be determined, taking statistics from PIRLS (the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) (Dempsey, 2016). Ireland ranked as the 24th country, highlighting that it is a country ahead of many of its neighbouring European countries, something it can take pride in.

However, as shown through the Positive Ageing 2016 National Indicators Report, a total of 61% of adults aged 55-65 in Ireland have low literacy skills, as well as 45% of young people from the ages of 20-24 (Central Statistics Office, 2013). These people are categorised as being at or below level one literacy skills, which is the ability to understand and respond appropriately to written texts. This identifies that there is need for change and improvement when it comes to literacy skill levels in Ireland. Perhaps this change is a more creative pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, such as cross-curricular integration with English and Drama Education.

Government initiatives

Both policy makers and educators alike are aware of the fact that no magic cure exists in order to solve low literacy standards; however, there are a number of intervention strategies available that can contribute to finding a solution (Stewart, 2001). Over time,

there has been a variety of initiatives implemented by the Irish Government in order to resolve this issue, such as the launch of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum, "designed to cater for the needs of children in the modern world" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999, p.6). While also having the launch on the most recent Primary Language Curriculum, requested by teachers to have a curriculum that is less crowded, with a greater emphasis on the progression of children's language learning and development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). This curriculum emphasises the importance of literacy in developing children's cognitive ability.

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 is another attempt from the Irish Government, seeking to address the significant concerns about young people developing their literacy skills. Its aim is to equip children with the necessary skills to participate fully in society. The concept of emergent literacy is particularly significant, in order to ensure that children are equipped with these skills from a young age. The Aistear framework is another government initiative that views emergent literacy as developing through 'play and hands-on experience [where] children see and interact with print as they build an awareness of its functions and conventions' (NCCA, 2009, p. 54) Aistear recognises the link between oral language and reading and writing within the emergent literacy phase (Kennedy et al., 2012). This indicates that the Government have been attempting to resolve the low literacy levels in Ireland. This thesis aims to investigate if primary school teachers are implementing these initiatives within their classroom, in order to improve literacy levels of children.

Towards a definition of literacy

Despite the fact that there is a lot of background research on the topic of literacy, there is no single definition for the term (Stewart, 2001). The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) no longer define literacy in terms of reading performance, distinguishing between illiterates and those who are literate. Rather, 'literacy is defined as … "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community..." ("Literacy in the Information Age", 2000).

Conclusion

With the rise of technology, it may appear as though literacy is becoming a redundant skill, but the data gathered from IALS demonstrates that literacy remains an essential skill in order for full societal participation. In order to resolve the issue, the education system must equip its participants in a complete manner and the teaching and learning of literacy must become a priority (Stewart, 2001). Chapter two will focus on drama in education and the need for a more creative and imaginative pedagogical approach, in order to facilitate the development of literacy skills, as they remain vital for societal participation.

Drama in Education

Drama in Education

The new Primary Language Curriculum is designed to cater for children in modern society, with an aim to provide a curriculum that is more than functional, enabling children to make and explore meaning, as well as receive and create it (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). The change of emphasis in the content of the curriculum gives rise to the need for a corresponding change in the teaching methods, putting responsibility on teachers to bring a creative, integrated approach to the teaching of literacy.

The value of drama education as a pedagogy has become increasingly popular as an approach to teaching and learning in primary education. "It incorporates elements of an actor's training to facilitate the students' physical, social, emotional and cognitive development" (Basom, 2005). According to numerous researchers, there is a variety of benefits through integrating drama pedagogy with the literacy programme. (Wells & Sandretto, 2017). According to Anderson (2012), Drama encourages children to actively participate with a new language through developing code breaking and meaning making skills, which are characterised as two of the four elements of the Four Resources Model framework (Luke & Freebody, 1997). This model suggests that children need to develop "a repertoire of practices" (Luke, Woods, & Dooley, 2011, p.159) in which they act as code-breakers, meaning makers, text users and text analysts when interacting with a text in order to fully comprehend it (Bull & Anstey, 2010). When this framework is looked at from a 'Process Drama' viewpoint, it can be argued that Process Drama has great potential in enhancing the literacy programme, as children

can subconsciously work through the stages of the Four Resources Model through

Drama Education (Wells & Sandretto, 2017).

Process Drama

Process Drama is a form of drama in education first developed by Dorothy Heathcote

(Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). The purpose of it is for the children to participate in

inquiry or discovery learning, rather than a rehearsed performance on stage (Wells &

Sandretto, 2017). Many teachers have experience with drama that builds up to an end

performance. Whereas with Process Drama, "the focus is on the process and reflecting

on the issues explored within and outside of the fiction (Wells & Sandretto, 2017,

p.183). Through Process Drama, children are presented with the opportunity to crack

the codes and conventions of the linguistic system, along with the gestural, visual and

audio systems, as they decode and make meaning of the pretext, while working in role

through drama pedagogy (O'Mara, 2004).

A practical example of a drama convention that can allow children the chance to

make meaning and analyse texts through the four resources is a 'freeze frame'. The

children read visual, gestural and special systems and make meaning from what they are

presented with. The children creating their own 'freeze frames', either in groups or

individually develop the text user role. The text analyst role is achieved through

encouraging the children to develop multiple interpretations, as they analyse the 'freeze

frame' (O'Mara, 2004). This highlights the potential that the Process Drama pedagogy

has in integrating a repertoire of practices into a cohesive whole (Martello, 2002).

Rather than depending on a written script, Process Drama is built from a number

of episodes, which according to Cecily O'Neill are created, not rehearsed (O'Neill,

1995). A dilemma is left unresolved, which draws the children in, thus heightening

their engagement levels. "Action is left hanging in the air, giving rise to dramatic tension and driving the dramatic action forward" (Stewart, 2001, p.45). The power that drama in education has on capturing children's attention can have a positive impact on children's literacy skill development. Their engagement levels are heightened as they move seamlessly from writing into drama repeatedly, granting them with a springboard for creativity (Kennedy et al., 2012). Student engagement coincides with successful literacy development and involves strategies for deep thinking and using these strategies for learning from text" (Guthrie, 2004).

Potential Benefits of integrating Literacy and Drama Education

A number of researchers are of the strong opinion that many potential benefits exist, through integrating drama pedagogy into literacy. Crumpler (2006) suggests, "a dramatic model of reading provides structures that help readers question, critique and evaluate the texts they are interacting with in terms of the dynamics of power (p.10). Schneider and Jackson (2000) carried out a study in New Zealand, to investigate if Process Drama is a productive pedagogy with affordances for multi-literacies. Throughout the study, they discovered that the students participation on 'writing in role' was genuine writing that encouraged them to use their imagination and be creative (Wells & Sandretto, 2017). "Going into role scaffolds children's thinking by creating a need to 'read' the situation, to harness relevant information from previous experience, and to realign this information so that new understanding becomes possible" (O'Neill, 1995, p.79-80). Working through Process Drama allows children to engage on a deep level, which in turn improves their understanding. With this notion in mind, it supports the idea that a better understanding of the concept will lead to improved literacy development.

A key aspect of Process Drama is building belief in a fictional world (O'Neill, 1995). A stimulating pretext helps to build this belief for the children, encouraging them to engage with the drama in question. However, there is an equal responsibility on the teacher to suspend the belief, by participating in drama conventions, such as 'teacher in role'. If the teacher is willing to adopt to this creative pedagogy of teaching, and perhaps minimise traditional pedagogies, they may become aware of more literacy success among the students in their class. In the Schneider and Jackson (2000) study, the teachers were surprised at the children's willingness and commitment in participating in the fictional world with teacher in role, with one teacher stating, "It is amazing. Nobody thinks, oh you are not that [role], you are [teacher]" (Wells & Sandretto, 2017, p.186).

Along with heightened engagement levels among the children in the class, the more timid children also became more confident during the participation as character in role. A teacher in an infant classroom stated that the child who would usually cry when asked a question, transformed into a different person while in role, willing to answer any questions (Wells & Sandretto, 2017). Being in the safety of the role created a protected space for this usually timid student to engage, participate and make meaning (Kana & Aitken, 2007).

Within the drama, there may be a need for the children to do some sort of writing, such as a police report, a letter overseas, a newspaper article or some sort of writing activity may arise as part of the drama. As a result of the writing process being a follow on from the dramatic situation, solutions and emotions have been explored prior to the writing process. The appropriate vocabulary has been mentioned and the children have some sort of emotional attachment to the activity (Stewart, 2001). Drama can offer children an opportunity to immerse themselves into the fictional world. They have the

autonomy to leave behind any insecurities or literacy difficulties they may have, as they are subconsciously developing a deep understanding on the topic in question, which subsequently builds up their confidence levels, while keeping them in a safe place. As Anderson (2012) states, Process Drama can support children who struggle with literacy acquisition to shift from "passive observer to active explorer of the meaning of text by actualizing it or performing its meaning" (p.974).

Teaching Drama in Education

There are teachers who are reluctant to teach Drama as an everyday subject, as they have certain ideologies about it. Although it is not a new arrival to the field of education, it has only become valued for its potential as an approach to classroom teaching and learning in recent years (Stewart, 2001). For many teachers, when the word 'Drama' comes to mind, they automatically think of nativity plays, costumes, stages or line learning. It is something they dread, as they have prejudgements towards it. The term drama in education or Process Drama, as is offered by people such as Dorothy Heathcote or Cecily O'Neill, "aims to draw teachers away from the traditional practices associated with drama in schools" (Stewart, 2001, p.43).

Rather than instructing children to sit in their seats and listen while the teacher talks, drama in education welcomes the use of practical activities that invite children to play an active role in their learning process. Through the active learning of Drama, children are present in the moment and have a certain degree of autonomy, allowing them to lead the lesson as they desire, to a certain extent. This heightens the possibility that the children will retain the information. Although some teachers may be reluctant to incorporate drama education into their literacy lessons, it is important that they are willing to adopt their teaching methodologies, if necessary, in order to achieve this

integrated approach to the teaching and learning of literacy skills. As Vygotsky states, teachers are also learners and require "collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p.86). Albert Einstein also wrote that, "The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking". If teachers are willing to shift their pedagogical paradigms to new levels, they will have the opportunity to see that the change may lead to lessons that are more important (Smith, 2011). This thesis aims to discover if teachers are integrating Drama with literacy and if not, to gain an insight into their opinion on how best to achieve literacy success for children.

Conclusion

Literature highlights the potential that drama in education has on allowing for a teaching approach that facilitates learning, while being highly engaging and motivating for the children. Through working with Drama, children are offered an opportunity to develop their literacy and language skills. Undoubtedly, there is a dependency co-existing between the field of Drama and the field of literacy, as pointed out by authors such as Heathcote and O'Neill (Stewart, 2001). Drama and literacy are similar, as both are dependent on the use of language (Flemming, 1994), and therefore it may be seen as a step forward to integrate the teaching and learning of the subjects, in order to achieve literacy success.

Drama in education offers the potential to facilitate literacy instruction in a unique way, by captivating the children and offering them a purposeful context to explore text, whether it be a writing process or oral communication. As stated by Booth "Dramatic play takes place in an imaginative frame that depends upon language for its existence" (1994, p.25).

The new Primary Language Curriculum for Irish Primary schools emphasises that there will be an implementation of teaching methods, in order to keep "up-to-date with the times we live in". The main emphasis of the curriculum is on the children having more opportunities to talk in class, give their opinions and express their thoughts (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). The literature reviewed in this study illustrates the potential that drama in education can have on facilitating this type of literacy learning and teaching needed to develop these skills.

Research Design and Methodologies

This chapter will include the aims of the study, the research methodology adopted, along with the advantages, limitations and ethical considerations that it brings along with it. A review of the literature has informed the researchers plan and ideas in relation to designing the study. The study examined teachers' perceptions of the potential that drama in education can have as an independent subject or as an integrated element of English, in terms of affecting children's literacy skill development in primary school education.

Aims of the study

The aim of this study was to examine if drama education has an influence on children's literacy skills in primary education. This was achieved through gaining an in-depth insight into how children are currently being taught literacy skills and whether the integration of Drama and English is common within the classrooms of the respondents, and if so, the effect they believe it to have on the success of the language productivity of children.

Along with reviewing the relative literature in the field, qualitative research in the form of one-to-one interviews were carried out with a sample of primary school teachers in a mainstream Irish non-DEIS school. The questions asked in the interview were combined with what current literature suggest as the most effective ways of including creative approaches to the teaching and learning of literacy skills, (see Appendix I for the interview questions). The study focused on the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of Drama in motivating and encouraging children to read and express themselves, as well as looking at teachers' own outlooks and confidence levels when it came to the teaching of Drama in primary schools. The study also assessed the

effectiveness of integrating Drama and literacy, in terms of reaching literacy success, in the form of productivity, participation and motivation levels.

Qualitative or Quantitative Research Design

Two general research approaches that can be adopted in the field of educational research are *qualitative* and *quantitative.* A quantitative approach focuses on a single objectivity that can be defined in terms of statistics (MacMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Qualitative research on the other hand aims to "describe and analyse individual people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions" (MacMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p.391). Qualitative research aims to analyse information that is expressed through language and behaviour in a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, qualitative research was the most suitable style in determining teachers' perceptions of the potential influence that Drama has on literacy skill development. While a quantitative approach can be used to establish sweeping generalisations, a qualitative approach 'presents facts in a narration with words' (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews have been used extensively across all the disciplines of educational research as a key technique of data collection (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were carried out as a method of data collection for the research topic in question. While interviewing is not an easy skill to master, it nonetheless brings with it several advantages as a means of data collection (Stewart, 2001). It is flexible, suitable for gathering large amounts of information, while simultaneously allowing the interviewer to clarify any misunderstandings and probe for more clarification on certain topics (Drever, 1995). This allows the researcher the opportunity to gain a rich, in depth

insight into teacher's personal perceptions and beliefs on the potential that Drama can have on the development of literacy skill levels for children in primary school education.

The success of any interview relies heavily on the relationship and rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. The overall aim of unstructured interviewing is to create an atmosphere, which allows the respondent to feel comfortable to relate to often-personal materials to the researcher (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). MacCrossan (1984) stresses the responsibility that the interviewer has in persuading the interviewee of the importance of the interview, in order to achieve their full co-operation. This can be achieved more successfully if a relationship exists between the respondent and the researcher. There is an importance for the researcher to build up some trust and confidence with the interviewee.

The researcher, who conducted these interviews ensured to make herself known and was therefore familiar with the staff, allowing these relationships to build in a professional manner. The interviews were semi-structured and based in the natural school environment. A semi-structured interview has a prepared interview schedule, however most questions are open ended. Although the interviews are not classified as being fully structured, as they allow for a high level of flexibility of coverage (Drever, 1995), there nonetheless remains an importance for the interviews to follow some structure. As Whyte (1996) has stated, a genuinely non-directive interviewing approach is simply not appropriate for research.

Semi-structured interviews allow the participants a degree of autonomy to explore the conversation and questions, thus capturing the richness of the answers given by the respondents (Drever, 1995). In other words, the semi-structured interview

"allows the interviewer greater scope in asking questions out of sequence and the interviewees of answering questions in their own way" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002, p.162). The schedule can contain prompts such as follow up questions or examples, in order to gain a more detailed response. It was quickly emergent for the researcher how these semi-structured interviews appeared to merge into a form of conversation, arguably another advantage of this form of data collection. Burgess quotes Palmer here who suggests that an unstructured interview:

"… assumes the appearance of a natural interesting conversation. But to the proficient interviewer it is always a controlled conversation which he guides and bends to the service of his research interest" (Palmer 1928: 171, cited by Burgess, 1982).

The semi-structured interviews carried out contained a certain amount of freedom, while also maintaining a certain sense of control (Wallace, 1998). Hitchcock and Hughes (2002) emphasise the fact that many of the problems that can potentially arise during fieldwork are minimised when conducted in a familiar setting. For that reason, the interviews were conducted in the classroom after a school day, in order to ensure the respondents felt comfortable, while the timing of after school meant there would be limited interruptions during each interview.

An important consideration for the researcher was how to record the interview, which is a decision that must be made in the early stages of the data collection. A concern with the semi-structured interviews, given their conversational manner, is that if recorded, the questions and answers given are likely to be lengthy, complex and perhaps include a degree of rambling (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). The semi-structured interviews were tape recorded, in order to produce the most complete record of everything said in the interviews. As stated by Hitchcock and Hughes, a reading and re-

reading of the transcript of the interviews should be carried out, in order to gain appreciation for the "… subtle features of tone, pitch, intonation and other crucial aspects such as pauses, silences, emphasis" (2002, p.173).

It is important to recognise the consequences that the tape recorder can have in the course of the interview. For example, it may influence the respondents' answers or the way in which they phrase their words. It is therefore essential for the researcher to develop a suitable rapport with the respondents, to minimise the tape recorder from hindering their truthful outlooks and opinions (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). The researcher had to consider many factors with the use of the tape recorder such as, the possibility of any interference that could hinder the quality, backing up the recorded material in case of technical issues, as well as positioning the tape recorder in a manner as to not intimidate the respondents.

Grounded theory analysis

The purpose of a grounded theory analysis is to develop concepts and theories from the data provided, through interpreting, categorising and coding it appropriately. "The grounded theory approach is primarily associated with the analysis of interview transcripts," (Denscombe, 2011, p.283). It was therefore the chosen method of data analysing for the researcher. In order to become completely familiar with the gathered data, the researcher ensured to read and re-read the interview transcripts, while cross-referencing it with literature published in the field of drama education and literacy. This led to the researcher identifying subsequent themes in the data. As the analysis progressed, new topics of interest were emerging for the researcher. In order to ensure these insights were noted and recorded, they were kept in the form of 'memos.' As

Denscombe (2011) states, memos are valuable as they allow a record to be kept of the analytic thinking of the researcher as they refine codes and categories.

Once the memos were noted, the researcher progressed with analysing the data by coding it with numbers. The purpose of coding is to link bits of the data to an idea that relates to the analysis (Denscombe, 2011). Through coding the data, the researcher was a step closer to identifying the main topics and themes emerging from the data gathered. The researcher chose to code on 'a shade of opinion', in order to determine what exactly teachers' confidence levels were when it came to integrating Drama and English, and the underlying factors that determined this level of confidence, or lack thereof. Overall, the grounded theory analysis aims to use the codes and categories established by the researcher, in order to develop and identify key concepts (Denscombe, 2011).

Limitations of the study

Researchers' using semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection must be aware of the potential sources of bias that can arise, along with the range of factors that influence encounters between researcher and respondent (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). According to Wilson and Fox (2009), disadvantages of this data collection method include the possibility of misinterpretation, as well as the possibility of leading certain participants towards a particular view. The researcher must remain aware of 'participant bias' (Robson, 2010), in terms of the respondents wishing to please the interviewer. For example, during the semi-structured interviews the researcher was limited based on interpretation, which therefore meant it was essential to remain critical throughout these interviews. This level of criticality was upheld by gathering teachers' opinions, while

simultaneously comparing them to the literature published on the given topic in question.

Another potential limitation is the age of the researcher as an aspect of her identity, which can have an impact on the course of the interview. While appearance can be manipulated to a certain degree, age on the other hand cannot (Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). The researcher was required to keep this in mind while interviewing older, more 'senior' teachers, to ensure not to offend or challenge them. This was something that the researcher had to be cautious of, particularly when addressing traditional teaching methodologies that certain teachers may have when it comes to the teaching of literacy skills in the classroom. As stated by Hitchcock and Hughes (2002), with age being in the equation, the problem remains that the data collected may not be a truthful indication of what the respondent feels, but rather what they deemed was an appropriate answer to give, given the relative ages of themselves and the interviewer. With this in mind, the researcher ensured to deal with all topics of the interview sensitively, while ensuring the respondent felt the autonomy and confidence to answer how they felt truthfully, rather than what they believed the interviewer wanted to hear.

Ethical considerations

The respondents from whom the researcher collected the data were mainstream teachers from a non-DEIS Irish primary school. Permission was sought for their participation through a letter of consent, including the details and purpose of the designed research question, (see Appendix II for letter of consent sent to participants). By agreeing to participate in the research, the respondents trust the researcher to act in an ethical manner and handle any data appropriately in order to ensure confidentiality (Altrichter et al., 1993). The participants were aware of any details of the research being

disseminated, along with the assurance of their identity remaining anonymous throughout the study. All participants were over the age of eighteen and not classed as 'vulnerable adults' (Abbot & Pippa, 2014). As stated by Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), some of the ethical considerations that relate to primary data gathering are:

Voluntary Informed Consent – the participants were made fully aware as to why the research is taking place and understand fully why their participation is necessary, with no pressure to take part in the research.

Right to Withdraw – the participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw their information at any time, for any or no reason.

Sample Selection

Purposive sampling was chosen in order to gain an in-depth insight into teachers' perceptions and to suit the needs of this study and type of interview questions. In order to ensure validation, the researcher purposefully selected teachers that ranged from the junior to the senior building, in order to gain a variety of perspectives. As Denscombe (2011) states, purposive sampling works when the researcher knows something about the specific sample and deliberately selects them, in order to produce the most valuable data.

Reflection process

The researcher recorded reflections throughout the data collection process in order to allow time to ponder or re-consider topics that may have arose unexpectedly. These reflections were also formalised by following Pollard's example of reflective teaching (Figure 3.7). This was a cyclical framework that allowed time for experimental learning, reflection, analysis and evaluation (Abbot & Pippa, 2014). This framework

was used in terms of planning, gathering and analysing the data, which helped during

the data collection stage of gathering teacher's perceptions of the potential that Drama

can have on the development of children's literacy skills.

Figure 3.7 *Diagram to show the process of reflective teaching framework*
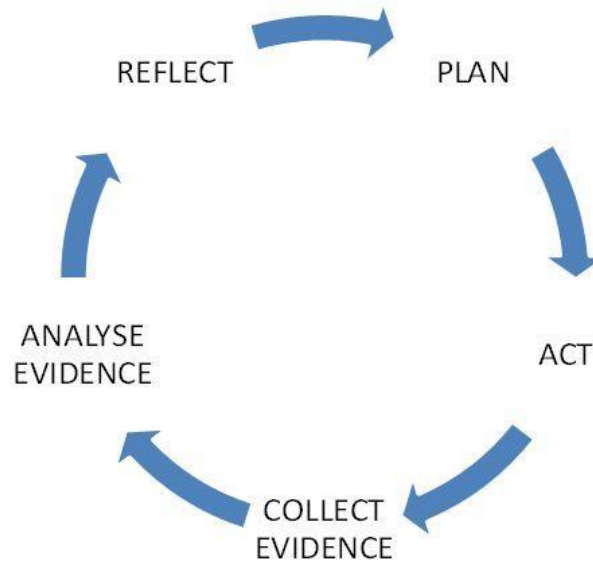
(Pollard, 2008)

Data Research and Analysis

This chapter will examine and discuss the recognised themes that emerged from coding the data, in order to identify teachers' perceptions of drama education having an influence on children's literacy skills. A description of the school and sample teachers will be given.

Data Demographics

The sample group were teachers from one Irish non-DEIS primary school, ranging from junior infants to sixth class, using purposive sampling. Five mainstream teachers and one learning support teacher were selected for the study. Both male and female teachers were included in the sample. The chosen sample had from three to thirty-nine years of teaching experience.

The School

At the time of the study, there were eighteen teachers working in the school. The school has a small staff, enabling the researcher to build positive and professional relationships throughout the school. The pupils hail from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the children belong to working class families, while the majority belong to middle class. The school is a Catholic patronage school; with a mission statement to welcome children with special needs as part of a wonderful mix of children, with the aim to educate the whole child and encourage respect, truth and courage ("Our School", 2018).

There are certain children in the school who receive learning support for literacy and numeracy. These children are extracted from their mainstream classes either individually or in small groups. The need to attend these classes for literacy is based on standardised Drumcondra Primary Reading Tests. Each of the classrooms have a library

and over the years have received many books for their library. The teachers in the school welcomed the researcher and were very accommodating and approachable when it came to carrying out the interviews. The researcher was treated like any other member of staff in the school throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The information gathered was analysed and interpreted through labelling and coding. The interviews were transcribed and common themes and opinions highlighted and categorised. These categories were inserted into grids, in order to create key themes and essentially answer the research question. Through analysing the data, five main themes emerged that related heavily with answering the research question. The themes are as follows:

- Teachers confidence levels

- Integration of Drama and literacy

- Aistear replacing the subject of Drama

- Process Drama versus Performance Drama

- Teachers reluctance to implement drama education

Teachers' confidence levels

Five out of the six teachers interviewed made it clear that they lacked confidence when it came to teaching or integrating Drama in the classroom. Two of the teachers were of the belief that they were not fully equipped to teach Drama, as it was not a part of their background. T.4 states that if Drama is a part of a teacher's background, they are 'usually very confident and happy to do it', while T.6 mentioned 'I always felt a bit inadequate… I felt like I should have taken some extra classes or whatever'.

Bandura (1997) supports this concept of confidence linking in with background experience, with the belief that the background and confidence of teachers affects if and how much they teach the art subjects. One must ask why many teachers have little confidence when it comes to the teaching of Drama, and can only imagine it is down to the fact that it is not viewed as a priority subject in primary education.

T.4 mentioned that because of 'time management, Drama is not always taught', which in turn can lead into a viscous cycle. If teachers are not including Drama as a subject on their daily timetables, it is unlikely they will gain experience and confidence to include it in their classroom routine. T.4 stated, 'I suppose if you just pushed yourself to do it every day, you would gain more confidence and get more ideas and it would become a lot easier'. These findings reinforce the literature that found if teachers lack confidence in the arts; it will influence strongly on their future classroom teaching (Ryan, 1991).

Among the cohort of those interviewed, it appeared as though the younger teachers, with less experience in the classroom, seemed to have more confidence with implementing drama strategies, as opposed to teachers with many years of experience. This is an interesting finding, as it is suggestive to be contradictory of the belief that confidence coincides with amount of time teaching. T.1 highlighted that she would be more than happy to 'stand in front of a very serious sixth class and introduce a new drama strategy with them, but again, I am twenty-three and that is my style of teaching and what I am used to, from doing it in college'.

This suggests that the teaching of Drama is perhaps modernising and student teachers' are receiving more practical skills and training required, in order to fully equip them to integrate Drama effectively into the classroom. As reinforced in the literature

by Stewart (2001), although Drama is not a new arrival to the field of education, it has only become valued for its potential in recent years. This sense of confidence and style of teaching among younger teachers could also be a consequence of the Governments initiative, of launching the new Primary Language Curriculum, with its emphasis on providing a more functional curriculum, enabling children to make and explore meaning, as well as receive and create it (NCCA, 2015). In other words, there is a greater emphasis on granting children with a certain degree of autonomy, in order to take ownership of their learning and become more active in the process.

Perhaps, teachers with more experience in the classroom have a misconception about what Drama includes and therefore, when the word comes to mind, it is something they dread (Russell-Bowie, 2013). T.3 added, 'It's kind of a subject that I find easier to just skip over'. "The Irish curriculum places a strong emphasis on integration as one of its key principles and this is outlined in each of the individual arts syllabus documents" (Russell-Bowie, 2013, p.63). However, in many primary schools, specialist Drama and Music teachers are employed for the teaching of these subjects (Russell-Bowie, 2013). If teachers had more confidence to teach Drama to begin with, they might notice the potential benefits it can have on literacy skill development and would be therefore more inclined to continue to integrate it in the classroom.

Integration of Drama and literacy

All of the teachers interviewed were of the belief that there is a place for Drama in the Primary Language Curriculum, despite four of the teachers admitting to having a lack of confidence and difficulty in fitting it into the timetable. Three of the six teachers stated that they unintentionally integrate drama strategies into their lessons, such as "acting out a poem", while T.2 mentioned 'I'd use it… because I am an infant teacher;

you're using it all the time'. T.5 added, 'Drama is great for oral language, in particular, encouraging children to react on the spot, listen to each other, while also being great for their vocabulary'.

T.1 mentioned, when doing story time with junior infants, she used 'teacher in role', acting as the wolf and stated that the children were 'totally engaged and fully believed in it'. Both the literature and the teacher agree that the engagement levels of children are heightened as the Drama involves building belief in a fictional world (O'Neill, 1995). Similarly proven in a study carried out by Wells & Sandretto (2017), they discovered that students' participation on 'writing-in-role' was genuine writing, as they were encouraged to use their imagination creatively.

Three of the six teachers believed that Drama offers children a safe place to explore their imagination and literacy, without fear of being corrected. T.3 was one who believed that in 'today's day and age, when children are somewhat reserved and are not willing to speak out as much, Drama gives them an opportunity to talk about things'. This finding reinforces the literature that found that through being in the safety of the role created in the drama, it creates a protected space for the students (Kana & Aitken, 2007). It is evident that T.4 was in agreement with this concept, by stating that if Drama is integrated with literacy, 'there is no fear of getting it wrong, because the whole idea is to just give it a go'. The characters created throughout the drama essentially protect students or perhaps, it is down to the fact that they are not solely focusing on the literacy side of the lesson, and are therefore less conscious about their literacy abilities, immersing themselves into the lesson. This idea coincides with the literature, as Anderson (2012) states that Process Drama enables children, who struggle with language acquisition to shift from "passive observer to active explorer" (p.974).

The school use the English Starlight programme, which is a programme that integrates the three curriculum strands, while following an integrated and thematic approach ("Starlight | Folens", 2019). T.5 mentioned that the Starlight programme includes the use of 'freeze-frame', with the literature stating that 'freeze-frame' is a practical example of a drama convention that can allow children to analyse text through the Four Resources Model framework (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Through discussing 'freeze-frame' as a drama strategy, T.5 mentioned that Drama is kinaesthetic learning and she is of the belief that getting children up and moving is a more beneficial method of learning, 'rather than sitting in front of a screen and having an aural lesson'. Kinaesthetic learning became a running theme among the teachers, with many believing that if children are active, they are more likely to be engaged and retain information. This finding from the data gathered concurs with the relevant literature, stating that if children are interpreting a concept through physical means, it will aid them in retaining and grasping information, which will in turn increase their comprehension levels (Griss, 1994).

Although the cohort of teachers were fully aware of the Starlight programme and implementing it effectively in their classroom, it became evident that the teachers as a whole, were reliant on following a book in order to incorporate any drama strategies. From the feedback received during the interviews, it appeared that there were no teachers independently implementing any drama strategies into literacy lessons without the use of a textbook. T.2 mentioned, 'every week we are acting out the posters, using the Starlight programme', with T.4 adding 'I follow the Starlight programme which includes drama strategies, such as 'freeze-frame'.

These findings are suggestive that teachers' are reluctant to steer away from textbooks, and do not seem to incorporate their own drama strategies into their literacy

lessons, despite the fact that they admitted to noticing the benefits it can bring. This finding from the interviews coincides with literature, which states that teachers prefer to keep structures that they know will work, in terms of securing results, rather than "leaping into a brave new world in which it is less easy to measure progress" (Kidd & Millard, 2007, p.66).

Aistear replacing the subject of Drama

The Government initiative Aistear views the emergent literacy phase as one that develops best through play, with socio-dramatic, make-believe, role play and fantasy play all facilitated, while simultaneously creating a springboard of new vocabulary for young children. However, it appeared through the data gathered from the interviews that two of the junior teachers viewed Aistear as a replacement or alternative to teaching Drama. T.4 stated; 'I haven't done very much Drama at all this year because of the Aistear', while T.1 mentioned, 'there is less of a pressure to include Drama into my timetable, because I know I am doing Aistear'. This raised a concern for the researcher, because despite the Aistear framework being a great initiative in encouraging children to see and interact with print through play, does it mean that, as a consequence, teachers should not have to include Drama as a subject, or integrate it into their literacy lessons at all?

Process Drama versus Performance Drama

The uncertainty that teachers have between Process Drama and Performance Drama was to the forefront of the findings. When T.3 was asked if he includes Drama in his teaching, he mentioned that every second year a Christmas Nativity play is held and stated proudly, that 'there was a lot of drama involved there … a Nativity play where children acted and dressed up.' T.4 also mentioned the Nativity play but was aware that

it is not necessarily the most effective use of Drama in the classroom, stating 'it's kind of a shame because you're more or less saying to the majority of the class, stay there and don't move…' This finding reinforces the literature that found that teachers have certain ideologies about Drama, feeling as though it needs to lead to an end production, such as a show or a Nativity play, with costumes, stages or line learning.

Whereas with the Government initiatives such as the most recent Primary Language Curriculum 2015 and the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011, the focus is to not treat children as passive learners, but as active agents in their own learning. Through Process Drama, "the group and the individual are co-dependant, all working in an inclusive created tension" (Hefferon, 2000, p.27). This creative pedagogical approach allows children to engage more actively in the learning process, concurring with the literature that children are drawn into the lessons, as there is action left hanging in the air, adding curiosity and tension to the classroom (Stewart, 2001).

Teachers' reluctance to implement drama education

It was evident from the interviews that there was a slight sense of reluctance from two of the teachers when it came to implementing drama education into their teaching. T.4 mentioned 'I do think it's very easy in a jam packed week to be a subject that you just skip over'; with T.6 stating, 'It is not a subject that I get too concerned about if I have not got around to including it'. This highlights the value that these teachers potentially have for drama in education, as it does not appear as a priority for them. T.1 added 'I think a lot of teachers, in particular, more traditional teachers, would think you need to get English, Irish and Maths out of the way and Drama is kind of an airy-fairy subject'.

This coincides with the literature that certain teachers can be reluctant to challenge traditional literacy pedagogies (Wells & Sandretto, 2017).

T.5 was of the belief that certain teachers can be 'set in their ways' when it comes to integrating Drama with literacy, stating, 'I think a lot of the time, people in general don't really like change', but went on to mention that 'it is not necessarily a bad thing to challenge these teachers, as its continuing professional development'. This concurs with the relevant literature; that teachers are also learners and sometimes require collaboration with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978). As Einstein stated, in order to change our world, we must change our thinking… and perhaps continual professional development will be the method of doing so. "The INTO welcomes the proposed increase in provision of professional development courses for primary teachers in the areas of literacy…" (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2011).

Conclusion

The findings have shown reoccurring themes that correspond with what arose in the literature reviewed. Teachers' confidence levels with teaching Drama, along with the potential that drama in education can have on literacy development and traditional literacy pedagogies were recurring themes that arose from both the literature and the research undertaken.

It is with this conclusion that the researcher has learned that the majority of teachers have a positive attitude towards the potential impact that Drama can have on developing the engagement levels and literacy development of children, but a negative attitude on their own ability and confidence to integrate Drama into their teaching.

Conclusion

This chapter will include the main points of the research question, outlining the implications of the findings, recommendations for future practice, recommendations for change, along with recommendations for future studies.

Implications of Findings

The consensus of this study was that teachers' appear to lack confidence when it comes to integrating Drama into their classroom, yet nonetheless, they are of the belief that numerous benefits exist with integrating Drama into literacy lessons. The teachers' appear happy to implement drama strategies in their classroom, if the support and required resources are available to assist them and build up their confidence levels. As a result of this study, the researcher feels more informed as to where CPD is necessary in the future, in order to limit the challenges that teachers face, with regard to implementing drama education into their teaching.

Both the literature and the findings of this research have displayed the potential benefits that Drama can have on the motivation, participation and productivity levels of children, with regard to their literacy development.

Recommendations for Future Practice

For drama education to be taught confidently and effectively in primary schools, it is necessary that teachers are provided with adequate resources and training, in order to feel equipped and for it to be a success. If teachers had more interactive resources, it could potentially limit the over-reliance on textbooks as a means of integrating Drama into the classroom. Perhaps, schools could encourage teachers to partake in courses specialising in Drama, in order to limit any insecurities they may have with the teaching of this art subject. These courses may also grant teachers a better insight into the value

and importance of Drama as an art subject, emphasising its role in children's

development.

Recommendations for Change

It is evident that more training and support would benefit teachers, in order to help them

feel fully equipped to teach Drama in their classrooms. Teachers believe that there are

benefits to integrating Drama into their literacy programme; rather the issue seems to lie

with how comfortable they are at teaching the subject. Teachers are the focus of this

research question and if they feel ill equipped to integrate Drama into their teaching; it

will affect the progress and effectiveness of Drama developing to its full potential in

primary education. Some of the recommendations offered by the teachers are

highlighted below:

- Croke Park hours dedicated to Drama workshops.

- Increase interactive resources.

- More collaboration with newly qualified teachers in order to learn new ideas and
  strategies.

Bubb (2007) highlights how observation can be a valuable learning tool for teachers

to progress and reflect on their own teaching, "you learn so much from seeing other

people's practice, and can't help but reflect on your own practice and pedagogy" (p.81).

Perhaps, if there were more of an emphasis on implementing observation in schools, it

would also help with continual professional development and encourage teachers to

work together to experiment and offer new drama strategies and ideas to each other.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This research identifies a small insight into teachers' perceptions of the value that Drama has on the literacy skill development of children in primary education. Research has been carried out in this field before, but not in Ireland in recent years. Arising from the findings and limitations of the study, the researcher suggests ways in which this research could be developed further, in order to gain a more in depth understanding of the impact drama education has on the development of literacy skills.

These recommendations for future studies are indicated below:

- The development of an action research study over an extended period, focusing on a particular element of literacy development. For example, focusing on the use of drama in education to motivate children to write. This particular study could focus on the comparison of the engagement and productivity levels of children before and after the action research. This would allow for assessing if the integration of Drama is having an impact on the development of literacy skills.

Due to the time span of this particular study, an action research study was not feasible.

- Teacher training colleges could also be researched in detail in order to investigate if teachers lack of confidence in teaching Drama stems from the training they received in college. Are teachers receiving the same amount of training in the art subjects, as they are in all the other subjects?

Conclusion

The overall aim of this research question was to gain an in depth insight into teachers' perceptions of how they view drama education and their viewpoint on Drama having any influence on the literacy skill development of children. This research question has

been answered to a limited extent but has indicated that teachers' undoubtedly have positive attitudes towards the potential impact that Drama can have on developing these literacy skills. However, the majority of teachers spoke apprehensively about their own abilities and experiences when it came to their self-belief of incorporating drama strategies confidently into their classrooms.

Furthermore, it was evident that the teachers were reliant on the use of a textbook, which illustrates that change is required, in order to better equip teachers with this sense of confidence and ability. This research has identified the dire need for more resources and further training for teachers, in order to build up their self-esteem and encourage them to integrate Drama, more confidently and frequently into literacy lessons, to help tackle the issue at hand.

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Appendix I

Interview Questions

1. What do you understand by the teaching of Drama in primary school? What sort of things have you done?

2. Would you tend to teach Drama as a subject in its own right?

3. Have you employed Drama, (through using drama techniques) as a subject to teach another curriculum subject?

4. How do you think teachers feel about teaching Drama?

5. Would you teach lessons, in which drama objectives are the main focus and identified on the plan?

6. Do you think that Drama, as a subject, has a place in the Primary Language Curriculum? (Please give reason for your response.)

7. Do you feel that Drama has any influence on children's literacy skill development, in terms of their motivation/engagement levels etc.

8. Research states that some teachers can be hesitant to challenge traditional literacy methodologies and would therefore be reluctant to employ drama strategies into English lessons. What would be your view on this?

9. Have you ever used the drama strategy 'teacher-in-role?' If so, do you find it effective and if not, is there a particular reason for this?

10. Do you feel as though a lack of confidence or background in Drama could have an impact on how often a teacher decides to include the subject?

Appendix II

Letter to Teachers

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a second year PME student in Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. As part of my postgraduate degree, I am required to undertake a research project. My research will explore the effect of drama education on children's literacy skills.

The purpose of this letter is to invite your participation in this research study. This involves you completing an audio-recorded semi-structured interview. The interview will take place in a space and time most convenient for you.

Involvement in this study is completely voluntary. If you wish to withdraw at any stage, you can do so without consequence. Throughout the research study, your identity will remain anonymous using an ID code. The data will be used for my dissertation and will only be viewed by my dissertation supervisor and examiners.

All information will be destroyed afterwards. This is in accordance with the Marino Institute of Education College Record Retention Schedule. The information may be stored in the library after the study, but all information will be anonymous.

Your knowledge is very important for my study and I would love to discuss this topic with you. I will get in touch with you following the receipt of this letter to arrange a convenient time for the interview. Should you require any clarification or additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me. My phone number is 0872981895 and my email address is cgibsonpme17@momail.mie.ie.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Ciara Gibson