“Let their imaginations flow”: Investigating Irish primary teachers’ views on the use of mythology in the classroom

Marino Institute of Education
Student Name: Hannah-Rose Manning

Word Count: 10,995
Supervisor: Mary Clarke

Submission Date: 09/05/21
Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Printed name: Hannah-Rose Manning

Date: 09/05/21
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether mythology has value for Irish primary school children in the senior classes in a modern cultural context. The study also examines the challenges posed by the use of mythology in the classroom as reflected in the reported experience of a selection of Irish teachers, including issues such as violence and gender stereotypes. It will also explore whether mythology should be considered as history or fiction. This was a topic that emerged during the course of the study.

The qualitative data for this study is gathered from online interviews with eight teachers of senior classes in a variety of Irish primary schools. The interviews were transcribed and analysed according to the themes.

The study will be of interest to teachers, student teachers and academics in a range of disciplines. It will also benefit those involved in curriculum design for Irish primary schools.

The results indicate that the participants do consider mythology to be of value, particularly in terms of children’s enjoyment of story and the development of their imagination. They do not consider violence to be a particular concern, once the material is age appropriate. Their views on the issue of gender stereotypes are nuanced. Some participants do not see it as problematic, and others had never considered it as an issue. A number think it deserves further consideration. Some participants report some confusion among children as to whether mythology constitutes history or fiction.

As a result of the data generated, this study recommends that the place of mythology in the primary school curriculum should be evaluated. Specifically, consideration should be given as to whether mythology should be on the history curriculum or the English curriculum or both. This study also recommends further education for teachers with a view to deepening their understanding of mythology.
Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this research project, I have received considerable support and assistance. I would like to firstly thank my supervisor, for her time, her invaluable help and useful comments. I would also like to thank my eight participants for their thought-provoking contributions to this research study. Finally, I would like to thank my family, my friends and my boyfriend, for all their support, encouragement and advice.
# Table of contents

Introduction................................................................................................................................................. 6

Literature Review......................................................................................................................................... 10
  The Nature and the Relevance of Mythology ........................................................................................... 10
  The Value of Mythology and Fairy tales For Children ............................................................................. 13
  Mythology and Fairy tales: Violence and Censorship ............................................................................... 15
  Mythology and Fairy tales: Issues of Gender ............................................................................................ 16

Research Methodology ................................................................................................................................. 20
  A Constructivist/Interpretivist Paradigm ................................................................................................. 20
  The Research Process ............................................................................................................................... 22

Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................................ 27
  The Power of Story ................................................................................................................................. 27
  A Sense of the Past ................................................................................................................................. 29

Teaching Mythology: Challenges and Approaches .................................................................................... 31
  Violence ............................................................................................................................................... 31
  Gender Stereotypes ............................................................................................................................... 34
  Fact Versus Fiction ............................................................................................................................... 37

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................... 39

References .................................................................................................................................................... 43

Appendix ...................................................................................................................................................... 46
  Letter of Consent for Teacher .................................................................................................................. 46
  Participant Consent Form ....................................................................................................................... 48
Introduction

“The old myths, the old gods, the old heroes have never died. They are only sleeping at the bottom of our minds, waiting for our call. We have need of them, for in their sum they epitomise the wisdom and experience of the race.”


Mythology was a significant influence on the poetry of former US Poet Laureate, Stanley Kunitz and here he suggests that we have a deep-seated need for its wisdom. This study asks if we do indeed have need of myth; specifically, it investigates Irish teachers’ views on their use of mythology in the classroom. It considers the value of mythology and the challenges of gender and violence. A third issue, whether mythology should be considered fact or fiction, emerged from the views of the participants. The research question is best answered by qualitative research; the phenomenon being explored would not easily lend itself to quantitative measurement.

I was prompted to do this study by my own experience of teaching mythology when on placement with fourth class as well as by my own interest. The experience encouraged me to ask how Irish teachers view mythology and how they cope with the potential challenges.

As Kearney notes, storytelling goes back over a million years and the narrative imperative is at the heart of many genres, including myth, epic, legend, folktale and novel (2001, p. 4-5). Frye suggests that the humanities express in the form of myths “the nature of the human involvement with the human world” (1970, p.55). One key term that will be used throughout the course of this study is ‘myth’, defined as “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, typically involving supernatural beings or events” (Oxford languages, n.d). Another key term is ‘mythology’, “the field of scholarship dealing with myth but also a particular body of myths” (Oxford classical dictionary, n.d).
This study will consider the participants’ views on their use of mythology in the classroom, in the context of the storytelling potential of mythology as well as its sometimes challenging content.

Hearne (2009) links myth, fairy tales and contemporary children’s literature; suggesting that they all share certain recognizable patterns but with distinct characteristics. Frye notes that the fairy tale crosses all boundaries of language and culture since it consists of a number of stock themes and plots. The same is true of myths.

This study draws parallels between myths and fairy tales since they have distinct commonalities. Like myths, fairy tales are from an oral tradition. Both share tropes, characters, plots and symbols. They also present similar challenges such as violence and gender-stereotyping. Both use the hero’s journey, with its trials and rewards, as metaphors for life experiences.

There is a wealth of existing literature on the value and nature of mythology. Critics suggest it attempts to answer the unanswerable by exploring complex, existential concerns (Aristotle, c.355 BC; Campbell, 1949; Frye, 1970; Kearney, 2002; Kearney, 2001; Leeming 2005; Sartore, 2010). There are also studies on the value of mythology for children, emphasising the importance of myth for engaging children’s imaginations. Mythological stories are seen by these same critics as therapeutic, enabling children to make sense of their world (Beard, 2013; Crago, 1999; Doherty, 2001; Frye, 1970; Gersie & King, 1989; Hearne, 2009; Hourihan, 1997; Kearney, 2001).

There is considerable literature on the subject of gender representation in mythology and the critics’ views are nuanced. Some suggest that myths reflect and reinforce patriarchal gender stereotypes. Others express the view that mythological women were not only powerful and strong, but also storytellers. Most critics accommodate both perspectives
There is limited literature on the prevalence of violence in mythology. Some critics directly deal with it (Doherty, 2001; Katz Anhalt, 2017; Kearney, 2002) and some refer to violence in the context of other themes (Bengtsson, 2009; Bettelheim, 2002; Dewan, 2016).

Some critics have explored the concept of censorship, focusing on the sanitisation of the Grimm fairy tales for children which began in 1819. These critics suggest that censorship focused on excluding sex and pregnancy but was rarely concerned about violence (Tatar, 1999; Bengtsson, 2009). An exception to this was in the Finnish version of these tales, collected by Laura Soinne, where the horror and violence were removed. Some critics suggest that violence is an intrinsic part of fairy tales and that children relish the cathartic experience of violence at a distance (Tatar, 1999; Dewan, 2016; Bengtsson, 2009). Some critics have discussed mythology in the context of history and fiction (Frye, 1970; Leeming, 2005; Kearney, 2001). This question, along with the other issues mentioned above, are explored in the light of mythology in the course of the study.

There is a lack of research on the practical experience of teaching mythology in Irish schools. This research is timely, given the considerable interest among children in mythology generated by stories such as the Harry Potter and Percy Jackson series. There is a scarcity of literature that addresses potential concerns about the challenges faced by teachers when using mythology. As a result, there is little consideration given to how mythology operates within various curricula.

By focusing on the experience of Irish teachers, this study aims to initiate a conversation about how the subject is treated in our schools as well as adding to the sum of knowledge on children and mythology generally. The study should be of interest to teachers in Irish primary schools, as well as educationalists and academics in various disciplines. It has the potential to
contribute to our understanding of the taught experience of mythology in the history and English curricula for senior classes.

This study focuses on teachers’ descriptions of their own lived experience; and the phenomenological design ensures that this intent is met. The research is conducted with eight teachers from third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes in Irish primary schools. The purpose of the research is to elicit teachers’ opinions on whether mythology is of value and to understand the impact of potential challenges. Their experiences will be juxtaposed with the literature on mythology; its value and appeal, its cultural significance and the challenges it poses. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a better understanding of how mythology is actually used in the classroom with a view to assess if its potential could be further exploited.
Literature Review

The Nature and the Relevance of Mythology

Kearney (2001) says simply that telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. He notes that the word mythos means story in Greek and explains that Aristotle argued that it is the art of storytelling that give us a shareable world. He posits that stories address the unanswerable questions of existence such as who we are or whether we are animal, human or divine.

He writes that life is inherently storied, that poems and sagas represent a form already existing in our lives. He notes that myths were the most common form of early narrative; a story that could be passed from generation to generation and usually had a sacred ritual function. He distinguishes between history and fiction, saying that fiction deals with possibility whereas history has an evidentiary basis. He suggests the truths they both offer can be complementary.

Leeming (2005) takes up the question of history and mythology, seeing myths as the universal, cultural dreams of different societies. He suggests that it is important to study the many myth-dreams of our world in order to understand human culture. He argues that whilst myths are literally or symbolically true to particular cultures, they may also contain elements of universal observable truth. His encyclopaedic entries with thousands of myths, fairy tales, legends and religions support the premise that myth is a universal language. He suggests that the concept of journey is central to human existence and that adults have always told children stories to describe that journey. An understanding of the importance of story for children informs this study, as well as where mythology sits as a form of story.

Journey is also a concern for Aristotle (c.335 BC), as can be seen in the journey of tragic heroes such as Oedipus and Thyestes, their misfortune caused by some error or
frailty. The audience can identify with this character flaw and experience what Aristotle calls catharsis, the purging of the emotions of pity and fear that are evoked by the narrative. For Aristotle, narrative fiction lies “deep in our nature”. What he calls the instinct for imitation or mimesis is embedded from childhood; it is a creative re-imagining of reality. Aristotle suggests that it is not the poet’s function to relate what has happened, but what may happen. In terms of this study, it is suggested that the imaginative potential of what may happen fosters the cognitive development of the child, their critical thinking and creativity.

Taking a psychological approach derived from Freud and Jung, Campbell (1949) is also focused on the journey of the archetypal mythical hero. He notes that myths have flourished in all civilisations; the cosmos is made culturally manifest from the “basic, magic ring of myth” (1949, p.1). He suggests that we all carry unconscious archetypal images that are revealed in myths. He describes the hero’s journey, the cycle of initiation, separation and return; that all myths, what he calls the monomyth, tell the one great story of mankind. He utilises a breath-taking number of myths from many cultures that tell that story. The physical exploration of the hero symbolically reflects his internal exploration and growth. He suggests that these stories symbolically connect us to the universal, the same story from all cultures conveying a universal truth about the shape of our lives.

Campbell’s hero ventures into the belly of the whale, symbolising his separation from his previous self; there he encounters gargoyles and other creatures, symbolising the dangers of the journey. Creatures and places such as these are the subject of Kearney’s final book in his trilogy, a place “where reason falters and fantasies flourish” (2002, p.3). According to him, these figures are representative of our split human psyche and how we are divided by conscious and unconscious, same and other. Mythical monsters, as in the
myths of Oedipus and the Sphinx or Theseus and the Minotaur, are indicative of our awareness that our ego is not fully in charge, leading us to reject what we see as other or different. His thesis is that we tend to project on to others that which we reject in ourselves. He calls for a philosophical understanding of alterity or otherness, suggesting there is a middle path between accommodating otherness and our own ego. By showing how we project our own unconscious fears onto demonic mythical creatures, Kearney demonstrates the universality of the metaphors of mythology.

Frye (1970) also suggests that mythology has universal relevance. Like Campbell, he sees myths and archetypes as overarching concepts, the expression “of human involvement with the human world” (p.55). He suggests that an imaginative understanding of these archetypes is crucial; to realise that current events are not real society but a transient appearance of real society. He suggests that an understanding of these myths is essential for the literary education of children.

Masse, Barber, Piccardi and Barber (2007) provide an overview of the nature and meaning of myth, both historically and currently. They outline common characteristics of myths and explain that it can be demonstrated beyond any doubt that at least some myths are based on the observation of specific geographic natural phenomena and historical events. For example, they point to the recognition in 1870 that the destruction of Troy as described in the Iliad was based on fact, when the ruins of ancient Ilion were discovered. They argue that the modern segmentation of knowledge into discrete categories does a disservice to our understanding of the ancient world; that traditional cultures had a holistic approach to existence that incorporated religion, myth, economics and governance as well as the events and process of the natural world. The primary school curriculum adopts a holistic approach, understanding that integration across subject areas is in accord with the child’s way of viewing the world.
The Value of Mythology and Fairy tales For Children

Hourihan (1997) notes the power of story for children; that stories provide children with images to think with since they have not yet learnt to reason abstractly. She suggests the universal shape of story provides children with a sense of optimism that things will turn out well. She notes that the hero story has dominated children’s literature and is assumed to be unequivocally good for children. However, she says that these stories incorporate values such as the glorification of violence, that women and people of colour are naturally subordinate, and that nature should be conquered. She suggests that children should be enabled to think critically about this adversarial view of the world, that we need to understand the appeal of these stories as well as telling children different stories.

Frye (1970) accords myth a central place in the education of children, calling them “the grammar of the imagination” (p. 104). As he puts it, teachers should understand the importance of literary training, since it is training the imagination. The child is enabled to make imaginative connections between myths, beginning to understand the relevance of their underlying themes to their own lives.

In his analysis of fairy-tales in children’s psychology, Bettelheim (1976) suggests that allowing the unconscious to work itself out through the imagination can reduce its potential for harm and produce positive results. He says the fairy tale offers a message that children badly need; that life presents us with serious difficulties, but that victory is possible through persistence. The fairy tale confronts the child with the basic human predicaments and allows him or her to resolve them. Similarly to Aristotle, Campbell and Frye, Bettelheim identifies the hero’s journey as the representation of the child’s struggles. The child identifies with the hero and emerges victorious with him, which promotes the child’s own moral development.
Dewan (2016) also treats of the value and appeal of fairy tales for children, arguing that fairy-tales are empowering for children since the underdog prevails. She suggests that the conventions of fairy tales, with their good and evil characters, predictable structures and generalised settings, offer stability in uncertain landscapes. Like Bettelheim, she also references the hero motif in fairy-tales, suggesting the protagonist moves from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood.

Crago (1999) proposes that children’s books and stories have been generally assumed to have directly beneficial effects on their readers. He traces storytelling back to the earliest written oral narratives saying that those myths and tales formed part of a collective, oral culture which spoke to a collective psyche, not a collection of individual psyches. He sees story as a natural mode of self-expression and self-healing, saying that story has always been an integral part of our humanity and is as natural as breathing.

Gersie and King (1989) also explore the educational and therapeutic value of story and mythology, arguing that mythology allows us to connect our individual experience with the experience of humanity. Their work contains myths and tales from all over the world, suggesting ways that teachers and therapists can use these myths to help children and adults develop their own unique, imaginative voice.

Doherty (2001) notes that since the 1970s, all kinds of cultural forms are increasingly analysed in similar ways to traditional ‘high’ literature. She says the study of myth is benefitting from this kind of collaboration, particularly since many modern versions of myth for children are produced for the mass market in books, films and comics. For example, she suggests it is better to engage with films like Disney’s Hercules rather than reject them. Beard (2013) says that it is astonishing that so much literature survives from the ancient world and that it offers the possibility of a “wondrous shared voyage of exploration” (p.13). As a teacher herself, she shares that journey with her students. This
study investigates if Irish teachers enjoy a similar shared experience, probing the relevance, the cultural enrichment and the psychological value of myth for children.

**Mythology and Fairy tales: Violence and Censorship**

Mythology is permeated by violence and therefore its suitability for children needs to be examined. On the one hand, it may be inappropriate for children in its original form yet sanitising the violent elements could mean that it loses its power or cultural integrity. Katz Anhalt (2017) suggests that the violence in mythology is not necessarily problematic. She uses the example of Achilles in *the Iliad* to show the limitations of rage, that by celebrating violence we only defeat ourselves. She explains that the public performance of Greek drama exposed tyranny and violence, promoting discussion and debate rather than conflict. She accepts that there are difficulties around issues of slavery and the subjugation of women but argues that mythology had an important role in the development of western culture. She suggests that we are all capable of violent rage and that Greek myths encourage us to reject simplistic tribalism. This perspective allows for a framing of violence in its cultural and historical context that may make it less problematic for children.

Writing about fairy tales for children, Bettelheim (1976) suggests that these tales engage with issues like violence and says that evil has its attractions. He argues that modern literature for children ignores our primitive drives and violent emotions and thus the child is not helped to cope with these feelings. He says the fairy tale treats of these existential concerns by directly addressing life, death and violence.

Fairy tales and myths can contain material that many would consider unsuitable for children. Tatar (1999) notes that after their first publication in 1812 the Grimm fairy tales were subsequently sanitised for children; the Grimm brothers no longer insisted on literal
fidelity to oral traditions but openly admitted that they had taken pains to delete every phrase unsuitable for young readers. Bengtsson (2009) also looks at the role of editing, revision and self-censorship in handling sexual content and aspects of horror, taking the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers and the Finnish stories of Laura Soinne as case studies.

Bengtsson says there is no need to criticise the presence of violence and cruelty in fairy tales and mythology; suggesting that without evil there can be no good either. The literature seems to suggest that violence is an intrinsic part of life and that the child should be enabled to come to terms with it rather than simply excising it from mythology.

**Mythology and Fairy tales: Issues of Gender**

On the issue of gender, Doherty (2001) notes that myths reflect, reinforce and sometimes subvert gender ideologies and so have an influence in the real world. She says that the gender hierarchy evident in classical myth is still largely intact. For example, she says that modern audiences would have no difficulty understanding that Demeter and Persephone have less authority than the male gods and need subversive tactics to achieve their aims.

She suggests that Campbell (1949) only partially succeeds in his contention that the ‘hero pattern’ can apply to female as well as to male heroes; noting that a female character is rarely the protagonist in Greek and Roman hero myths. She says that myths have multiple perspectives that can be celebrated but since they are passed from one generation to the next, they inevitably reflect specific gender systems.

Like Doherty, Hourihan (1997) also challenges the hero motif and notes its dominance in children’s literature. She questions the critics who see these stories as positive for children, suggesting we need to deconstruct the hero’s story, with the understanding that all stories are ideological. Zajko (2009) also deals with women and myth, noting that
feminist interpretation of myth can view it as either liberating or oppressive for women. She says that just as it is often difficult to categorise myth, so too it is difficult to categorise the place of women in mythology.

Lefkowitz (1986) adopts a distinctly positive approach. Accepting that ancient Greece was a patriarchal society, she nonetheless suggests that women were better understood and appreciated than is generally thought. She suggests that what Greek men both feared and valued in women was not their sexuality but their intelligence. She says that while severe limits were imposed upon women in ancient societies, it does not necessarily follow that all women in the ancient world were silent, unappreciated and repressed.

Beard (2013) takes a more sceptical approach, challenging the classic mythological tropes from a feminist perspective. She notes that women were excluded from power and politics and generally had no voice. She gives the example of Telemachus in Homer’s Odyssey who chided his mother for interrupting: “talking must be the concern of men” (2013, p.27). She also notes how the work of Sappho undermines the male literary tradition by reinterpreting Homeric epic in female terms.

Williams (2010) critiques the conventions of the fairy tale and in particular she explores the origin of the stereotype of the wicked stepmother. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) also address these kinds of stereotypes, suggesting that both fairy tales and myth often reveal a culture more accurately than more literary texts. They say that from Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onward, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity. Throughout the history of literature, they suggest that male authors have portrayed women as either the ‘angel-woman’ or its antithesis, the ‘monster-woman’. They explain how the fairy tale of Snow White conforms to this pattern with its two faces of women: the wicked Queen and the virginal Snow White. This dichotomy needs to be considered when teaching
mythology to children since mythology also has its stock female figures. For example, Hestia is the gentle and virginal Greek goddess of the hearth, maintaining the fire for cooking and warmth; Irish mythology has the triple female deities known as the Morrigan, goddesses of battle and strife and harbingers of death for men they meet.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) tell the story of Lilith, who according to Hebrew mythology, was both the first woman and the first monster, reduced to killing her own babies. She rebelled against her husband and when he tried to force her to submit, “she became enraged and speaking the Ineffable Name” (1979, Ch.1, para.83), she flew away to reside with demons. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that this act of finding her own voice specifically connects her with monstrosity. They nonetheless conclude that female writers have found ways to let their voices be heard, that they have metaphorically exploded out of the queen’s looking glass.

Rowe (1999) also explores the female voice in folklore and fairy tale, noting the connection (both literal and metaphorical) between weaving and telling a story. She traces the female art of storytelling back to the mythological figures of Philomela from Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Scherezerade from One Thousand and One Nights. Both women are saved by the power of storytelling, even though Philomela can only tell her story through weaving.

Warner (1999) suggests that many tellers of stories have been female, and that this fact has been neglected. She says that fairy tales involve an exchange between an older voice of experience and a child, presenting dangers and possibilities. She points to the active engagement of the audience with the story, often mediated through working women such as nurses, governesses and family domestics. Similarly, Paul (1999) applies feminist theory to children’s literature, saying that feminist criticism has taught readers to see and hear the stories of women and children in ways not understood before.
These critics are concerned about validating the variety and richness of the origins and the contents of fairy tales and myths, understanding their potential value for children. Mythology has always been a process of re-telling and re-imagining, so it is particularly suited to having its assumptions interrogated and to being adapted to a modern dispensation. As this literary review indicates, the challenges of using mythology with children are not inconsiderable but the literature would also suggest that the rewards make the effort worthwhile.
Research Methodology

A Constructivist/Interpretivist Paradigm

“Believing (with Max Weber) that Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (Geertz, 1973, p. 311).

For Geertz, the analysis of culture should not be governed by the laws of science but should be analysed interpretively in a search for meaning (1973, p. 311). This is the approach taken in this project. It adopts a qualitative approach, using a paradigm or worldview that is constructivist and interpretivist. The design is primarily phenomenological, and the method utilised is open-ended interviewing.

Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 23) define qualitative research as an “approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem”; it uses words rather than numbers and open-ended rather than closed-ended questioning. The research questions of this study are best answered by qualitative research since it is culturally based, and the focus is on emotions and beliefs.

A constructivist/interpretivist paradigm derives meaning from the individual’s subjective, interpretative view of their world. According to Creswell and Creswell, constructivist research relies heavily on the views of the participants (2018, p.27). This dovetails with the phenomenological approach of this project where the focus is on understandings and opinions. Denscombe explains that phenomenology is concerned with human experience, “on getting a clear picture of things as directly experienced by people” and that the researcher’s task is mainly one of description (Denscombe, 1998, p.137 – 138).
Denscombe describes two versions of phenomenology. The European version as espoused by Husserl aims to discover underlying essences, “features that are universal and that lie at the very heart of human experience”. The North American version, the one adopted in this study, emanates from the “social phenomenology” of Alfred Schutz (Denscombe, 1998, p. 142 – 143). It is concerned with how people interact with a social phenomenon, in this case the participants’ views on teaching mythology in the social environment of the classroom.

The research also encompasses an awareness of relevant critical theory, particularly feminist perspectives. Habermas acknowledges “the pervasive influence of gender as a category of analysis and organization” (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 34). Creswell and Creswell note that researchers increasingly use a theoretical lens for the study of questions of gender, and that this shapes the questions, the data analysis and provides a call for action and change (2018, p. 78). The feminist perspective does inform this research since questions were asked relating to gender, possible change is suggested by some participants, and feminist critics are included in the literature review.

However, the phenomenological approach was borne in mind, an emergent strategy was utilised, and the findings are based on the views of the participants. For example, a number of participants do not consider gender to be a significant issue and their views are reflected in the research. This was in keeping with Creswell and Creswell’s recommendation that stresses the importance of reporting contrary findings, that a “hallmark of good qualitative research is the report of the diversity of perspectives about the topic” (2018, p.213).
The Research Process

“Subjectivity is truth” (Kierkegaard, 2009, p.159).

Kierkegaard, one of the originators of existentialism, believed that objectivity was an illusion, and that anyone who is committed to positivism and science needs to be rescued from his state of darkness (2009, p.163). Anti-positivism would suggest that objectivity cannot be achieved by the researcher. Cohen et al., quoting Ezzy, say that “the personal experience of the researcher is an integral part of the research process” (2007, p. 36). This researcher has a keen interest in mythology since childhood, but she was conscious not to interpret or steer the responses of the participants in the direction of her own interest. However, her enthusiasm for mythology inevitably influenced the choice of topic, the nature of the research and the questioning.

The emphasis on describing the participants’ views and the open-ended questions, as suggested by the phenomenological approach, mitigates the potential bias by keeping the focus on the participants’ opinions. Denscombe suggests that qualitative semi-structured interviews allow respondents to speak widely on issues and the questions are more open-ended (1998, p.204). He says that interviews allow the respondent to raise issues that he/she feels are important; that this helps the phenomenologist’s investigation (1998, p. 142). In this research, the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews, along with open-ended questioning, resulted in issues being raised by the participants that had not been considered by the researcher, e.g. whether mythology should be considered history or fiction. This ensured that the research findings remain focused on the participants’ views.

There are, however, disadvantages to qualitative interviews. As Bell and Waters suggest, they have less statistical power than quantitative surveys, they cannot be generalised in the
same way and there is a greater risk of researcher bias (2014, p.178). Due to the pandemic, of necessity, the interviews for this study were conducted online. Online interviews are less time-consuming but, as Denscombe suggests, the lack of direct visual contact is a disadvantage (1998, p. 217).

Sampson suggests that pilot work can mitigate against bias, and “that there are potential benefits in putting a toe or two in the research waters before diving in” (2004, p.399). Before conducting the actual interviews, a pilot interview was conducted to identify any pitfalls and make any appropriate changes. The pilot enabled this researcher to establish the approximate length of the interviews. One of the questions was re-phrased during the pilot as its meaning was ambiguous. Brock-Utne and Gudmundsdottir suggest that both piloting and gaining access to the views of participants can be considered action research, since the intention is to learn and change future action (2010, p. 359).

Gaining access to participants is key to interview-based research. Creswell and Creswell suggest a purposeful sampling strategy, purposefully selecting participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (2018, p. 210). This strategy was followed in this study and the sample was as representative as possible. Creswell and Creswell suggest that three – ten participants are suitable for phenomenological research (2018, p.210). Eight teachers were sourced for this research and located through personal and professional contacts. Two were found through snowball sampling, where one participant suggests another. Five of the participants are female, and three are male. Four teach in Dublin schools, and four teach in schools outside Dublin. Six teach in Catholic schools, one teaches in an Educate Together school and one teaches in a multi-denominational school. All teachers have taught both boys and girls. All participants have taught, or are currently teaching, at least one of third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes.
Informed consent is one of the key ethical considerations, Denscombe notes that researchers need to make it clear that participation is voluntary and that participants are provided with adequate information; he suggests the use of a written consent form (1998, p.344). A written consent form was used in this research, explaining the parameters of the research project.

By signing the consent form, all participants agreed to participate and signified that they had the consent of their school principal. Israel & Hay say that “researchers need to protect their research participants, develop a trust with them, promote… guard against misconduct and impropriety” (quoted from Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.109). Trust was a key factor for this research; participants were informed that they were being recorded and assured of confidentiality. Only data that is relevant to the research study has been recorded and stored and all data was placed in a password protected file.

The questions involve discussion of potentially sensitive topics such as violence and gender representation, so the boundaries established by the interviewees had to be respected. Bell and Waters note the importance of being prepared to deal with any ethical issues: “Even experienced researchers… sometimes come across ethical issues they failed to see or appreciate” (2014, p.6). It was also important to thank the participants for their contribution.

Once the data collection was complete, each interview was listened to individually to gather a sense of the whole, as suggested by Hycner (quoted in Cohen et al., 2007, p. 370). When using a phenomenological approach, Hycner emphasises the importance of bracketing or suspending one’s own interpretations, and “entering into the world of the unique individual” (quoted in Cohen et al, 2007, p. 370). Care was taken to focus on reporting what the participants actually said, giving primacy to their views throughout.

This study was guided by Denscombe’s five stages for the analysis of qualitative data (1998, p. 262 – 263). As he suggests, the text was catalogued and carefully transcribed.
Secondly, recurrent themes were established. Each participant was then given a numeric code and each theme an alphabetic code, establishing categories. Then the process of written interpretation of the data began, taking care to maintain the integrity of each contribution. Finally, the findings were compared with the literature, noting points of agreement and disagreement.

The steps taken to ensure the validity of the research results have been outlined above, and the following amplifies those points. As Creswell and Creswell suggest, the validity of qualitative research is based on determining if the findings are accurate from the point of view of the researcher, the participants, or the readers (2018, p. 222).

Triangulation, whereby multiple methods or sources are used to understand phenomena, is one method used to establish validity. As outlined above, participants were used from varying educational backgrounds to inform the research and themes were developed based on their views. As Creswell and Creswell explain, “If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (2018, p. 222).

Researcher bias is one cause of invalidity (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 150). Reflexivity or self-reflection was therefore important given that this researcher has a decided view on the value of mythology. Creswell and Creswell suggest that presenting negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes is a way of ensuring validity (2018, p. 223). This researcher maintained an awareness that participants might have contrary opinions to her, and this is reflected in the findings. For example, a number of participants do not consider gender stereotypes in mythology to be problematic whereas this is not the view of this researcher. Silverman argues for the importance of open-ended interviewing and questioning to counter bias, to “enable important but unanticipated issues to be raised” (quoted in Cohen et al, 2007,
The open-ended nature of the interviews did indeed result in issues being raised and included that were not anticipated.

Denscombe notes that the data must be plausible; it must be asked if it is reasonable to assume that the person being interviewed is able to comment authoritatively (1998, p. 219). The focus of the research is on the senior classes, so only teachers who had taught one of the senior classes were recruited to ensure so they could contribute authoritatively. Yin suggests that the reliability of the data can be ensured through careful documentation of the procedures used (quoted in Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 223). Notes and memos were made both during and immediately after the interviews, as well as during the data analysis process.

Generalisation has limited applicability in qualitative research since the focus is on the particular experience. This is even more true of phenomenological research where the intention is to understand the phenomena in its own terms. However, transferability may apply to qualitative research; in this work, the views expressed may have relevance for curriculum design as outlined in the data analysis chapter and conclusion.

Creswell and Creswell suggest that rich descriptions bring the data to life and allow the reader to share the experience (2018, p. 223). This was certainly the case in conducting this research. The breadth and variety of the participants’ views was considerable, and their subjective experiences of teaching mythology were different. In his poem “Epic”, Kavanagh suggests that a petty dispute over land in Ireland is just as important as World War 2 and the Trojan war, that we each create our own worlds: “Gods make their own importance” (1960, p.1). This research endeavours to stay true to the world of the participants, to their individual experience of teaching mythology in the classroom.
Data Analysis

And when I was a schoolchild, I loved those old stories…They have mystery, treachery, murder, loyalty, romance, magic, monsters – everything is in there. So, I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t interested in mythology and that just continued when I was a teacher.

- (Interview with Rick Riordan, March 14th, 2010).

Author Rick Riordan identifies here the compelling power that mythological stories hold for children, the elements that engage and entrance. This chapter investigates the importance of mythology and story for children as described by the participants, comparing their views with the literature. Firstly, it asks how the participants view children’s engagement with the story element of myth, followed by investigating if participants think these stories can help children develop a sense of the past. Secondly, this chapter investigates the participants’ views on challenges that may arise. It considers three themes: violence, gender issues and the theme of fact versus fiction that arose during the research, as well as possible teaching approaches.

The Power of Story

A number of participants in this study refer to the sheer enjoyment children get from myths, how these stories engage their imagination. P1 says “they could let their imaginations flow, I know when we linked it to writing their own myths they really, really enjoyed doing that”. P8 says his fourth class enjoy Greek mythology, “the story of Troy…they would be particularly interested in stories like that, they loved them”. P4 makes a similar point, “story really engages kids”. For P3, enjoyment is important, “they love the discussion, the insights to it, they love story anyway”.
The literature supports the participants’ views that stories provide enjoyment and have imaginative value for children. The participants’ comments accord with the findings of Hourihan, who says that all teachers understand the power of stories as education tools, that children find stories enjoyable and compelling (1997, p.1). Kearney says children still crave “stories of fantastic creatures and conflicts”, and that great tales and legends bring “pleasure and enchantment” (2002, p. 7). The findings are also in accord with Frye’s view that the literary imagination of the child should be fostered, (1970, p.104), only literature “can train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind” (1970, p. 105). Crago says that story has always been an integral part of our humanity, that arranging experience into a pattern “is a process almost as fundamental to human life as breathing” (1999, p.168).

Beyond the attractions of story are the specific attractions of mythology. Frye suggests that the teaching of literature for children should consist of mythological stories (1970, p. 101), because studying mythology provides a blueprint for literature (1970, p. 102). Echoing Frye’s argument, P1 suggests that TV programmes about heroes can give children a better understanding of myths; “there’s a lot of movies on TV at the moment …So when you’re reading stories like Hercules…they can understand it a bit better”. Frye suggests that it does not really matter whether students understand literary archetypes or recurring images through Shakespeare or through TV; that understanding analogies and resemblances is what matters, that value judgements come later (1970, p. 101).

Campbell emphasises the commonality of myth, manifested in different forms but with a consistent theme and structure (1949, p.1). The hero leaves the everyday world into a place of “supernatural wonder”, meeting “fabulous forces”; he is victorious and comes back with “the power to bestow boons” (1949, p. 23). All participants’ responses bear out Campbell’s theory by identifying the hero narrative as significant. As P3 put it, children “love… the tales of heroism…they love if there is someone outwitting a baddie”. P6 says she was surprised
when she realised that the Earthlink fifth class programme just has two hero myths, St
Brendan’s Voyage and Androcles and the Lion: “I thought there should have been a little bit
more”. One participant, P5, suggests that the hero myth helps children discern good from
evil, “the hero…through like bravery…standing up to your enemies”.

Most participants subscribe to this idea, that myths promote discussion and understanding
about human behaviour and morality. P8 believes that mythology impacts “our beliefs, our
morals, how we behave as a society. A lot of that can be traced back to our myths”. And P2
suggests that “a lot of the mythology stories will have good morals about, like, just general
behaviour”. It is clear that the participants view story, as expressed in mythology, as a
powerful educational resource, providing enjoyment, fostering imagination, and promoting
moral understanding.

A Sense of the Past

“But still the heart doth need a language; still
Doth the old instinct bring back the old names…
Spirits or gods that used to share this earth
With man as with their friend (Coleridge, 1800, Piccolomini, l. 18-23).

Several participants suggest that mythology offers children a connection to the past. P7
remarks that children see it “as part of their history. Like they enjoy learning about the
different cultures”. P6 says myths are important because they are “a great way of teaching
across countries, different cultures, and different religions… to recognize that our stories and
our myths aren't the only ones, that every culture has their myths”.

The literature supports the participants’ views; acknowledging that every culture has
its own mythology but highlighting what they hold in common. As Leeming suggests, myths
are part of “a larger world mythology, the cultural vehicles for understandings that people in all corners of the world have shared” (2005, p.2).

The history curriculum suggests that children should acquire a range of historical skills and concepts, including empathy, sequencing, chronology and a sense of the past (1999, p.8). A number of participants believe mythology is important for the acquisition of these key competencies. P3 says that mythology helps children “to kind of explore the path, the kind of human dimension, the connection, and an understanding about the past”. P5 suggests that mythological stories allow children to understand “what people used to think, or people used to believe, a long time ago”. Two participants suggested that mythology helps children to develop empathy. P8 says “And I think they’re a very good way…of teaching empathy” and P6 also believes that mythology can help children “empathise with characters from the story”.

P3 says that it is important that children learn that “things change over time, and that’s part of what they learn in history”. Three participants suggest that mythology helps children understand sequencing. P8 says they “draw pictures and do comic strip characters of whatever mythological stories we have done, [which] helps with their comprehension and their ability to sequence”. However, some participants had some difficulty with using mythology for developing skills of sequencing and chronology. P4 feels that different versions of stories can prove confusing, “and that’s really annoying, because you could print off a big ream of a sequencing activity, and…oh no, that’s slightly different to the version they know, so they’re going to get confused”. P6 suggests that it can be hard for children to understand the chronology of myths; “where does the myth sit in the chronology of the history of a country?”

The participants’ responses clearly agree with the literature that sequencing and chronology is important for story. Aristotle proposes that a plot “should have… a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity” (c.335 BC,
Poetics: Book XXIII, para.1). Kearney notes that myth generally had a sacred, ritual function, using a traditional plot that could be transmitted from one generation to the next (2002, p. 8). For Frye, mythology is an “initiatory pattern of education”; a genuine society “preserves… the memory of the past, the reality of the present, and the anticipation of the future” (1970, p. 20 - 21). As above, several participants identified the importance of children developing an understanding of the past, the present and the future.

Teaching Mythology: Challenges and Approaches

Violence

“But this Achilles- first he slaughters Hector,

He rips away the noble prince’s life,

Then lashes him to his chariot, drags him round

His beloved comrade’s tomb. But why, I ask you?

What good will it do him? What honour will he gain?”

(Homer, The Iliad, Book 24, lines 58-65).

Mythology is rife with violence, yet there is a space within mythology to interrogate the morality of violence. Cúchulainn’s most important asset was his ríastrad or warrior rage; he went into battle wielding his Gaé Bulg, a vicious spear that released further barbs once it was inside its victim. Achilles, as in the above quote, is also a warrior fuelled by rage and revenge; he threatens to eat his enemy Hector raw and dishonours him after killing him. Yet this quote from The Iliad also indicates Homer’s concern with the moral implications of violence, as opposed to the representation of frenetic violence with no moral warning in the tale of Cúchulainn.

Two participants raise this point of interrogating violence, not just accepting it. P5 says; “the violent behaviour like doesn’t always…lead to a positive result…the bad character
might become imprisoned or killed at the end”. P6 stresses the importance of emphasising that a myth is a story that is “made up to teach a moral…it's not there to glorify that element in any way”.

The concern with violence leads four of the participants to the consideration of age-appropriateness. P1 remarks “There can be quite a lot of violence…so you have to be quite careful to kind of find an age-appropriate version”. P2 also considers the child’s age important, as well as parental concern, “I mean, parents are a big worry there…you don’t want to teach the kid a story about, like a mythical creature or mythical story that like upsets them in some way”. P3 notes that it is about “just making sure you’ve got good materials to use with the children, that it’s kind of age-appropriate”. P6 says that myths should not be sanitised for children but that the stories we tell young children are going to be “quite different” to those we tell older children.

Several participants, however, offer a different perspective, suggesting that the violence in mythology captures children’s interest, particularly boys. Asked whether she thinks that violence is a particular challenge, P4 responds; “I’m in an all-boys school and they love an auld warrior, they love a fight, they love a war, the spears and a bit of violence goes down a treat. It really engages them and really keeps them sucked into the story”. Similarly, P8 feels that the amount of violence is not a particular challenge, “Especially for boys anyway, they tend to enjoy it even more, when there's a little bit of violence in it…you're the one who guides the whole process”. P1 thinks children view “gruesome and violent…stories” as “quite fun”. One participant, P5, mentions that children are already exposed to violence; “I think there's violence everywhere…when it comes to like video games, and TV shows… I think an aspect of it is almost like necessary… But that’s just kind of the way we seem to be programmed”. 
The above comments reflect critics like Bettelheim and Tatar, who argue that children seem to accept the violence in myth and fairy tales as the dramatization of the struggle between good and evil and the playing out of unconscious forces in the psyche. Experiencing violence and danger through literature and mythology allows children to experience the strong emotions of terror and fear without being in actual physical danger.

Kearney posits the thesis that we project on to others that which we fear in ourselves, that we are obsessed with strangers, gods and monsters because of our refusal “to acknowledge oneself-as-other” (2001, p. 11). Writing about 9/11, he suggests that the more we experience horror in the real world, the more we want to experience it in the unreal world: “the imaginary can furnish access to the heart of darkness which remains intolerable in the flesh” (2001, p. 120). This is also true for children, as Bettelheim says, the child can sleep peacefully because it has exorcised its demons by listening to bedtime stories (2002, p. 120). Dewan notes that fairy-tales include scary creatures such as witches, monsters and trolls, suggesting that children enjoy dangerous situations in the safe world of fiction (2016, p. 28).

Paul suggests children are viewed differently in the context of feminist and post-colonial theory, that more autonomy is ascribed to them and “distinctions between them and us no longer become categorising features and suitability recedes as an issue” (1999, p.122). Bengtsson argues that evil is an integral part of folk tales and mythology: “without evil there cannot be a clear sense of good either” (2009, p. 16-17).

Returning to the Iliad, Homer juxtaposes Achilles’ evil deeds with a moral message, asking what honour lies in such actions. Katz Anhalt argues that Greek myths have played a vital role in moving western civilisation from tribal rage to civil society, cultivating debate and our capacity for empathy (2017, p.1). In this context, as the teachers suggest, stories of violence do not make children violent but contribute to their understanding and empathy.
Gender Stereotypes

“For from her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live among mortal men to their great trouble” (*The Theogony*, Part II, l. 590-591).

In the Theogony, Thesiod describes how the first woman was created by command of Zeus “to be an evil to mortal men” (Part II, l. 596). The question of gender in mythology is a complex one; women are rarely in charge and are often presented as a danger to men, but they can have prominent roles, ranging from beautiful brides to benign goddesses to demonic threats to the hero’s life and quest.

The views of the participants also present a complex picture; they vary considerably. Most participants either had not considered the question before or do not consider it an issue. When asked if he considers gender stereotyping in mythology to be a problem, P2 says “I don’t really know much about that to be honest”, saying his interest was in mythical stories like Cúchulainn. P4’s response was “I’ve never really thought about it. I think it’s come up before when I’ve been teaching traditional tales and fairy tales, but not so much in myths and legends”. P6 says “I haven’t thought about that” and P8 made a similar point, “I never really thought about gender in mythology before just now”.

However, some participants go on to make qualifying comments. P8 says, “there probably isn’t that many sort of stories where females…have the leading role apart from Gráinne Mhaol or someone like that”. P7 makes a similar point and suggests she would like to consider the issue further, “I will…be more aware…women in mythology and history…That’s something maybe to be more mindful of. But yeah, you don’t really see much about women in mythology”.

Two participants suggest that women have a considerable role. P4 says that there can be gender-based warrior stereotypes but that women in mythology can be “powerful warrior
women, really brave women, women who were really clever. I don’t think it’s as gender stereotyped as some of the more traditional tales”. P6 makes a similar point, “I know, in Roman and Greek mythology women would play a much greater role than they would we’ll say in our Irish myths and legends”.

A specific point raised by P4 taps into a major feminist concern- the demonisation of women in the figure of the wicked stepmother: “When you tell that story to small kids, and they’re like, I have a step-mum, she’s really nice and she loves me…and you’re like No, no, I’m not saying that!” P4 was referring to a fairy tale reading, but the trope also has mythological equivalence, the Children of Lir are banished because of the machinations of their wicked stepmother and the Greek goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, tries to kill Hercules, the child of Zeus and his mistress Alcmene. As noted by P4, these kinds of stories can have real life, damaging consequences for children. Again, this feeds into feminist concerns about the nature of traditional fairy tales and myths.

Several participants mention the importance of discussion and placing myths in context when it comes to gender. P1 remarks “I think it opens up a lot of discussions… but you have to be quite careful, you know, when it shows women kind of depicted in a certain way”. She goes on to say that engagement with issues of gender bias can be fruitful in the classroom: “I guess it does engage discussion over gender as well…not trying to shy away from some representations of gender but looking at it from the perspective of the time as well”. P5 feels that mythology can help children challenge gender stereotypes: “I think if you can attack those stereotypes from a young age… it’s a nice idea to be able to compare and contrast things from a long time ago compared to like attitudes that we should try and instil in children now”. Similarly, P3 says “as long as they understand the context, I think it's fine… it's the way it is, and it's the way things were then”.
The variety of participants’ opinions accords with current literature in the range and complexity of views. On the negative side, Beard posits the feminist position that classical myth’s huge cultural authority has mainly operated “to perpetuate the oppression of women” (2007, p.396). But there are positive commentaries too. While Lefkowitz accepts that women’s rights were severely limited in classical Greek society and that Homer’s women seem to have little independence in his epics, she also argues that Homer’s women still have considerable moral authority (1986, p. 25) and that goddesses have a prominent role in the Greek creation myth (1986, p. 14). Both P4 and P6 also emphasise the considerable role that women have in mythology. Doherty takes both a critical and a celebratory approach to mythology, (2001, p. 37), while Zajko says that feminists have engaged with myth because it offers the potential for a wider conversation about women in western society. P1 and P5’s suggestions that gender stereotypes can be examined and challenged echo Beard’s recommendation that the patriarchal tropes in the classical tradition should be “spared against” (2013, p.3).

The feminist objection to the hero myth is encapsulated in Hourihan’s remarks that it is founded on white male “superiority, dominance and success” (1997, p.1), that it valorises violent subjugation of the other and the enemy, and that it reduces women to “not ‘characters’ at all but symbols of events in the hero’s psyche” (p. 157). One participant, P4, does refer to the hero motif as potentially problematic and others note the absence of female figures. However other participants suggest that women do have powerful roles in mythology. Several view gender stereotypes as a means of promoting discussion. In general, the participants view challenging tropes such as violence and gender stereotypes as opportunities for learning and increasing understanding for children.
Fact Versus Fiction

“This is stupid, why are we learning this?”

According to P2, this is the response he got from one of his 6th class pupils when reading mythology. This topic around the historical validity of mythology was not something that was considered previously by this researcher but was brought up organically by several participants. P2 did go on to say, “the negative attitude disappears” when the children understand “the bigger story behind it”. But he does suggest that whether stories are “real or unreal” can be an issue for older children.

As previously outlined, the participants are generally positive about how mythology could contribute to a deeper understanding of history, but some concern is expressed on the issue of fact versus fiction since mythology is in the history curriculum. P5 was “surprised by how much they were not taken by the idea of like mythology”. When shown a video where children expressed a belief in the Banshee, his students were shocked that anybody would believe this: “they would think this is so obviously a made-up story”.

P5 also makes the point, saying that his third-class children are exposed to social media and concepts like fake news and therefore focus on “what is real and what’s not real”. He suggests they are much more interested in actual history such as a “genuine ancient civilisation” like the Aztecs: “they tend not to be like, as carried away by the stories of…mythological creatures and characters as you would think”. P2 also tends to focus on factual history, “you don’t have as much time to focus on them stories, you know, when you’re trying to teach the real stories of history”. P7 also thought that some mythology could be “far-fetched and unbelievable”, and this could be a challenge. P6 says that “the children need to appreciate they’re not real”.

The answer to the concern expressed is to consider creating a space for the fictional nature of mythology, perhaps in the English curriculum. One participant, P6, challenges the
place of mythology in the history curriculum, saying “I don't know if mythology should sit as part of the history curriculum really”. She goes on to suggest “maybe it would sit better...within the oral language curriculum ...because a lot of our myths are passed on orally”. This distinction between fact and fiction is clear among literary critics. Aristotle considers poetry a “more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (Aristotle, c.335 BC, Poetics: Book IX, para.1).

The implications of the participants’ views, and the ideas suggested by the literature, will be considered further below. The findings of this research project will illustrate that the theoretical perspectives in the literature review are being lived out in the Irish classroom.
Conclusion

“For the plot ought to be so constructed that… he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place” (Aristotle, *Poetics*: Book XIV, para.1).

Aristotle’s seminal thesis posits that, when we experience pity and fear through the power of narrative fiction, we experience a purgation of emotion or what he calls catharsis. As the literature suggests, this kind of process is at the heart of our experience of story. For the participants in this study, story was a central component in their consideration of the value of mythology. The key findings of this study fall into three categories; the value of mythology, the challenges of mythology; and whether it should be considered in terms of history or fiction. The third finding emerged during the course of the study.

Participants emphasise that children enjoy the story element of mythology, and that it engages and fosters their imagination. The participants’ understanding that the value of mythology lies in story is supported by the literature; a variety of critics (Crago, 1999; Frye, 1970; Kearney, 2001), return to the thesis that mythological stories offer universal truths through their imaginative and metaphorical power. Participants also view mythology as useful in terms of developing key skills from the history curriculum such as sequencing the structure of a story and the development of empathy (1999, p.8). Morrow notes that educators have long recognised that reading stories to young children helps them assimilate sophisticated language structures; her own work indicates that reading and retelling improves the child’s recall as well as their understanding of the stories’ major structural elements (1985, p. 870).

Generally, participants did not consider either violence or gender stereotypes to be particular challenges in the teaching of mythology. Indeed, a number of participants think that violence has an appeal for children, particularly for boys. Several commented that it
should be age-appropriate. These findings agree generally with Bettelheim’s point (2009) that the violence in mythology is symbolic and that children understand that it is not real. This accords with the commonly held position that violence is intrinsically human, and that fictional representations of violence are something we can learn from (Aristotle, c.355 BC; Bettelheim, 2009; Doherty, 2001; Katz Anhalt, 2017; Kearney, 2002).

In terms of gender representation, some participants had not considered it previously but then acknowledged that it was a matter for further thought. Further exploration revealed similarities in position to the debate on the subject which continues among critics. While there is an acceptance that these stereotypes form part of the cultural context there is less agreement on how they should be viewed currently (Beard, 2013; Doherty, 2001; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Hourihan, 1997; Lefkowitz, 1986; Williams, 2010; Zajko, 2009). Several participants agree with critics who argue that the gender stereotypes need to be interrogated and challenged (Beard, 2013; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Hourihan, 1997; Paul, 1999).

As discussed in the data analysis chapter a key finding arose organically in the research process: the challenge of how mythology should be categorised. Participants report that the question of whether mythology is fiction or history can be perplexing for children and result in them dismissing mythology. The literature suggests that the power of mythology derives more from its imaginative and literary value than its historical application. Nonetheless the literature endorses the idea that mythology has considerable historical and cultural resonance. A key recommendation of this study is suggested by the reservations expressed by some participants around the place of mythology in the history curriculum; this study recommends it be reconsidered.

Developing empathy and the ability to sequence are key skills in the history curriculum and I would recommend that mythology should continue to be used for the development of these skills in history. However, it is questionable whether the primacy of the imaginative
power of myth is maintained when the fictional element is subordinate to the historical element; some participants did suggest this was a matter of confusion for the children. Frye suggests that to consider the classics as historical documents is to separate the student from their literary value (1970, p. 83).

This researcher agrees with the suggestion of P6, that mythology would sit best in the oral language element of the English curriculum. The focus would then shift onto the storytelling nature of mythology which of course is its primary purpose. It also has potential to be of value in the written language element of the English curriculum; in my teaching experience, children gained considerable satisfaction from writing their own myths and populating them with the requisite monsters. This activity helped to improve their vocabulary and their ability to write creatively. The views of the participants are generally supported by the literature (Aristotle, c.355 BC; Frye, 1970; Kearney, 2001), therefore, this study suggests that mythology should, Janus-like, face both ways, towards both English and history.

This study also recommends that consideration should be given towards further education for both student teachers and teachers on the potential challenges of teaching mythology. Participants were willing to engage with the material, yet many had never considered issues such as gender and the connection between fairy-tales and mythology. In my own student teacher lectures, issues of gender were considered in relation to fairy tales but not in relation to myths and legends. It would seem appropriate that teachers have the training to deal with violence and gender stereotypes in myth. Teachers could also be given context on the background of myths and fairy tales and helped to identify the patterns between the two genres.

Making teachers aware of the wealth of resources would be key to such education. There are numerous re-imaginings and retellings of ancient myths for children that are invaluable resources in the classroom. For example, there is the beautifully illustrated *D’Aulaires Book*
of Greek Myths, Hagwitch by Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick (using the Children of Lir myth as intertext), Circe by Madeline Miller (a re-telling of the Odyssey) and Eithne Massey’s Best Loved Irish Legends.

Research could also be done on mythology’s potential for integration with other curricular areas. Its potential for integration with drama is obvious. A study of how mythology explains natural phenomena and how this could be used in geography and art might yield interesting results. For example, children could learn about myths about volcanoes. This could be integrated with studying volcanoes in geography and creating models of volcanoes in art. The common tropes in mythology across all civilisations could promote intercultural understanding. Exploring how mythology can be made more accessible for children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds would also be a timely topic.

Roy writes that the storyteller “tells stories of the gods, but his yarn is spun from the ungodly human heart” (1997, p.229-230). This is why myths resonate; they tell our story in a superhuman context. Frye recommends that myths should be central to literary education for children since they provide the structural principles of literature, “an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end” (1970, p. 102). The participants in this study expressed strong support for the centrality of these stories in the Irish classroom; one participant P5 expressed concern that mythology could be “skipped over…stories can be forgotten”. The participants in this study have expressed the view that these myths should not be forgotten; that they offer imaginative access to children on what it means to be human and how to live in the world.
References


Appendix

Letter of Consent for Teacher

Dear Teacher,

I am writing to ask for your help with a qualitative research study that explores whether mythology is of value, in the context of the difficult themes and issues that often arise in any study of mythology. The study is being undertaken with particular reference to its use in education, specifically in 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th class.

My expectation is that this study will increase awareness of how mythology can be used in the classroom, as well as adding to an understanding of the inherent difficulties. There is one part to the research element of the study: (i) an interview. The interview questions will broadly cover the following areas.

1. Your general views on Mythology.
2. Whether Mythology has value in the classroom.
3. Challenges in using Mythology as an educational resource.
4. Do the challenges negate the advantages?
5. Any strategies for overcoming the challenges.
7. Anything else you would like to add.

The interview would last for 30 minutes or less and it would be recorded on Zoom. I will not share this recording with anyone else. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so.

There are no obvious risks or direct benefits in participating in the interview.
Please sign the attached consent form and email it back to me, indicating agreement to participate in the study at horeillymanningpme19@momail.mie.ie. Your participation in this project is sincerely appreciated; I do understand that your time is valuable. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research.

Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact me. You may also contact my advisor for the project, Mary Clarke, mary.clarke@mie.ie. This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact horeillymanningpme19@momail.mie.ie.

Yours faithfully,

Hannah-Rose Manning.
Participant Consent Form

[Investigating Irish primary teachers’ views on the use of mythology as an educational resource]

Consent to take part in research

• I……………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I have consulted the principal of my school about participating in this research project.

• I understand that participation involves a brief interview about the benefits and challenges of teaching mythology in the classroom.

• I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I agree to my Zoom interview being recorded.

• I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

• I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in my research project.
• I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

• I understand that signed consent forms and original recordings will be retained in a secure password-protected file that only I will have access to until May 9th (the date I will be handing in my research project). These will be deleted May 10th.

• I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

• I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of researchers (and academic supervisors when relevant).

**Signature of research participant**

----------------------------------------------------------

Signature of participant Date

**Signature of researcher**

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

----------------------------------------------------------

Signature of researcher Date