



An Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions of the Benefits of Multi-Grade Settings in Irish Primary Schools

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Declaration

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Date: 13th May 2019

Abstract

Multi-grade settings are prevalent in many schools both in Ireland and internationally. However, there is a widespread lack of awareness of multi-grade settings. There also continues to be a lack of understanding around the benefits and advantages that multi-grade settings can have on children's outcomes. Therefore, there is a need to highlight practicing teacher's perceptions on the positives of multi-grade settings in order to create a greater awareness of multi-grade settings among the teaching profession. There is a dearth of literature on this topic and much of the literature is out-dated. The literature that is available discusses the challenges of multi-grade teaching which includes, time management, classroom management, organisation and planning. The literature also highlights the cognitive benefits of multi-grade settings as children are constantly interacting with others and learning from one another. The literature also shows that there are no differences in the educational outcomes of a child in a multi-grade settings than those in a single-stream setting.

The aim of this research was to establish and highlight the benefits of multi-grade settings. The researcher took a qualitative approach and carried out seven semi-structured interviews. This research study investigated the perceptions of seven teachers currently teaching in multi-grade settings in rural Ireland. This approach provided rich and detailed information which was then analysed thematically. Analysis of the findings showed that multi-grade settings have significant benefits to a child's development of positive relationships and social skills. It also showed that children in multi-grade settings are provided with greater opportunities for peer and collaborative learning as well as enquiry-based learning. The children in multi-grade settings benefit from a spiral and integrated curriculum where they continue to build on their knowledge each year. The researcher can conclude that multi-grade settings have profound educational, social and emotional benefits for children.

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Introduction

The overall aim of this dissertation is to investigate teachers' perceptions of teaching in multi-grade settings in rural Primary schools in Ireland. The primary objective of this dissertation is to unearth the advantages and benefits of multi-grade teaching in Irish Primary schools. The main research question of this dissertation is to establish how multi-grade settings impact on children's educational and social outcomes with a particular focus on the perceived positives. This dissertation will aim to elicit data from participants that will contribute to the understanding of multi-grade settings and how they impact on children's learning. It will also examine, if aspects of multi-grade teaching and learning can be applied to single stream settings. The purpose of this study is to establish an in-depth understanding of practicing teacher's perceptions of the value of multi-grade settings and to highlight the impact multi-grade teaching has on children's educational and social outcomes.

Multi-grade teaching is best described as 'the teaching in Primary education of children from a number of grades usually in one class' (Birch & Lally, 1995). Multi-grade teaching is 'prevalent in most educational systems throughout the world', however there is a lack of research on multi-grade teaching (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005). There is a profound lack of literature describing this subject both in Ireland and internationally. Therefore, there is a glaring need to further research this subject. It is evident that there is a dearth studies around this topic, therefore, further research is required to fully elucidate the advantages and disadvantages of multi-grade teaching in primary school settings in Ireland. This research may inform the field of education in relation to multi-grade teaching as there is a need for up to date research on this topic.

It is therefore, worthwhile to investigate the current opinions and views on multi-grade settings. Existing research focuses on the challenges described by teachers who have taught in

multi-grade settings. Some of the research focuses on the educational outcomes of children in multi-grade settings compared to those in single-stream settings. However, there is no real difference in these outcomes. Therefore, this research will focus on the perceived advantages on multi-grade settings with a particular focus on the curriculum, differentiation, social and emotional relationships and the importance of small schools.

Overall, this dissertation will present the current research available on multi-grade settings in Ireland in order to establish a context for this study. The methodology section will outline the research design as well as describing the chosen methodology for this research study. The data analysis section will discuss the main findings of the research and draw a number of conclusions and recommendations relation to multi-grade settings.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review aims to investigate the current literature relating to multi-grade teaching in primary schools both internationally and in Ireland. This literature review will discuss and explore the literature under relevant themes and headings. There is a profound lack of relevant and up to date literature describing this subject both in Ireland and internationally. Therefore there is a pressing need to further research this subject. During the past few decades, ‘few of the leading educational journals or teacher union magazines have published up-to-date articles on the situation of multi-grade education in Finland or internationally’ (Muusa-Maria & Maija, 2016). According to Mulryan-Kyne (2007) ‘information on the incidence of multi-grade teaching is difficult to find and is often out of date’. It is evident that there is a dearth of relevant studies around this topic, therefore, further research is required to fully elucidate the advantages and disadvantages of multi-grade teaching in primary school settings in Ireland. It is clear that there is a ‘need for continuous research on multi-class teaching in the Irish context’ (INTO, 2003).

Firstly, this literature review will give an overview of multi-grade settings drawing on literature from both within Ireland and internationally. This literature review will aim to discuss the literature relating to teacher’s preparation for teaching in multi-grade settings and the challenges teachers face in multi-grade settings. It will also investigate the educational, social and emotional outcomes of children in multi-grade settings with a particular focus on children with special educational needs. This literature review will also look at key theorists and theories that relate to multi-grade settings. Lastly, this literature review aims to investigate and discuss the literature available on both children’s and teachers’ experiences of multi-grade settings. A significant amount of the research discussed in this literature review is based on semi-structured

interviews with teachers as it is ‘considered that this is an appropriate form for eliciting views which would be of relevance to this research topic’ (INTO, 2003).

Overview of Multi-Grade Settings

Multi-grade classes, ‘where students from two (or more) adjacent grades are grouped within one classroom are common in many developing and developed countries’ (Checchi & De Paola, 2018). Multi-grade teaching is best described as ‘the teaching in Primary education of children from a number of grades usually in one class’ (Birch & Lally, 1995). Multi-grade teaching is ‘prevalent in most educational systems throughout the world’ (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Figures from DES (2016) state that ‘in Ireland 1,295 schools are 2,3 or 4 teacher schools out of a total of 3,124 schools in the educational system’ (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). According to the ‘Growing up in Ireland study, ‘29% of nine-year olds are taught in multi-grade classrooms’ (ERSI, 2009). When discussing multi-grade or multi-class teaching most of the literature refers to small schools. Multi-grade teaching features ‘predominantly in schools with enrolments of less than one hundred pupils’ (INTO, 2003). These schools are referred to as small schools. The majority of these small schools with multi-grade classes are located in rural areas, however, there are also multi-grade classes in urban areas. Research carried out by the INTO (2003) states that

‘In terms of the overall quality of education, inspections show pupils in small schools are not disadvantaged in comparison with those in larger schools because of the size of the school. Small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are the most effective in the country’ (INTO, 2003).

According to a similar study carried out in Ireland, small schools are described as doing ‘very well’ (Ó Slatara & Morgan, 2004). Class teachers and principals in Mulryan-Kyne’s study cited many ‘positive effects of multi-grade teaching and learning and indicated that they found

teaching in small schools settings satisfying and fulfilling' (Ó Slatara & Morgan, 2004). Small schools in Ireland appear to suffer from serious neglect at official level and have less access to learning support, psychological services and library facilities (Ó Slatara & Morgan, 2004). As well as this, 'colleges of education appear to ignore small schools and the problems associated with them' (INTO, 2003). Children and communities also develop an emotional attachment to the local school. The closure of small school can often have devastating effects on the community and cause a loss of life to rural Ireland. There are many examples of small schools closing down due to lack of numbers. There is a small one teacher school in the West of Ireland in June 2019 and it has been described in local newspaper as 'another nail in the coffin of rural Ireland'. It also believes that the closure of the school 'underlined the neglect of once-vibrant and sustainable communities' (Mayo News, 2019).

Overall, multi-grade classes can be found in developing schools, declining schools, schools whose pupils are drawn from a minority religious denomination and schools who may have multi-grade classes due to teacher-pupil ratios (INTO, 2003). As well as this, some schools choose to have multi-grade classes to 'promote educational development' (Quail & Smyth, 2014).

Teacher Preparation for Teaching in Multi-Grade Settings

It is clear from the research that many primary schools in both Ireland and internationally have multi-grade classes. Therefore, there is a need to investigate and discuss whether or not teachers receive adequate preparation and training to teach in multi-grade settings. Turner (2008) carried out research with primary school teachers in Ireland based on 'pre-service and in-service provision for multi-class teaching in Ireland'. This research states that 'sixty out of sixty-four respondents had received no compulsory training in multi-class teaching during their training'. This research also showed that 'multi-class teaching was not a

field of specialisation in teacher training colleges’ (Turner, 2008). In most ‘teacher education programmes all teachers are provided with the same courses, without specific support for multi-grade teaching’ (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). It is interesting to note that although many schools have multi-grade classes, teachers are not receiving adequate information or training in relation to teaching in these multi-grade settings. According to a report carried out by the INTO on ‘Teaching in Multi-grade Classes’ teachers felt dissatisfied with both preservice and in-service training in relation to multi-grade teaching. Many teachers felt that in-service and preservice provision was geared towards single stream classes and there was a need for in-service which addressed the particular curricular problems experienced by multi-class teachers (INTO, 2003). It is clear from this report that there was a ‘general consensus among respondents that their preservice education did not adequately prepare them for the challenges of teaching in a multi-class setting’ (INTO, 2003). Although research suggests that ‘the professional knowledge and skills that are relevant and necessary to teaching effectively in single-grade contexts are also relevant and necessary for effective multi-grade teaching. However, many of these skills need heightened emphasis for multi-grade teaching’ (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Overall, it was found that ‘teachers were generally critical of teacher training courses and claimed that these courses ‘did not prepare them for teaching in a multi-grade situation’ (Veenman, 1995). It should be noted that there is a lack of up-to-date research on this topic and therefore it is unknown if teacher training college currently give more training and preparation to students in relation to multi-grade teaching. There is a lack of research on the value colleges of education place on multi-grade teaching and whether or not this is prioritised in their colleges.

Challenges Associated with Teaching in Multi-Grade Settings

‘There are many contradictory opinions on the benefits and challenges of multi-grade classes and their teaching’ (Muusa-Maria & Maija, 2016). Some teachers may see something as a challenge and another teacher may see it as a benefit. The challenges discussed in this

literature are broad and are mainly based on teachers' personal experiences of teaching in multi-grade settings. Miller (1990) identified six key factors which affect successful multi-grade teaching. The six areas he identified are; classroom organisation, classroom management and discipline, instructional organisation and curriculum, instructional delivery and grouping, self-directed learning and peer tutoring (INTO, 2003). Miller believed that in order for multi-grade settings to be successful these six key areas are crucial. These six key areas are discussed in many research studies. Research carried out by Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher (2015) states that flexible grouping strategies, fairly distributed time management and successful organisation had a significant impact on student learning in multi-grade classes. This study also identified two types of peer tutoring; spontaneous peer tutoring and guided peer tutoring. Teachers describe peer tutoring as 'helpful and cooperative and feel that situations where older students help younger students as very important (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015).

Teaching in multi-grade settings has been described as 'difficult and less satisfying than teaching in a single-stream setting' (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). On the other hand, some teachers 'find multi-grade settings a stimulating and interesting setting to work in as the atmosphere is normally busy and productive' (Muusa-Maria & Maija, 2016). Teachers teaching in multi-grade settings described feeling 'stressed and over-whelmed at times' (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). Multi-class teachers also believe that their 'workload is greater than that of their colleagues in single-class settings' (INTO, 2003). Research carried out by the INTO on 'Workload, Stress and Resilience of Primary Teachers' shows that a higher percentage of teachers in multi-grade settings felt more time for planning would make teaching less stressful, than those teaching in single stream classes (INTO, 2015). In a similar study carried out by Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire (2018), teachers felt there was a lack of time in the school day to meet the needs of all children including those with SEN. However, in this study teachers also state that team teaching and station teaching are beneficial in multi-grade settings (Tiernan,

Casserly & Maguire (2018). Some of the challenges teachers described in multi-class settings are classroom management, planning for groups and maintaining a well organised and structured classroom (INTO, 2003). Teachers in multi-class settings also face challenges in relation to resources and materials as many of the resources and text books are not designed for multi-grade classes and teachers have to spend extra time preparing resources and materials. Overall, there are mixed opinions on the challenges teachers face when teaching in multi-class settings and these are based on teachers own personal experiences.

It should be noted that it is ‘commonly stated in the literature that multi-grade teaching is more difficult than single-grade teaching’ (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). However, there is little research on whether the challenges that multi-grade teachers face are the same or different to challenges that teachers in single-stream classes may face. Do multi-grade teachers experience other challenges in addition to the challenges that teachers in single stream settings face or are the challenges each teacher faces based on the particular class they have regardless of whether this is multi-grade or single stream? While there are many studies that highlight the challenges that teachers face in multi-grade classes, ‘few studies have pointed to a consistently negative effect of being taught in a multi-grade class on student outcomes’ (Quail & Smyth, 2014). This literature review previously discussed the lack of training and preparation teachers receive for teaching in multi-grade settings. This lack of training may be contributing to the challenges teachers are facing in multi-class settings. Research is needed to establish if the lack of training teachers receive is impacting on their teaching and causing challenges for multi-class teachers. Overall, there are many questions left unanswered in relation to the challenges teachers face in multi-class settings. The majority of research discussed in this literature review is dated and therefore it is difficult to conclude whether or not teachers still find multi-grade teaching challenging. There is a lack of research available on teacher perceptions on the impact multi-grade teaching has on children’s educational outcomes. Much of the research focuses on the

challenges teachers describe in multi-grade settings. However, the research does not address how multi-grade teaching is impacting on children and whether teachers feel multi-grade teaching is beneficial or not for children's learning. Overall, the challenges discussed relate to time management, classroom management and organisation and planning. It can be concluded that the challenges discussed relate more to the organisation of multi-grade teaching rather than the children's learning and development.

Theories Relating to Multi-Grade Teaching

Many studies have been carried out comparing cognitive and noncognitive outcomes of children in multi-grade and single-stream classes. Research carried out by Veenman (1995, 1996), shows no differences in cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes between the single-grade and multi-grade settings (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Studies by Mason and Burns (1997) and Galton and Patrick (1990) showed similar findings (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). There are many factors that back up this research such as classroom environment, national policies, school policies, curriculum and individual teachers. Research suggests that when the 'IQ and parental background of pupils were taken into consideration, there was no significant difference in the attainment of pupils of mixed-age and single-age classes' (INTO, 2003). The socio-constructivist ideas of both John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky are frequently associated with underpinnings of multi-age classrooms and are still relevant to multi-grade settings (Broome, 2016). According to Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development, 'learning in a multi-grade class would be a more beneficial way of learning for individual students, as the interaction with older or more knowledgeable peers constantly challenges a pupil's development' ((Muusa-Maria & Maija, 2016). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be described as 'the distance between the child's actual development level and his or her potential level of development under the guidance of more expert adults in collaboration with more competent peers' (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2003). The scaffolding process is also evident

in multi-class settings where an ‘older or more advanced partner may serve as a foundation on which less experienced members can stand upon to reach new levels of co-constructed knowledge that they may not have gained when acting alone’ (Broome, 2016. p.6). In multi-grade settings peers can often act as this scaffold. This suggests that there are a range of factors that impact on children’s educational and learning outcomes. Multi-grade settings facilitate collaborative learning and allows children to engage in peer learning. ‘Peer tutoring offers opportunities to develop the pupils’ learning in the class both cognitively and socially, despite their age and level of knowhow’ (Muusa-Maria & Maija, 2016). Therefore, it can be concluded that ‘there is no empirical evidence for the assumption that students learning may suffer in multi-grade and multi-age classrooms’ (Veenman, 1995). Overall, the research suggests there are both advantages and disadvantages for children in multi-class settings with regard to both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. Gaustad (1997) argued that:

‘Research indicates that heterogeneous grouping promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces anti-social behaviour and facilitates the use of research based developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as active learning and integrated curriculum’.

Educational Outcomes of Children in Multi-Grade Settings

This literature review has previously highlighted the challenges faced by multi-class teachers teaching in multi-class settings. However, there is little research on teacher’s opinions on the impact multi-grade teaching has on children’s educational outcomes. Teachers describe the challenges they face however, it is unclear how these challenges are impacting on children’s learning. Although multi-grade teaching may be challenging for teachers, does it still have benefits for the children? It is clear that multi-class teaching can be challenging. However, this may not necessarily mean it is having a negative impact on children’s learning. The challenges of multi-class teaching and the impacts of multi-class teaching on children seem to be

researched separately. There is a need to research these areas together in order to be able to draw comparisons and investigate if there is a correlation between both topics.

The majority of research on children's educational outcomes draws a comparison between children in multi-class settings and those in single-stream settings. Research shows that 'educational outcomes are no different for pupils in single-grade and multi-grade classes' (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005). There is mixed evidence regarding the effects of multi-grade classrooms on student achievement, however much of this research is dated (Mariano & Kirby, 2009). Mulryan-Kyne (2004) carried out research with seventy-six, two teacher primary schools in Ireland. The research stated that low achieving children gain in a multi-grade setting as they have more continuity. According to Mulryan-Kyne, (2004) younger children absorb knowledge from older children and older children benefit from constant revision. This research suggests that multi-grade classes have benefits for children in all class levels and children of all ages. It also suggests that multi-grade settings allow children to learn from each other and facilitates collaborative and active learning. This research was further backed up by a similar study in England carried out by Little (2004). This study states that 'higher achieving and older learners cement their learning through teaching and helping others, while the lower achieving and younger learners look up to and learn from others;' (Little, 2004). The teachers had mixed opinions on the benefit a multi-class setting has on children who have learning difficulties. Some respondents felt that weaker children may not benefit to the same extent as brighter pupils, however others were of the opinion that there are benefits for pupils with learning difficulties as they are exposed to a lot of repetition. Research conducted by Leuven & Ronning, (2011) states that 'one-year exposure to a classroom that combines two grade levels increases exam performance by about nine percent of a standard deviation'. This may be driven by the influence of older more mature peers. The INTO published a report based on teachers views on the advantages and disadvantages for pupils in multi-grade settings. In this report

teachers felt there were ‘many advantages for the pupils, particularly in relation to the contribution that older pupils can make to the learning of the younger pupils’ (INTO, 2003). Lapuz (2015) believed that in multi-grade settings social comparison between peers is reduced because children are working together and the emphasis is on cooperation rather than competition. Although there are mixed views on how multi-grade settings impact on children’s educational outcomes, research suggests that ‘being a student in a multi-grade classroom does not negatively affect academic performance nor student social relationships and attitudes’ (Miller, 1990).

Multi-Grade Settings for Children with Special Educational Needs

Research suggests that ‘inclusive practices identified in mainstream single-grade classrooms generally apply to the multi-grade classroom setting. These practices include effective leadership, positive attitudes of school personnel towards including pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and quality teaching focused on pupil achievement’ (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). Collaborative learning and teaching are beneficial for children with SEN in a multi-grade setting. Differentiation and co-teaching play a vital role in multi-grade settings. Teachers use differentiation to accommodate the learning styles of all children in their class regardless of whether or not they are teaching in a multi-grade setting or a single-stream setting. In relation to children with SEN in multi-grade settings, the research suggests that ‘the effective inclusion of pupils with SEN in multi-grade classrooms is more complex, depending on the teachers; ability to differentiate appropriately and to meet the balance of delivering a balanced curriculum while simultaneously meeting the often quite specific needs of pupils with SEN’ (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). This study also states that multi-grade settings are ‘ideal for children with SEN as they are with the same class teacher for a number of years’ (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). However, in the same study ‘all twenty-seven multi-grade teachers that were interviewed stated that ‘lack of time in the school

day to meet the needs of all pupils including those with SEN was a challenge' (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018).

According to a report carried out by the INTO (2003) teachers raised concerns in relation to shared learning support teachers. Many schools described sharing a learning support teacher with five other schools and teachers felt that schools should have daily access to a learning support teacher (INTO, 2003). Overall in this report, teachers were concerned that pupils with special educational needs were not having their needs adequately met in multi-class settings. On the other hand, in a more recent study carried out by Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire (2018) teachers 'indicated that multi-grade classes supported inclusive practices due to the fact that pupils could move seamlessly between grades in the one classroom, according to their needs'. Overall, the research suggests that teachers have contrasting views on the impact multi-grade settings have on children with SEN. It is clear that there are both advantages and disadvantaged for pupils with SEN in multi-grade settings.

Conclusion

This literature review discussed relevant literature on multi-grade teaching in both Ireland and internationally. The majority of research on multi-grade teaching is extremely dated, however there are still many aspects of the research that applies to current multi-grade settings. It is evident that there is a need for further research in this field. Firstly, this literature review discussed multi-grade teaching in today's context. It also investigated the challenges teachers face in multi-class settings and the training they receive in preparation for teaching in a multi-class setting. As well as this, the educational outcomes of children in multi-grade settings were also discussed, in particular those with special educational needs. Overall, this literature review gave an in-depth investigation into the current literature that is available on

multi-grade teaching while highlighting the significant number of gaps and lack of research on this topic. There is glaring need for further research on multi-grade teaching.

Methodology

Introduction

The main focus of this dissertation is to investigate the positive aspects of multi-grade settings, while acknowledging some of the challenges it poses. The aim of the study is to unearth from practicing teachers, the values they perceive for children in multi-grade settings in rural Irish primary schools. Much of the research that is available on multi-grade settings focuses on the perceived challenges, however, this dissertation aims to provide a detailed and honest description of the perceived positives of multi-grade settings from practicing teachers. From this study the researcher aims to establish the value of multi-grade settings. This section discusses the chosen research design and methodology and will define why the chosen methodology is appropriate for this study. It will also outline the research context and research participants for this study. It will give a brief outline of the chosen method of data analysis for this research. Finally, this section will describe the researcher's positionality for this dissertation and outline the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Research Design

This research design is phenomenological. Phenomenological research is a 'design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants' (Creswell, 2014). This research study also takes an interpretivist approach. Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world of people, they see people, and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings as the primary data sources (Mason, 2003). In relation to the interpretivist paradigm 'efforts are also made to get inside the person and to understand from within' (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2008). Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm was suitable for this research study as it focuses on the individuals own views.

This dissertation also took a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is ‘an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’ (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research ‘the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issues, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research’ (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative approach is best suited to the topic being explored in this dissertation as it allowed the participants to fully express their opinions and views on the topic. It also allowed the interviewer to obtain data of high quality and the participants insights on the topic. Bryman (2016) states that in qualitative research ‘the researcher seeks close involvement with the participants’, so they can understand the world through their eyes.

Methodology

The chosen methodology for this dissertation was semi-structured interview. Interviews ‘enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Semi-structured interview refers to ‘a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are given in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions’ (Bryman, 2016, p.201). The use of semi-structured interviews for this dissertation allowed the participants to be flexible and fully explore issues. A semi-structured interview is a ‘flexible tool for data collection which enables multi-sensory channels to be used such as verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are popular in educational research. The article ‘Doing teacher research: a qualitative analysis of purpose, processes and experiences’ successfully uses semi-structured interviews for the purpose of educational research (Gewirtz, Shapiro, Maguire, Mahony & Cribb, 2009). A semi-structured, face to face approach was hugely beneficial for this research as it allowed a more

genuine response from participants. Overall, semi-structured interviews were the best approach for this research study and allowed the researcher to obtain rich and detailed data.

An interview schedule was prepared with a number of questions that were asked of each interviewee. However, the participants freely discussed other topics and areas that arose during the interviews. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses based on a variety of themes. Each question had a clear purpose and was included and asked for a reason. The interview schedule was developed in a way that allowed similar kinds of responses from participants and therefore, facilitated the process of categorizing (Gillham, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven primary school teachers who have experience of teaching in multi-grade settings in rural Irish Primary schools. A pilot interview was also carried out with one participant. A pilot study is an important tool in qualitative research, as it strongly increases the reliability and validity of the research (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utre, 2010). The pilot study enabled the researcher to evaluate the interview and make any necessary changes or adaptations to the interview schedule. The pilot interview also helped the researcher to develop and practice their interview skills. A pilot study is described as ‘invaluable in conducting ethnographic, as well as other forms of qualitative research’ (Sampson, 2004).

Research Context

This research dissertation is based on multi-grade settings in rural primary schools in Ireland. The primary schools that the participants are currently teaching in are in the West of Ireland. The schools are located in small villages in rural Mayo. The schools are Catholic and co-educational primary schools. The schools that the participants teach in vary from two-teacher, three-teacher to four-teacher schools. The class levels vary for each participant and the participants teach a minimum of two classes and a maximum of four classes. All class levels are represented in this study. There are currently no traveller children or no children with

English as an additional language attending the schools. All the schools are diverse and cater for the needs of all children.

Research Participants

The participants for this research study were chosen using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is ‘built upon selections which suit the convenience of the researcher and which are first to hand’ (Denscombe, 2007. p. 18). In convenience sampling the research ‘chooses the sample from those to whom they have easy access’ (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2008. p. 114). Convenience sampling was an appropriate and relevant choice for this study as the researcher had access to a reasonable number of participants that are currently teaching in multi-grade settings and were suitable participants for this research study.

Teacher	Class	Years Teaching	School Type
Participant 1 (Mainstream Class Teacher)	4 th 5 th & 6 th	Less than 5	3 teacher co-educational Catholic school
Participant 2 (Mainstream Class Teacher)	Junior infants and Senior Infants	15-20	4 teacher co-educational Catholic school
Participant 3 (Teaching Principal)	1 st & 2 nd	15-20	4 teacher co-education Catholic school
Participant 4 (Teaching Principal)	3 rd , 4 th , 5 th & 6 th	10-15	2 teacher co-educational Catholic school
Participant 5 (Teaching Principal)	3 rd , 4 th , 5 th & 6 th	10-15	2 teacher co-educational Catholic school
Participant 6 (Teaching Principal)	3 rd , 4 th , 5 th & 6 th	15-20	2 teacher co-educational Catholic school

Participant 7 (Mainstream Class Teacher)	5 th & 6 th	10-15	4 teacher co-educational Catholic school
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Data Analysis

The analysis of the data for this research was a lengthy process. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data for this study. The seven interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribing process allowed the data to be coded and interpreted. Coding allows you to ‘cluster key issues in your data and take steps towards drawing conclusions’ (Bell & Waters, 2014, p.239). The researcher analysed each line of the data and applied a relevant code. The following figure shows an example of the coding process.

6. well the children learn from one another you can group **Group work**
7. children you can differentiate it's easier to engage with the children **Differentiation**
8. when they're in multi-grade because they can work together and
9. they can help one another. **Peer Learning**
10. You kind of feel like you are building like a spiral
11. or like a pyramid where they're gradually adding to the base **Curriculum**
12. I for example teacher from 3rd class to 6th
13. And they establish the base we'll say in 3rd class and **Spiral Curriculum**
14. they're gradually adding to the picture as they move
15. through the years.

Figure 1: Example of Coding Data

Following the coding exercise, a thematic analysis approach was used which involved categorising the data in to relevant themes. This allowed the researcher to make sense of the

data. The themes which were chosen related to the research question. The data was then discussed under these themes. A number of findings were discussed, and the data was related back to current literature on this topic.

Positionality

I have a keen personal interest in multi-grade teaching having went to a small three teacher rural primary school for the duration of my primary education. Throughout my years in primary school I was in a multi-grade setting with three classes and I have first-hand experience of the benefits of being in a multi-grade setting. As I continue on my journey of becoming a primary school teacher I can now look back and see many benefits to multi-grade settings. Overall, I had a very positive and valuable experience of being in a multi-grade setting. I now also have experience teaching in multi-grade settings and I feel there are many benefits associated with being in a multi-grade setting. I am also very aware that although many schools in Ireland have multi-grade classes there is a significant lack of information and research on multi-grade settings. Through informal discussions with peers and colleagues, I have become aware that there is a significant lack of understanding in relation to multi-grade classes particularly those with four classes. I have experienced people speaking both negatively and enthusiastically about multi-grade settings and this has strengthened my interest in this area. This has particularly sparked my interest on the values and advantages on multi-grade settings and thus my reason for focusing on the perceived advantages of multi-grade settings in this research study. I am very interested in researching this topic in order to establish and highlight the advantages of multi-grade teaching and the potential benefits multi-grade teaching may have on children's learning. I would hope to add to the field in this area of research. I also have a keen aspiration to teach in multi-grade settings in the future.

Ethical Considerations

This research dissertation has been approved by the Marino Ethics and Research Committee. Ethics can be defined as ‘a matter of principal sensitivity to the rights of others’ (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2008). A letter of information was given to each participant to inform them of what was involved in the study. Each participant was informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that all information is kept confidential. The participants were also informed that the research will be used for the purposes of this dissertation only and will only be viewed by the researcher, the researcher’s supervisor and an external examiner. Each participant signed a letter of consent which were made available to my supervisor. The researcher also obtained the participants consent to record the interview. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study and all data will be appropriately destroyed after the study.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study. Qualitative research can be time consuming and may take longer than other types of research. It took a long time to complete and transcribe each semi-structured interview. The interpretation of results was also a factor in this study. Qualitative research recognizes more openly than does quantitative research that the researcher’s own identity, background and beliefs have a role in the creation of data and the analysis of data’ (Denscombe, 2007. p. 313.). The sample size for this study was small therefore, there was a smaller chance of generalisation. The participants also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and therefore, this would render the data on this participant void.

Conclusion

This section gave further insight into the main aims and objectives of this dissertation. This section outlined the chosen design and methodology for this research study. It also discussed the research context and gave a brief account of the research participants for this study. This section gave an insight into the researchers' positionality on this study. Finally, this section also examined the ethical considerations and potential limitations of this research study.

Data Analysis

Introduction

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data collected for this dissertation based on Braun and Clark (2006) six step guide. Thematic analysis is ‘a term used in connection with the analysis of qualitative data to refer to the extraction of key themes in one’s data’ (Bryman.2016. p.697.). The researcher carried out seven interviews. The interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken as part of the data collection stage. The interviews were transcribed, and the researcher coded the data using a thematic approach. Coding is the process of organising the data by bracketing sections of the data and writing a word to represent and categorise the data (Creswell, 2013). By coding the data, it allowed the researcher to establish a variety of key concepts and also helped to categorise the data. The next stage of data analysis involved the development of themes which related to the research questions and the participants responses. The data was then analysed and discussed under a number of relevant headings and themes. The final stage of data analysis was interpreting the data. The findings were analysed and discussed in relation to the research question and a number of recommendations and conclusions were drawn from the data. A variety of interesting themes emerged from the data collected relating to multi-grade settings and in particular the benefits of multi-grade settings. The following themes emerged from the data and will be discussed and analysed in this section; peer learning, benefits of an integrated/spiral curriculum, differentiation, challenges, relationships, sense of place and school closure. The findings are supported with a variety of quotes from the interviewees.

Peer Learning

Peer Learning was a common theme which emerged from the data collected. The majority of interviewees highlighted the fact that multi-grade settings facilitate peer learning

and allows children to learn from each other. The interviewees saw this as a significant positive and they felt that children really benefited by learning from one another and 'learning from their peers'. All of the interviewees believed that there were benefits to both older and younger learners as well as both higher achievers and lower achievers. Participant 1 believe that the children 'are all learning off each other and they learn more off their peers'. When asked about the benefits of the curriculum in a multi-grade settings participant 4 felt that the children 'are learning a lot from the other pupils'. Participant 6 felt that 'peer learning is extremely important'. The participants also stated that the children were able to carry out enquiry-based learning. The children were able to engage in independent enquiry-based learning as well as working with others through enquiry-based learning. Overall, the participants felt that multi-grade settings facilitated peer learning and all children were benefiting from being in a multi-grade setting.

As well as peer learning, the participants also highlighted the ability to group and pair children in multi-grade settings. Some of the interviewees felt that multi-grade settings allowed for mixed ability grouping. Participant 1 felt that 'mixed ability is definitely the way to go'. Participant 7 believed that multi-grade settings allowed for 'a variety of group and pair work which allowed children to learn off each other'. Similarly, Participant 3 felt that group work allowed children to 'mix with children in other classes and helps them to socialise and move out of their comfort zones'. Participant 1 also did a lot of group work and believe that children work really well together and when the end product comes out they're all really proud of it because it's their work and they've all worked together'. Overall, the data showed that the participants used a variety of methodologies such as group work, pair work and peer tutoring in multi-grade settings.

Words that came up continuously during interviews were 'leaders, mentors and teachers'. The participants used these words to describe the children in their classes. The

participants felt that the older children in the classroom became leaders and mentors to the younger children and this had huge benefits for all children. Participant 4 stated that children are able to ‘work collaboratively’ and the 5th and 6th class are brilliant mentors and tutors to the 3rd and 4th and they really help them’. This participant also believed that being a mentor had huge benefits for both stronger and weaker children because ‘a weaker child in 5th or 6th can be a mentor to a child in 3rd or 4th and their confidence grows as they know I’m a mentor and a peer tutor and it really brings them on’. Participant 5 felt that ‘the older children become natural leaders in the classroom’. Similar to this, participant 1 stated that ‘the older children in the group act as ‘leaders and they all work well together’. However, the participants were also conscious not to continuously draw on the children as leaders and mentors and allow the children to work independently. The teachers also encouraged enquiry-based learning and methods of direct teaching. While the teachers spoke about mixed ability grouping, peer learning and paired work, the children also had opportunities to work within their own class.

Benefits of an Integrated/ Spiral Curriculum

The benefit of having an integrated or spiral curriculum was another theme which emerged from the data. Some of the interviewees also felt that the children are more familiar with topics because they may have over heard another class learning about that topic. This means that when they are faced with a new topic they are already somewhat familiar with the topic and it’s not as daunting for the children. Participant 3 felt that ‘well abled children in junior classes can be picking up things from the children in the senior classes almost by default’. Participant 1 also felt the same and believed the children ‘learn quicker because they’re listening to new topics and when the younger children come across a new topic it’s not brand new to them they’ve heard it subconsciously’. Participant 4 stated that the children ‘see the curriculum as a journey and they build on it every year’. Furthermore participant 4 stated that ‘the curriculum is like a spiral and the children have a 4-year cycle going at it’. Participant

4 also stated that ‘you’re building on the prior knowledge of the students all the time when I start a new topic I get the ideas off the 3rd class first then 4th then 5th and then 6th and by the time they get to 6th class the 3rd class can see the progression and they know what’s expected of them’. When asked about their view on the curriculum in multi-grade settings participant 5 felt that the curriculum was like a ‘pyramid’ and the children were ‘gradually adding to the base’. Participant 5 also felt that an integrated curriculum is very beneficial for all learners and learning styles as it ‘gives a great chance for eager learners to learn at a level above themselves and it gives a chance for learners who mightn’t be able to pick up on content to pick it up in a simpler way that is repeated the following year’. In relation to the curriculum participant 7 stated that ‘they all learn from each other, it’s an integrated and thematic approach and once you’re doing the same theme within any curriculum subject and you have different learner outcomes it works really well’

The participants believed that the children were more continuously exposed to areas of the curriculum rather than coming across topics in isolation and this allowed the children to continuously build on their knowledge. Overall, the participants felt that the children benefited from an integrated and spiral curriculum and it allowed them to gradually build their knowledge on a particular topic each year.

Differentiation

Another theme which emerged from the data was differentiation. There were varying views on differentiation in multi-grade settings. Some participants felt that teachers need to differentiate in both single-stream and multi-grade and didn’t see it as an extra challenge in multi-grade settings. Other participants felt it was easier to differentiate in multi-grade settings and some participants felt it was slightly more challenging to differentiate in multi-grade settings. Two of the interviewees stated that it was easier to differentiate in multi-grade

settings. Participant 5 believed that there was a 'kind of natural differentiation' in a multi-grade setting as children are exposed to varying levels of content at varying levels of difficulty and pace'. Participant 5 also felt that in multi-grade settings it is 'quite easy to pair or group learners in terms of ability in a more natural and less streamed way than in a single stream setting'. Participate 4 felt that

'it's probably easier to differentiate because you've four curriculums' going on for example I have a child in 6th class who has mild general learning difficulties and he would be on a 3^d/4th class programme so it's easy for me to differentiate because he can still work along side his peers and he knows who he's working with for each topic'.

This participant also stated that 'you have the children for 4 years and you know the children so well that you know exactly what you need to differentiate for each topic'. As well as this participate 6 believed that 'it's sometimes easier at one level because if you plan properly and have the resources the differentiation is easy to manage'. Participant 3 felt that

'you can use differentiation to your advantage because you may have a higher achiever in a higher class working with a higher achiever in a lower class and a lower achiever in a higher class could work with a middle or higher achiever in a lower class and they can help each other'

Some participants felt that differentiation was a bit of a challenge in multi-grade settings. Participant 7 felt that 'it can be helpful to have an extra pair of hands whether that be team teaching or the help of an SNA'. Participant 1 stated that 'you've to differentiate for each class in the classroom and the needs in the classroom so it's a bit of extra work but you do it subconsciously anyways'. Although, these participants felt that differentiation was a challenge it wasn't a major concern.

Challenges Associated with Multi-Grade Settings

Although the participants perception of multi-grade settings was a significantly positive experience with immense benefits for children's learning, they also discussed some of the challenges of multi-grade settings. The main challenges that were identified were having time to spend with each class, planning, organisation and time management. One participant believed the biggest challenge was getting a substitute teacher. Participant 7 felt that 'there may be challenges but there are challenges no matter whether you have single stream or multi-grade'. When asked about their opinion of the challenges associated with the curriculum participant 5 stated that 'there are challenges with organisation and planning particularly with a subject like Maths where you teach 4 levels and it needs careful planning, but it still benefits from the spiral where they are getting constant reinforcement of earlier learned concepts'. Participant 4 felt that 'there are challenges regardless because if you have single-stream you're still going to have multi-grade within your single stream because you could have children who are at 4 different levels within the class anyway'. Participant 3 felt that in a small school 'it may be more difficult to raise money for a school project'. Participant 4 stated that one of the challenges was that 'you're a teaching principal and you're doing all your admin and teaching four classes but no matter what the children are my priority'. Two of the interviewees spoke about having shared learning support teachers and sometimes the logistics and planning of this can be a challenge.

Overall, there were mixed views on the challenges associated with multi-grade settings. Many of the challenges identified were not directly associated with multi-grade settings and rather general challenges relating to school administration, fundraising, staff and accessing substitute teachers. The challenges the participants discussed weren't directly impacting on the

children and the none of the participants perceived teaching in a multi-grade setting as a challenge. It can be concluded that the challenges presented are very general and could be as much a challenge in a single-stream school as well as a multi-grade setting.

Relationships

The participants felt that multi-grade settings facilitated and promoted the development of friendships and relationships while also helping the children to develop their social and communication skills. The participants felt that in multi-grade and small schools the children are constantly mixing with children in other classes and children of different ages and this has a profound impact on their development of social and communication skills. Participant 1 stated that the children ‘build friendships as they’re mixing with other ages and not just their own class where as in a single stream class you’re just focused on your own class and there’s not must opportunity to mix with other classes’. Participant 7 also felt that ‘it’s good for the children to mix with other ages and not just stick to the one class’. When asked did the participant perceive any challenges relating to the development of social relationships participant 2 believe that ‘sometimes a child might be a bit immature but all in all I find it has been very advantageous for all the children I have taught in multi-grade’. In relation to the development of relationships in multi-grade settings participant 4 stated that ‘it builds positive relationships among the pupils, it helps their self-esteem and their self-confidence and helps them to become very close to each other like one community’. Participant 4 also felt that children ‘develop a good rapport with each other because they all work with together at different stages and learn to work collaboratively’. When asked about the overall value of a multi-grade setting for children participant 5 stated that ‘the major plus I see is the social aspect and I see first-hand how happy the children are in the school’. Participant 6 described having one child in a class by themselves as a slight challenge and felt they slightly missed out on social interaction. The participant felt in this situation that extra-curricular activities outside

school are extremely important. Overall, the participants felt that the children develop confidence and self-esteem as well as building strong friendships.

Benefits of Having a School in the Locality

The importance of having a school in the locality was a theme which emerged in all interviews. All of the interviewee's felt that having a school was positive for both the children and the local community. Participant 5 stated that 'I often say that the school that I teacher in on a daily basis is the hub of the community, it's the busiest building in the community'. In relation to the children Participate 5 felt that 'it is important to have a link between their locality and their school and it really gives them a sense of where they're from and a sense of identity'. Participant 4 felt that having a school in the community allowed the children to 'grow up in a community and there's a great sense of community spirit'. Participant 4 also believed that the value of attending a small school was the 'sense of 'community spirit'. Participant 7 believed 'it is hugely important for children to have a sense of where they're from and the children I teach are hugely proud of their community and are involved in sport and local groups'.

Overall, participants felt that the children develop a sense of pride about their locality and it is also good for the community and the people living in the community. It was evident that the participants felt passionate about having a school in the local community. However, while participant 6 felt that having a school in the locality was important they also felt that 'sometimes the sense of community is weaker than the sense of life being comfortable. While sometimes parents choose a school for their children based on their lifestyle and what suits them and not based on 'community integration' however, participant 6 believed that this was 'not a reflection on the school'. The participants were also asked about their opinions on small rural schools. Participant 4 stated that

coming from an urban town and teaching in Dublin I suppose small schools were a completely new thing for me before I moved to the West of Ireland but really and truly If I was now to choose I can just see the absolute and utter benefits of a small school’.

Participant 1 believes that ‘a small school is nice and less daunting for children and I definitely think there are benefits of a small school’. As well as this they felt that ‘the children are proud of their school and their area and they are generally positive about school and their locality’.

Participant 2 discussed their experience of teaching in a small rural school which was forced to close down due to the decrease in the number of children attending the school. When the school closed down the ‘community was devastated, and it is now no longer busy and there’s nothing there in the community now, so it does have an effect on the people who are still living in the community’.

Overall Value of Multi-grade Settings

Although the participants believed there are some challenges relating to multi-grade settings, they all highlighted and discussed the benefits being in a multi-grade setting has on children’s social, emotional and academic outcomes. Participant 4 had experience teaching in both single stream and multi-grade settings and stated that ‘I really believe that there are far more advantages to a multi-grade setting than a single stream’. Similar to this participant 2 stated that ‘there will be challenges and difficulties, but I believe that the pluses outweigh the minuses’. Participant 3 felt that the overall value of multi-grade settings was that the children ‘become more adaptable and used to change and they also learn from each other’. When asked about the overall value of multi-grade settings participant 5 believed that the importance of

small schools needed to be recognised more. Participant 5 had experience of being a student and a Principal in multi-grade settings and stated that

‘There may be a perception out there that students might miss out on opportunities that a bigger school may provide but in my experience of being a student in a small school and now a principal of a small school I feel that the children in my school or even children back in my own school days have equal if not better opportunities than children in larger schools’.

Conclusion

This section reported and discussed teachers’ experiences of the benefits associated with multi-grade settings. It discussed and data under relevant themes. While the participants highlighted some challenges in relation to planning, organisation and time management there was an overall consensus that there are many benefits and advantages of multi-grade settings. The participants discussed the benefits of multi-grade settings in relation to peer learning, group work and paired work. The participants also highlighted the benefit of a multi-grade setting where the children are exposed to the curriculum through a thematic approach. The participants also felt a multi-grade setting has a huge influence on a child’s social and emotional development and allows their self-confidence and self-esteem to grow while building strong friendships. Overall, this data analysis section highlighted the advantages and benefits of multi-grade settings. The data presented in this dissertation challenges some of the perceptions and beliefs of multi-grade settings and highlights the many benefits a multi-grade setting can have on a child’s academic and social outcomes.

Conclusion

The overall objective of this research was to investigate teacher's perceptions of the benefits of multi-grade settings. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the data presented in this dissertation. The findings reveal multi-grade settings to be hugely advantageous for children's learning and development.

The participants in this study advocated for multi-grade settings and felt they were very beneficial for all learners and all children. Although the participants discussed some challenges regarding multi-grade settings the challenges were mainly administrative challenges such as planning, organisation, time management, accessing substitute teachers and fundraising. The teaching and learning aspect of multi-grade settings was not seen as a challenge.

It is evident from the findings that multi-grade settings facilitate and promote a variety of teaching methodologies and caters for all learning styles. The participants spoke about the benefits of peer learning, group work, paired work, individual work and enquiry-based learning. The children in multi-grade settings benefit from peer learning as well as enquiry-based learning and have the opportunity to work with a variety of different age groups and levels. Multi-grade settings provide infinite opportunities for children's learning and development. It was evident that the participants in this study have themselves grown and become accustomed to multi-grade settings.

It was also evident from the data that the children benefit from a spiral or integrated curriculum in multi-grade settings. The overall aim of the Irish Primary School Curriculum is that children learn through an integrated approach and all the participants in this study are implementing the curriculum in this way. This allows the children to continuously build on their knowledge each year and not learn about topics in isolation. The children learn by being scaffolded which allows them to learn to their full potential. This reflects Vygotsky's theory

about the Zone of Proximal Development as children benefit from working with others and co-constructing knowledge (Broome, 2016). The data gathered in this study relating to peer learning and enquiry-based learning reflects Vygotsky's theory of ZPD.

Furthermore, multi-grade settings contribute to the development of children's social and communication skills. In today's society, there is an increased awareness of children presenting with anxiety and mental health problems. This study revealed that multi-grade settings can build children's self-esteem and self-confidence while also helping them to become more resilient and more adaptable to change. With an increased awareness of the benefits of multi-grade settings it could provide considerable benefits for student's overall educational and social outcomes.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

1. Curriculum

- (i)** What do you believe are the advantages of multi-grade settings in relation to the curriculum?
- (ii)** Do you believe there are benefits of an integrated or spiral curriculum in multi-grade settings?
- (iii)** What do you believe are the challenges relating to the curriculum in multi-grade settings?
- (iv)** What are the values of multi-grade settings in relation to the curriculum?

2. Teachers in all class settings differentiate to accommodate for the learning needs of all children regardless of whether they are teaching in a single stream or a multi-grade setting.

- (i)** What would be your opinion of differentiation in multi-grade settings?
- (ii)** Can you give some examples of differentiation in multi-grade settings?
- (iii)** What are the challenges associated with differentiation in multi-grade settings?
- (iv)** What do you see as the ultimate value of differentiation in multi-grade settings?

3. According to Little (2004) 'Higher achieving and older learners cement their learning through teaching and helping others, while the lower achieving and younger learners look up to and learn from others'.

- (i)** What do you think of that statement or what do you believe to be the social and emotional benefits of multi-grade settings?
- (ii)** Can you give an example of some of these benefits?
- (iii)** Are there any challenges in relation to the development of social and emotional relationships?

4. The majority of multi-grade schools are situated in rural areas with approximately 100 pupils or less. Often referred to as ‘small schools’.
- (i) What do you think of that statement?
 - (ii) Do you think there are benefits of having in a small school in the locality?
 - (iii) Can you give any examples of small schools closing down?
 - (iv) Can you identify any challenges of ‘small schools’?
 - (v) What do you believe is the value of being in a small rural school? Sense of place, locality
5. Anything extra you would like to add about the overall value of multi-grade settings?

Appendix 2: Letter of Consent



*An Associated College of
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*

Dear Participant,

My name is Niamh Grimes and I am a final year Professional Masters of Education student in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my course I am required to undertake a piece of research. I am carrying out my research on 'Teacher's perceptions of the perceived value of multi-grade settings for children in rural Irish primary schools'. My research is under the supervision of Fintan McCutchoen.

The method of data collection is semi-structured interviews. The interviews will take approximately 20 minutes for each participant.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project and I would be extremely grateful if you would participate in a semi-structured interview.

I can foresee no risks for your participation in this study. The data collected will be treated with the utmost privacy and confidentiality. The information will be stored safely and will only be accessed by myself, my supervisor and an external examiner if required. The findings will remain anonymous and will be included in a dissertation that will be viewed by myself, my supervisor and an external examiner.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

If you have any questions or queries regarding the study or require more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind Regards,
Niamh Grimes.

Student Number:

Student Email:

Supervisor Email:

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date