

How my Living Educational Theory Research is helping me to improve my practice as a primary school teacher, in supporting children to recognise and manage their anxiety.

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Abstract

In this paper, I articulate my own living-educational-theory of my practice as a primary school teacher, who seeks to help her students to recognise and manage their anxiety in order to improve their quality of life and ability to benefit fully from their school experiences. Anxiety disorders are one of the top contributors to the global burden of disease for young people (Global Burden of Disease Study, 2019). I outline how I created an intervention to support four mixed gender, twelve-year-old children – with no anxiety diagnosis – to recognise and manage their anxiety with the involvement of their parents and class teachers. As my research developed, I realised that my principle educational values of social justice, empowerment, hope and positivity were not being lived fully in my practice. By explicitly addressing my living contradiction, I came to a deeper awareness of, and fluency in, my educational practice, and saw the children becoming less anxious and more confident over time. As a Living Educational Theory researcher, I recognise the importance of rendering this text as relatable to the reader as possible and to provide an original contribution to educational knowledge and theorising.

Keywords: Living-educational-theory; Anxiety; Values; Confidence; Empowerment

Introducing my pedagogical concern

I always wanted to be a primary school teacher. I instinctively knew that teaching was my role, as it was what always felt most natural and enjoyable to me. I spent some time at the beginning of my career on a voluntary basis working as a teaching assistant in primary schools in full- and part-time jobs, teaching children to swim and being a coach in children's sports camps. These roles laid my foundation for becoming a primary school teacher, which I have proudly been since 2014.

My pedagogical concern was informed by my professional experiences and is value-based (Whitehead, 1989). Since becoming a primary school teacher, I have taught in many schools, from the slums in Kolkata, India, to single-sex schools in Ireland, DEIS schools (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools in disadvantaged areas), Special Schools (schools for children with special educational needs), Gaelscoileanna (Irish language medium schools), large mixed schools and smaller four-classroom schools where two grades are taught at the same time by one teacher. As diverse as all these schools are, the one common challenge I observed was that of children presenting with low levels of anxiety, which were affecting their educational, emotional, and social outcomes. Some of these children had recognised the anxiety within themselves and sought help from me. With other children, I recognised their anxiety and offered support to them. There was a growing number of parents who sought strategies from me to support their child, who displayed anxious feelings at home. I felt a moral imperative both personally and professionally to learn more about the recognition of anxiety and its management so that I could confidently recognise the signs of anxiety within a child and could then better support them with learning skills to recognise and manage it within themselves. Reducing student anxiety has been associated with improvement in educational functioning (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2019).

I thought I would understand my student's state of mind by asking them in the morning 'How are you today?' I accepted that their positive responses to my question were reflective of their state of mind unless a student approached me with anxious feelings or I observed any of them with an unhappy demeanour. I realised it was not always obvious to me that a student was anxious. As more students presented with low levels of anxiety and parents sought help from me to support their child, it became clear to me that, in understanding the complexity of every student, I needed to change my pedagogical approach.

My educational values

Whitehead (1989) discusses how values are fundamental in the practice of teaching, as education is "a value-laden practical activity" (p. 45). Values are the guiding principles that determine what people will prioritise in making a judgement and what they will strive for in seeking improvement (Haste, 2018). Before undertaking an Action Research approach (see below under the heading 'Addressing my living contradiction'), I considered values only at a conceptual level. Similarly to Laidlaw (2018), my research helped me to understand the ways in which my values have become living educational standards of judgement for me in my current teaching practice. Korsgaard (1996) claims an educational value is only useful if it provides guidance about how to educate people. I discovered that my values are

empowerment, social justice, hope and positivity and that they are values that contribute to the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 2018), as I explain below.

Laidlaw (1996; 2018) puts forward the idea that our values are not static but grow in practice over time in relationship to ourselves, others and the world. "This insight lies at the heart of what makes Living [Educational] Theory living, and permeates living-theory theses" (Laidlaw, 2018, p. 30). This means that I am explicitly concerned with the ways in which my educational values of social justice, hope, empowerment and positivity are influencing my thinking and teaching practice as I seek to improve it and create my own living-educational-theory in terms of an original contribution to educational knowledge (Laidlaw, 1996). My values developed through a range of different life experiences and teaching practices. These include my own lived childhood and adult anxieties such as my first day at school or anxieties that arose when my mother travelled to war-torn countries as part of her job requirements working with a Non-Government Organisation (NGO). Below I outline what each value means to me.

Social Justice

Growing up in an area of Dublin, where services were and still are lacking, I witnessed and heard of other children's and adults' unresolved anxieties, which were not always reported or treated by relevant professionals, and at times ended tragically. I often internally question that if those affected by mental health illnesses had had the skills to recognise and manage their mental health at an early stage, they might then have had different life outcomes. Therefore, my value of social justice has developed into an educational value for me as it can be expressed as equality, including gender equality, children's rights and safety (Rahman *et al.*, 2021).

Empowerment

I believe that all children have an equal right to acquire skills that recognise and manage their anxiety at an early age regardless of their anxiety level. This would enable children to gain empowerment to have expanded choices to make changes and gain a responsible control over their lives. I see empowerment as encompassing self-sufficiency and self-confidence which is inherently linked to knowledge and voice. I believe empowerment to be a function of individual initiative, which is facilitated by institutional change (National Policy on Gender and Development, 2018). Empowerment has been put forward by Kreisberg (1992), as a process through which people can increase their control or mastery of their own lives and the decisions that affect their lives (p. 19). I believe that all children have the right to conditions and resources that facilitate their empowerment, which is why it is one of my educational values.

Hope

Hope can be expressed as a "sense of glad anticipation for the future, one of purpose and of fulfilment" (Laidlaw, 2018, p. 31). From my upbringing in an area where services are lacking and by having second-hand exposure to oppressed people living in poorer countries through my mother's non-governmental work, I realised that so many children and adults who live in poverty are empowered to change their lives when given the hope that it is

possible. I have taught children and trained teachers in the slums of Kolkata, India, which gave me direct exposure to those who thirst for the same hope. According to Snyder (2003), hope is a positive cognitive state based on a sense of successful goal-directed determination and the expectation that those goals can be achieved. I feel that my students can sense the hope that I have for them to use the skills I have taught them. I feel the quality of my educational research would have been impaired had hope not been one of my educational values.

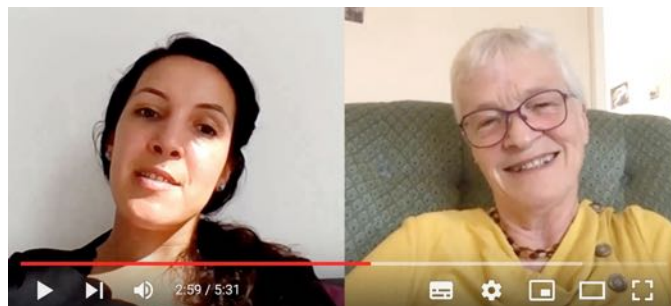
Positivity

Peale (2019) describes positivity as having self-confidence and belief in oneself which can lead to self-realisation and successful achievement. I have inherited and developed my value of positivity from my mother who has always been the most positive influence on me. This value has strongly evolved through my experiences of believing and seeing that change can happen when support is delivered in a positive way in my practice and in my home environment. I consciously try to create a positive atmosphere for my students by hanging positive quotations on my wall, addressing lessons in a positive way and by role-modelling positive language and actions so that they too can develop their self-belief. Below is a favourite quotation for many of my students by Roald Dahl (1980):

A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly. You can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts they will shine out of your face like sunbeams and you will always look lovely.

Addressing my living contradiction

As evidence of my growing awareness and my own learning in my practice as a teacher and a woman, I realised I was a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). Working with my educational values of social justice, hope, empowerment and positivity, I understood that I was negating my value of social justice by assuming my students' happy state of mind unless they approached me or I observed them with an unhappy demeanour. What emerged from my realisation was a greater sense of my own learning and desire to improve my practice by diminishing my living contradiction. I discussed my 'living contradiction' with Moira Laidlaw (Video 1).



Video 1: 5 minutes of conversation between Moira Laidlaw and myself about my living contradiction. Access from <https://youtu.be/3ju-3e9vBt0>.

I realised I wasn't acting in the direction of my values and was experiencing an internal living contradiction in terms of expectations, assumptions and the reality of what I

was doing. Through my increased awareness, I felt the moral imperative and a sense of urgency to improve my awareness and teaching practice. I completed basic courses and workshops in mindfulness, yoga, sensory strategies and wellbeing for children and teachers. These courses were run by professionals at the Department of Education in Ireland.

In a further effort to diminish my living contradiction, improve my practice and address my pedagogical concern, I completed a Master of Education (Research in Practice) course in 2019. This gave me the opportunity to conduct Action Research (see below) within my practice to support children through anxiety recognition and management strategies. I did not follow a specific Action Research process, like for example Whitehead's (1985) personally-oriented Action Research. Instead, I designed a mixed-method approach, which focused on piloting a recognition of anxiety and management programme. It entailed such processes as planning, putting into action and reflecting on practice. My research focused on the school and home environment and situations of and responses to anxiety that arose for four twelve-year-old children without an anxiety diagnosis. I used surveys, questionnaires, journaling, note taking and interviews in mixed forms of structured and semi-structured open-ended questions which looked for depth and meaning to gain quantitative and qualitative data that was valid and reliable (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). I aimed to give full expression to my life-affirming and educational values of social justice, empowerment, hope and positivity because I wanted all children with or without anxiety to have the same equality of opportunity for educational outcomes. My research question was then established: 'How can I, as a primary school teacher, improve my practice to support children with anxiety recognition and management strategies'?

My educational influence in my practice context as I answered my research question

I wanted to apply my approach of planned intervention and be able to modify it, if required, when applying it with the students, their parents and the student's teachers. During my literature review, I learnt that there is a significant number of children who report moderate levels of anxiety (Spence, 2018) but do not receive treatment until several years after initial onset (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Those children still show functioning difficulties at home, at school and in other environments and are at increased risk for progression to a clinical anxiety disorder and/or other disorders (Costello *et al.*, 1999 cited in Spence, 2018). In Ireland, even if treatment is sought, children risk being put on a long waiting list. Nearly 2,700 children were waiting to be seen by the Child Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) with over 400 children waiting longer than a year (Barnardo's, 2018). Ireland has the fourth-highest teen suicide rate in the EU (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017). The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) reports that one in three young people is likely to have experienced a mental disorder by the time they are thirteen years old and by twenty-four years old that number will have risen to one in two (Cannon *et al.*, 2013).

My pedagogical concern along with the above disturbing Irish and global statistics contributed to my rationale for undertaking my Living Educational Theory Research. I find it unacceptable that children who need support will suffer lifelong consequences if not given it in a timely way. Research shows that children who are exposed to programmes concerned

with the prevention of anxiety are less likely to develop anxiety problems due to the deployment of adaptive coping strategies (Barrett and Turner, 2001). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) state that anxiety is among the most common psychological disorders of childhood and adolescence and that identification and efforts at prevention must occur early in the child's life to help them develop self-regulation skills from as young an age as possible (Cartwright-Hatton *et al.*, 2006).

I have found in my everyday teaching practice, that the terms anxiety, fear and worry are used interchangeably. To help children with their anxiety, I needed to understand the technical meanings to those commonly-used everyday words. According to Dacey *et al.* (2016, p. 5), "anxiety is a general frightened response to a source that is not readily identifiable". It is an "ongoing sense of worry without a specific cause" (Mental Health Ireland, 2015).

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by:

- Feelings of tension
- Worried thoughts (the focus of my research)
- Pains in areas such as the stomach or head
- Physical changes such as increased blood pressure and shortness of breath (American Psychiatric Association, 2019).

Mental Health Ireland (2015) describes anxiety as a natural reaction and a necessary warning response experienced by all. It can become a serious disorder when it is persistent, excessive, (MHI, 2015) and uncontrollable when there does not seem to be any reason for it, and when it begins to present itself through a variety of physical and affective symptoms, as well as slight to severe changes in cognitive abilities and behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). Several factors can contribute to anxiety in children such as genetics, gender, cultural differences, the home and school environment, age, social stereotyping, parents' own mental health issues, lower educational attainment, the level of agreement between different informants for fear of stigma, childhood sexual abuse, upbringing traumas and depending on how their resilience is when coping with such situations (Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Spence, 2018; Fjermestad *et al.*, 2017; Mental Health Ireland, 2015). Bullying in school or by peers is sadly still too common but the pervasive nature of social media means that bullying can continue beyond the school gates, and can even take place anonymously. Bullying behaviour consists of intentionality, repetitiveness, power imbalance and causing negative effects (Smith, 2014). Bullying that affects children can persist into adulthood, increasing the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and self-harm for both the perpetrator and the victim (Wolke, 2013).

Fear is a response to an urgent danger that is focused on a "specific object, individual, or circumstance" (Dacey *et al.*, 2016, p. 5). A moderate amount of anxiety or fear can serve as an adaptive function, such as protecting oneself or as motivation when trying to learn new things (Dacey *et al.*, 2016). I find it reassuring to know that it is normal to experience anxiety in everyday situations.

Muris (2007) states that worry usually refers to the negative thinking of something bad that might happen in the future and has adaptive features as it prepares for unexpected aversive events. Worry is a default option, a cognitive avoidance response to a perceived

threat, prompted as a result of no availability of knowledge to deal with that threat (Borkevec *et al.*, 2004).

Having understood anxiety, fear and worry, my next step was to determine how I would approach my research. I further analysed the three-level flexible framework through which schools can address educational and the wellbeing needs of students (DES, 2018):



Figure 1. Three Level Flexible Wellbeing Framework (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 14)

Dodge *et al.* (2012) state that wellbeing is our ability to manage challenges that we face every day. The capacity we have to balance these challenges is what generates our level of wellbeing. They defined stable wellbeing occurring "when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge (Dodge *et al.*, 2012, p. 230).

Ethical issues in my research

The main ethical issue that I considered in my research process was the safeguarding of the children in my classroom. I received approval from my school Principal and the Board of Management to proceed with my intervention. My Resource room could only comfortably accommodate four children. Therefore, I selected four students from the sixteen I taught regularly, whose parents first responded to my invitation for their child to be part of my study. Following this process, my six-week intervention focused on four mixed-gender sixth class children¹, aged twelve with no anxiety diagnosis, together with their parents and their class teachers.

¹ Sixth class is known as the eighth year of schooling for children in Ireland

To facilitate a harmonious learning environment, and to help the class teachers, parents, and children to feel at ease, I developed and discussed a contract of understanding at the beginning of my intervention. I emphasised to all participants that their participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty or needing to give a reason (Johnson *et al.*, 2017). I first obtained consent from the children's parents after they had been informed of the features of the study, which might affect their willingness to allow their child to participate and then I obtained consent from their child (Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

As a teacher and researcher, I place the best interests of the child at the centre in accordance with the Maynooth University Policy for Child Welfare (2017)² and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2010)³. I considered all factors in the research design deemed likely to maximise the safety of participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). This particularly included safety, from exposure to harm should they disclose, in an unsafe way, a violation of safeguarding at home or at school. My intervention lessons were designed to reflect the participant's context, background, and any existing knowledge of their worries that helped to ensure that the children would be safeguarded throughout their involvement in my study (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Beauchamp, 2015). Raising awareness of anxiety factors was thought-provoking, which could have resulted in a disclosure of sensitive information or of the child feeling more worried than previously. Had a sensitive disclosure been made by one of the participants about themselves, their family, school or teacher at any time throughout the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), I would have followed our school Child Safeguarding Statement which fits into the Department of Education's overall Safeguarding policy (DES, 2017)⁴.

Reaching Out for Support

During the process of my research, I realised that a collaborative reciprocity in learning had evolved when I reached out for support. I was very challenged by designing my research intervention, determining the questions I wanted to research and what approach I would take. My supervisor for my Master's course – to whom I initially came to with frustrations I found within my practice and with ideas that I did not know how to approach or implement – gave me invaluable guidance throughout my research. She challenged me to interrogate and extend my thinking by developing a reflective critique to understand my practice within complex social, cultural and historical practices (McNiff, 2017).

My critical friends were not only willing sympathetically and critically to discuss my study, vision and plans, they also energised me during times when I struggled with doing a full-time teaching job as well as research within my practice. The role of my critical friends,

² National University of Ireland Maynooth, https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Child%20Protection%20Policy%20%28Dec%202017%29_1.pdf

³ Children's Rights Alliance, <https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/UNCRCEnglish.pdf>

⁴ Department of Education and Skills, [Child Protection Procedure for Primary and Post-Primary Schools \(education.ie\)](http://www.education.ie/en/Child-Protection-Procedure-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.html)

who consisted of past college friends and a close relative, helped to ensure that I demonstrated critical engagement and methodological rigour (McNiff, 2016) in strengthening the validity of the evidence base of my assertions. Although I was not compelled to act on their feedback, I did value their judgment and needed them as an important source of support for my research process. Initially I struggled with reaching out as I did not want to burden them in their busy lives, but I discovered quite quickly that they were very enthusiastic to be constructively critical on such a pervasive topic (Ginsburg, 2019).

Working on my living-educational-theory

Prior to the Master of Education Course lectures, the term 'living-educational-theory' was unknown to me. Whitehead (2008, p. 104) states that each person has a unique living-educational-theory and that it is:

an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and social formations.

Being a teacher and researcher as well as learning from my teaching experience have been my key educational influences (Laidlaw, 1996). Throughout my research process, I made self-reflection central and this strengthened as I learnt through my course lectures about different reflective approaches and the value of documenting my reflections through journaling. I also applied Brookfield's four-lens reflective approach which involved looking through the points of view of my students, my peers, and relevant theory as well as my own lens. Brookfield (2017) emphasises that viewing in this way helps us uncover when and how certain assumptions work and when distorted or incomplete assumptions need further investigation. Reflective journaling helped me to make sense of events, develop leadership capacity, improve responses through emotional literacy, develop mindfulness to engage in activities and develop resources for managing life which could improve the quality of learning for my students (Sherwood and Horten-Deutsch, 2012). Siegel (2007) claims mindfulness sharpens our focus on the present, when we engage with ourselves and with others, making a more authentic connection, with more reflection and consideration. I felt excited and anxious about the unpredictability of how my research would evolve while living out and developing my values of social justice, empowerment, hope and positivity in myself, and focusing them consciously with others, in order to improve my practice and our learning.

Developing a framework for researching student anxiety

I considered the Wellbeing Framework (Figure 1) as I designed my intervention in a jargon-free, child-friendly manner. I wanted to understand how four twelve-year-old, mixed gender children, in a sixth class, with no anxiety diagnosis, recognised, experienced and responded to anxiety prior to, during, and after engaging in ways to recognise anxiety and management strategies over six weekly lessons. My intervention included students, their parents and their class teachers. I included parents as I see, 'the life of the family as a part of the life of the community' (Froebel, 1902, p. 166, cited in Bruce, 2019, p. 28) and being central to the child's educative life and learning.

I recognise that the relationship teachers develop with their students is a key influence on the development of wellbeing, as an access to "one good adult" (DES, 2018) who can guide and support a child at a vulnerable time is an identified protective factor. Although a teacher's primary duty is to educate, the role and needs of teachers have broadened to include understanding and even intervention to reduce anxiety in their students (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2019). I wanted to include the class teachers of the students in my study as their data would greatly contribute to the validation and validity of my research as the students spend most of their school day in the classroom. I also wanted to share the strategies that I was using with the class teachers so that they knew the emotional literacy and strategies I was applying with their students, so that they too could apply it to their teaching if it proved to be effective.

Steiner (1979) developed a sense of emotional literacy and defined it as a construct which includes an accurate recognition of emotion in self, empathy, suitable expression of emotions to others, and the management of emotion. He divides emotional literacy into five skills: knowing emotions, possession of a sense of empathy, management of emotions, the resiliency of emotional damage, and combining those skills. An Emotional Literacy Model created by Faupel (2003), consists of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, social competence and social skills.

My research took a transformative approach, in the sense that it deliberately sought to improve the lives of the participants involved (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Supporting children, as well as their parents and class teachers, to recognise and manage anxiety, allowed me to collaborate with them in a world characterized by a negotiated view of reality. This gave the study-participants a personal role of being their own power-agent focused on issues such as empowerment, social justice, voice and action (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

The educational research questions that I developed for my six-week intervention were to address my pedagogical concerns. The questions listed below led to the current elaboration of my living-educational-theory as an explanation of my own educational development:

1. How did participating pupils describe their feelings and behaviours about anxiety before engaging in its recognition and management strategies?
2. How did participating pupils engage with, and respond to, the recognition of anxiety and management strategies during the intervention lessons?
3. How did participating pupils, who completed a six-lesson intervention on the recognition of anxiety and management strategies, assess their experience and describe how they have used and will use them in the future?
4. How did parents of the participating pupils assess their children's experience of the six-lesson intervention?
5. How did class teachers of the participating pupils assess their experience of the six-lesson intervention?

My research design included the following anxiety recognition and management strategies:

My anxiety recognition strategies	My anxiety management strategies
Feelings word bank (building vocabulary on feelings)	Discussion i.e. Circle Time, throughout the lessons
Body cues (identifying how our body reacts to different feelings)	Mindfulness i.e. deep breathing, yoga, meditation
Body Senses (building self-awareness on the senses that influence our feelings)	Positive Self-Talk (PST)
Worry meter (to self assess the level of worry and support required)	Confidence Booklet (wellbeing activities on building self-esteem, self-love and self-confidence)
Explicit lessons on recognising worries	Explicit lessons on managing worries
Journaling and Reflection	Journaling and Reflection.
	Action Plan (consists of the child's knowledge of how their body reacts when anxious, the possible situations that can cause their anxiety, the strategies that help and the trusted adults they have).

Figure 2. Anxiety recognition and management strategies

I deemed a mixed-method approach as the most suitable for my research, so I used both quantitative and qualitative research ideas, approaches and techniques as I attempted to solve the diverse and complex problems that I faced. Quantitative data was collected in the form of surveys, questionnaires and journals. It helped me in providing background to the causes and effects of anxiety whilst the qualitative data showed what the children experienced and how they responded to my intervention.

Qualitative research methods (reflective journaling, observation, note-taking and interviews) allowed me to collect meaningful data. This provided a rich description of the study participants' beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions (Forster and Eperjesi, 2017) and to view participants' behaviour as being fluid, dynamic and changing in the construction of their different realities and perspectives and how they acted in response to it (Johnson *et al.*, 2017). I was able to comprehend the experiences of the children and how they related to their context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This qualitative approach also helped me to understand how the study participants interpreted themselves, their experiences, and the world in which they lived (Mertens, 2005). The data I gathered and the process of learning for me as a Resource Teacher during this research, allowed me to witness changed

behaviours and transformation both within myself, and with the children, their parents and their class teachers.

What I learnt from conducting my research

I have learnt that my living-educational-theory is alive and evolving just as my values are. I have experienced the educational advantages of being a learner during and after my research. I am understanding more fully what my educational influences are when questioning how I can improve my teaching practice. Reflective practices enabled me to address the contradictions in my values to influence my teachers and students towards transformation as I tried to establish a culture of reflection in my class environment (Parekh, 2020). My teaching practice has been improved by my learning:

- I found it very revealing, that worries children were experiencing were not observed by parents, myself or their class teachers. This was mainly due to the children's lack of emotional literacy or confidence in sharing them with a teacher, parent or the group. Different anxiety ratings were also found between children, their parents and teacher (Federer et al., 2001). The reasons are attributed to several factors: age and cultural differences, different perspectives between adults and children and situational specificity of symptoms (Spence, 2018).
- Coskun and Oksuz's (2019) findings from an eight-week study indicated successful outcomes where emotional literacy training significantly increased the students' emotional performance. Giving the children emotional literacy is hugely critical in helping them to articulate their feelings and worries. By introducing alternatives through reflective analysis, Sherwood and Horten-Deutsch (2012) found children can begin to visualize and reconstruct their views of how to act in a situation. Research by Hidayat and Budiman (2014), found that high levels of positive self-talk have been associated with motivational use for improving achievement and giving meaning to life. I have observed that using self-reflection, having a positive open approach in my practice and asking the children to show me their feelings on a scale of 1–10 first thing in the morning, followed by yoga, breathing techniques or meditation, increases the children's feelings rating number by one or more. The children then begin their academic subjects feeling (more) relaxed, rejuvenated and happier. The ability to express one's feelings develops within my classroom. I can see the duality of learning that happens in the reflective dialogue between my students and myself, which requires an open approach from me as a mindful teacher. Reflective journaling helped me to make sense of events, improve responses through emotional intelligence, develop mindfulness to engage in activities and develop resources for managing life which improves quality learning for my students (Sherwood and Horten-Deutsch, 2012).
- A triangulation of data was obtained from a range of people to support and validate the explanations I gave to my study findings. The assumption of multiple realities enhanced the natural flow of human behaviour which promoted a natural and holistic approach to my research (Cohen et al., 2018). Data from the children's journaling was validated by triangulating data with their parents' and class teachers' reflective journals. This provided evidence of the effectiveness of the recognition of

anxiety and management strategies, and what new understandings were emerging through explaining more fully the richness and complexity of my research as studied from more than one standpoint (Cohen et al., 2018).

Figures 3, 4, and 5 are an example of the triangulation of data relating to the journey of empowerment for pupil C with his parent and class teacher. Pupil C documented in his journal how he ‘talked’ to his class teacher about his worry, feeling that homework was burning him out and not getting his Maths homework done. (C’s teacher’s name has been removed from the data for ethical reasons).

Wednesday	My Notes (Optional)
Did you have any worries today? Tick one: Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	If there's anything that went well or not so well for you this week. Thursday
If yes, what was the cause of the worry/worries? Love Lego work, Not getting school work done Home work burning me out	realised didn't get to do my Maths (I tried) to do last night
What did you do with the worry? Tick one. I shared my worry with someone else who could help <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Figure 3. Pupil C ‘talked’ about his worry to his class teacher.

100% Yes - having to think and verbalise what was happening made it more real and lessons learned!

Figure 4. Parent C documented in his journal how his child could ‘think and verbalise what was happening’.

Did the selected child in your class express any worries to you today? Tick one: Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If yes, what was the cause of the worry/worries? Other children using inappropriate language
How did the child manage the worry? He came and spoke to me.

Figure 5. Teacher C recorded how pupil C came and spoke to him when he heard other children using inappropriate language.

According to my early intervention data, pupil C often chose not to share his worries which regularly resulted in "the worry grew bigger". My data showed how pupil C was empowered to use emotional literacy within a short space of time when he used his voice and emotional vocabulary to share his worries with his parent, class teacher and the intervention group. As recorded in his post intervention interview "branching out to others and finding out that I'm not the only one with these problems, other people have these problems as well" is what helped most. This can be heard in the recording, which can be accessed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJIR-JdTxac> of pupil C expressing what helped him most in the study.

Before the end of the school year, Teacher C saw the drawing (figure 6) on pupil C's desk with an image and the writing "you can do it". Pupil C showed and explained to me that with the help of our PST strategy, he regularly creates a Positive-Self Drawing (PSD), as shown in Figure 6. Permission was granted to include the drawing in any publication. Art is his favourite subject. I found it very encouraging to see how this student had adapted the intervention strategies he has learnt to suit his own needs. I now use PSDs in my teaching practice and share with my students that the term was created in my classroom by one of my past students.

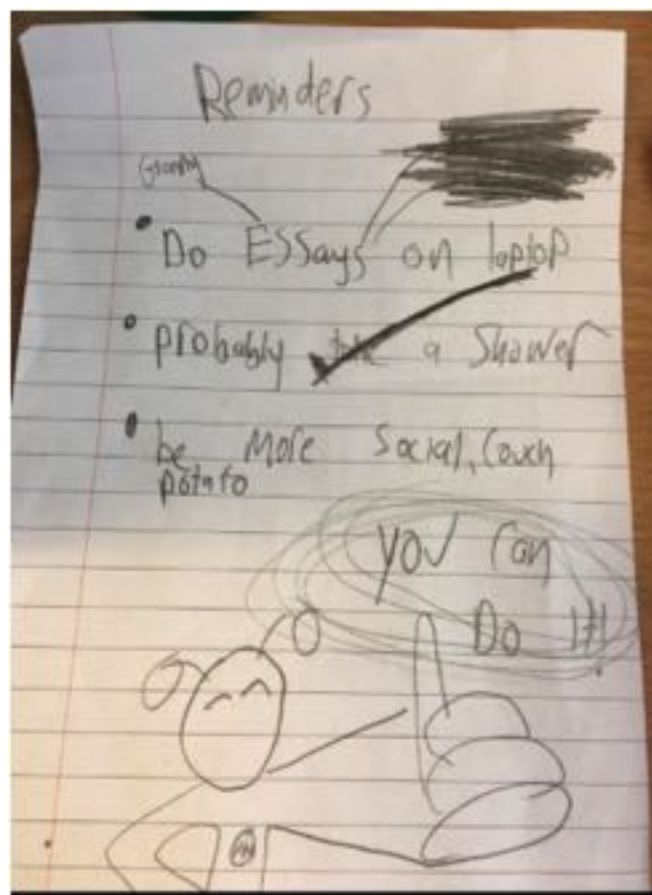


Figure 6. A Positive Self-Drawing by pupil C.

The context of my practice shows, that as the Department of Education and Skills (2018) outlines, school plays a crucial role in the promotion of a positive mental health mindset through a range of activities and approaches to support children's academic,

physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual development. The recognition of anxiety has shown me that collaborating with the wider school-community of children, parents and teachers in learning the invaluable life skills to recognise anxiety and the management of appropriate strategies, can improve the educational quality of my practice.

The process of self-reflection has enabled me to affirm my current practice when I observe my students with a positive mindset and increased happiness, and as I hear the children using their emotional literacy, which aids their learning outcomes. Like Diamond, (2010), I believe the most fundamental strategy for advancing academic achievement is also to nurture children's social, emotional, and physical needs. Although I did not 'measure' the academic performances of the children, I have evidence, such as the data I refer to in this paper, which supports my claim that my teaching strategies (figure 7) enable children to learn more effectively, feel happy in their work, believe in themselves, and feel supported.

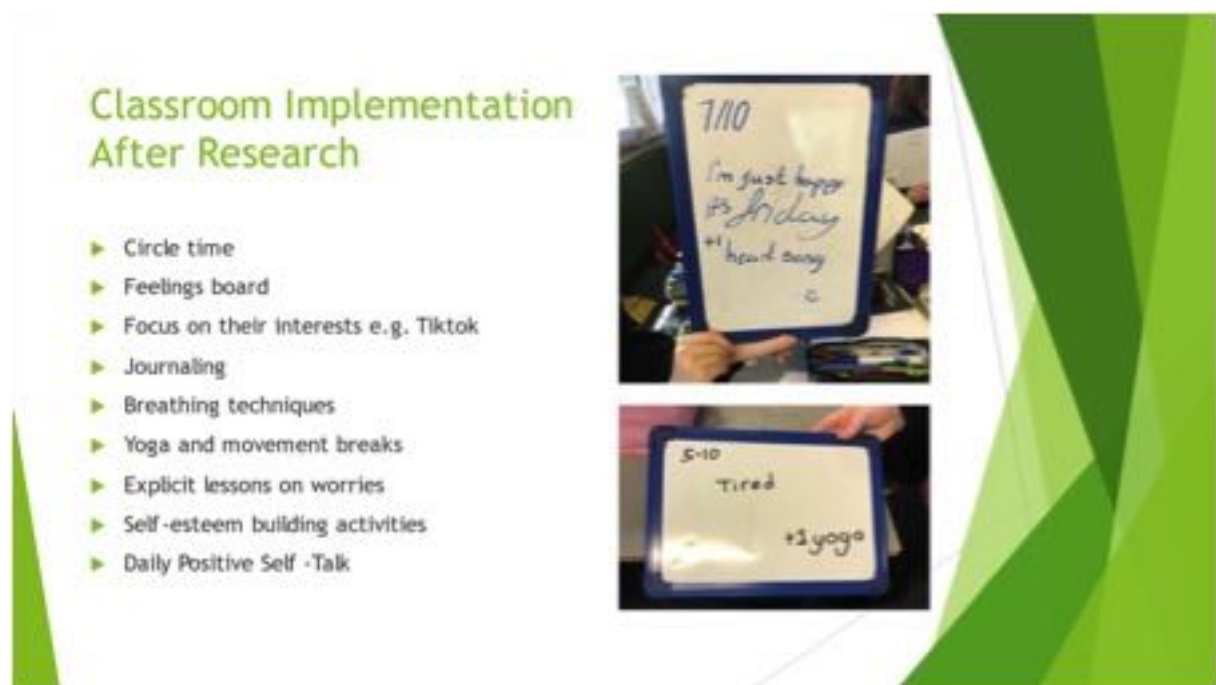


Figure 7. A slide from my presentation at the Wellbeing and Resilience Seminar for Maynooth University, 2nd December 2020

How my teaching is developing my living-educational-theory

As Dewey states (1933, p. 78), "we do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience". In addition:

...reflecting on and learning from our practice is perhaps the most natural and innate process in the business of being human (McAteer, 2013, p. 7).

The adaptive and reflective approach I took in my research has contributed to my ongoing personal and professional transformation. Findings from my research have convinced me that schools are ideal for supporting children's social and emotional development. One of my intervention students clearly expressed why he thought that is

when asked, "Do you think teachers should teach children in school to recognise and manage their anxiety?" when he says:

Well, that is one of the most important things up there with uh maths, science geography English Irish. Well, like, like, maths and stuff it is really important to manage uh well-beings, well-being, because, say you're a maths professor you know you know the value of pi you can solve any math problem in the world but you don't have the time and you're constantly stressing out you don't know what to do, if the teachers taught you how to handle your mental well-being you'd be much better in that situation to be able to calm yourself down and keep going on. So learning that sort of stuff in school is up there with some of the most important subject. (Transcript of audio-recording <https://youtu.be/IYTmbZh1PYg>)

What the transcript does not communicate is the embodied meaning of his words, which I hear when listening to him speaking.

My research process has been influential in my learning as I have now adapted and developed new strategies to understand and respond to the often-complex needs of my students. The importance of recognising each child as a unique individual is at the core of my teaching practice. I have achieved this by recognising their behaviour as fluid, dynamic and changing in the construction of their different realities and how they act in response to skills taught (Johnson *et al.*, 2017). I believe the changes in my professional practice have had a profound effect on me and appear to have contributed to the growth of some students, parents and classroom teachers. Figure 6 (see below) lists the strategies I am implementing with my current class of 21 mixed gender, sixth class children, aged eleven and twelve, that help me and my students to recognise and manage anxious feelings that we may be experiencing. The slide below contains examples of my continued efforts to address my living contradiction so that all students, regardless of their anxiety level, are given equal opportunities to develop their emotional literacy. Teaching students self-regulation, "the self-control of thought, action, and emotion" (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012 p. 154) can reduce anxiety and increase academic and sports performance (Ader & Erkin, 2010).

Expanding new learning for students and for my practice

Self-reflection was central to my research within my practice and continues to help me to live out my values more fully in my everyday practice. My classroom routine begins with a reflective task known as 'my feelings board'. The children rate on a number scale (1–10) how they are feeling with 1 feeling the worst they have ever felt and 10 being the best. Through words or drawing pictures, the children identify reasons why they feel like the number they apply. They then identify one realistic activity that will help their number go up by 1 or more. The children write this on a small whiteboard and hold it up simultaneously for the class to see. This allows me to see instantly which children are having a good or challenging day. It also allows their peers to see how they are doing. I share my number with the children. By role-modelling my answer, my students are encouraged to share their answers openly as well. We discuss the boards and support those who are not feeling happy on that day. Support is mostly given verbally or through acts of kindness from me or the children throughout the day or week, depending on the problem shared. It allows the opportunity for the children to share how they may have experienced a similar situation and discuss how they were able to overcome it. This strategy is based on using my own initiative

and adapted from similar methods used by Le Messieur, 2004 through which children rate their feelings on an 'emotion chart' or 'worry meter'.

Since the beginning of the school year, I have heard children express how nice it is to know that somebody else could relate to their problem on many occasions. By doing the reflective task daily, the children soon appear to notice a pattern in what activities help their number rate go up by 1 or more. For some it consists of physical activities, for others it was Art, Music or talking openly about their worries. The children are encouraged to apply this strategy independently at home to choose activities to help them feel better if they are having a bad day. For example, if a child had an argument with their sibling, they might choose to walk their family dog as it is a physical activity they know will help.

Over time, the children appear to have become more open in sharing positive and negative experiences with our class. In addition to this strategy, a child who is having a challenging day is permitted to go to our Wellbeing Area at the back of the classroom. Here the child can sit on a chair or beanbag to write in their diary or journal, do mindful colouring, practice breathing techniques from the display poster or rest their head for a few minutes while gazing at our lava lamp to relax.

Journaling is welcomed by many of the children, who have the choice to share their journal entry with the class. Eighteen children from my class of 21 are journaling and benefiting from it. Three are struggling to find purpose in journaling. Those that feel comfortable voicing their journal entries have unknowingly acted as journal models through demonstrating their learning from their journal writing.

I teach lessons about worries to my class to ensure that the children know what a worry is, the reaction it can cause within their body and what action plan they can have in place to overcome it or seek support for it. These lessons also include the importance of Positive Self Talk (PST) and ways to change their mindset. Whenever I hear a child speak negatively about her/himself, such as 'I can't do this', 'I'm bad at this', or 'I know I'll get this wrong', I stop my lesson to help them change their negative comment into a positive comment such as 'I can do this', 'I will get better with practice', 'I might get this right'. I feel that by stopping my lesson to take the short amount of time to change a negative comment into a positive one shows the children how seriously I want them to value their own self-image.

As I continuously practice this strategy of PST with the children, I seldom need to help them change their negative comment into a positive comment as the other children offer to help one another, or the child independently changes it themselves after been given a few moments to rethink. It is very satisfying to see the positive learning that comes from the consistent practice of this strategy and the positivity that is being instilled. This is further supported by the 'three good things' the children say before they leave my classroom every day. 'Three good things' are positive affirmations. I would say for example 'we are amazing' and the children would then repeat it back to me. I found it was important to model this strategy as the children initially found it strange to speak so highly about themselves. Some asked if it was being 'big headed'. This question highlighted how important it is for me to teach explicit lessons on worry which emphasises the importance of self-confidence and self-love. With practice, the children no longer need me to model positive affirmations. They think of their own and seem disappointed if I do not choose their affirmation to share with

the class. To ensure equality, the children write their affirmations on a piece of paper and put it into a box. Each day I pick, at random, three pieces of paper from the box. Although there are still some disappointments if a child's affirmation is not chosen, fairness is more greatly ensured.

Evaluating my living-educational-theory

I began my paper by introducing my pedagogical concern. I then discussed my educational influence in my practice context as I answered my research question explaining the influence of my research on my own learning. I show how these actions are linked to my values of empowerment, social justice, hope and positivity. I then go on to discuss how I reached out for support and how my living-educational-theory is influencing my teaching:

1. Reflection is essential to live out my values
2. Voice is transformational
3. Confidence-building is vital for change
4. Reaching out for support is essential to progress.

Reflection is essential to live out my values

By introducing alternatives through reflective analysis, children began to visualize and reconstruct their views of how to act in a situation. I could see the duality of learning that happened in the reflective dialogue between the children and myself, which required an open approach from me. For example, one student shared a reflection with the group about how one of his physical activities was to tap his fingertips of one hand onto the palm of his other hand. This was an activity I had not considered. It was heart-warming to see how the children respectively welcomed his idea and stated how they would try that strategy if they were in a situation in which they needed to feel calmer. The children suggested that if they weren't allowed to go outside, this would be a helpful technique, for example, in an examination.

In living out my values of hope and positivity, I took steps to create a safe space for my students to learn and understand the recognition of anxiety and management skills through circle time, reflection, mindfulness and explicit lessons on worries. The children seemed happy to have a safe and supportive space to share their worries. My data supports my claim that on several occasions, the children most looked forward to the 'talking' aspect of my lessons. Figure 8 (p. 19) is an example of when Pupil C recorded that he enjoyed, "talking to Ms. Kennedy (researcher) and the rest of the group" as the most enjoyable part of the lesson.

Through my reflective journaling, I could see that giving the children emotional literacy was critical in helping them to articulate their feelings and worries. My data shows that the journaling and sharing with each other helps the children to resolve their worries. In my own reflective journal, I wrote:

C

Ⓢ Student Reflection Ⓢ

(To be completed after lesson finishes)

1. Did you learn anything new today? Circle YES or NO

If you circled yes, what new thing did you learn? how to breath

us and air properly

If you circled no, where did you already learn it?

2. What did you enjoy about today's lesson? talking to

ms Kennedy and the rest of the group

3. If there was anything you could change about today's lesson, what would it be?

Nothing 😊

Figure 8. Written Record by Child C.

One child was particularly eager to share how she was feeling with the class as she had asked me before the lesson began could she share her journal entry. When it was time for the children to share their journal entries, I chose her first. She told the class that she rated her feelings as a number '2'. Her pet guinea pig had died the previous night. Immediately several children raised their hand up eager to speak. I selected children and I listened to how they gave advice and shared their own experiences of what had helped them when they experienced their own pet die. Feelings of sadness, support, reassurance, care and love filled my classroom. The discussion concluded with a smiling child sharing with the class that she felt better. She thanked her peers for the advice they gave her (Kennedy, 2019, personal journal).

This gave me confidence that my approach and intervention were on the right track and beginning to make a positive difference. This was the emotional literacy that I craved at a young age to express my own worries when my mother travelled to war-torn countries.

It gives me such joy to know that my students have the ability to discuss worries with their own parents. An example of this is taken from Parent D, who wrote in his journal entry below how his child was happy when he was in control of the situation by being able to explain to his parent why he was upset. Pupil D became upset as he felt overwhelmed by the long school day followed by an extra tutoring class after school. He asked if he could "miss the extra class for that day". Parent D expressed how his child identified and requested a solution to his problem in order to help himself feel better. Not only is this an example of the child's happiness but also of his use of voice and agency.

Did your child express any worries to you today? Tick one:
 Yes No

If yes, what was the cause of the worry/worries?
 Worried over attending after school tuition class
 he was tired and a little emotional

How did your child manage their worry?
 he just explained that he was a little upset and
 asked if OK to miss the extra class

Did you need to suggest ways to help your child manage their worry?
 No, he was in control of it. Because he
 explained it so calmly, I could understand and he
 seemed really happy about that!

Figure 9. Written Record by parent of child D.

Voice is Transformational

I found it revealing in my pre-study data that some of the worries children were experiencing were not observed by parents, myself or their class teachers. In applying Brookfield's (2017) four lens approach, my findings show the value of giving my students a voice and emotional literacy was transformational. My questionnaire set before the intervention showed that all the children had 'hidden worries', i.e. worries not shared with a parent, teacher or me. The value of teaching my students a recognition of their own anxiety and management was transformative for them, resulting in their feeling happier, which was recorded in their reflective journals and triangulated with their parents' and class teachers' reflective journals.

At the beginning of my intervention, all the participating students were hesitant to answer simple questions such as, 'How are you today'? They all replied with monosyllabic answers such as 'grand' and 'fine'. By the end of my intervention, all the children had the language openly and comfortably to discuss how their day was and about any worries they had or worries they overcame.

What follows is an example taken from my reflective journal on the last week of the intervention:

My students took out their reflective sheets and wrote down their feelings' rating number. They discussed with one another their number and why they felt that way and the strategies that can be used to help their number go up by one. Instinctively they took out their weekly reflective journals. The children talked about worries they had or overcame that week. They shared experiences and gave suggestions to one another. At this point, I realised that I was mainly observing the children's discussion without needing to intervene or them asking me for guidance. They were confidently, independently and accurately leading discussions among one another about anxiety recognition and management strategies. (Kennedy, personal journal, 2019)

As I saw that the strategies I introduced in each of my intervention lessons were building the students' self-confidence and self-esteem, it strengthened the way I lived out my values of social justice, empowerment, hope and positivity. In order to give children agency and voice, I have learnt that I need to recognise the children's anxiety, help them to recognise it and for us to develop management strategies as a way of dealing with it. Eggleston (2015) found children who are engaged in activities of mindfulness, such as yoga and meditation, showed improvements in classroom learning and became calmer and were finding it easier to pay attention and complete tasks. I therefore contend that recognition and management strategies need to involve the wider school community of children, parents and teachers for maximum impact in learning the invaluable life skills of anxiety recognition and management strategies. The aim of such an approach that Lean & Colucci (2013) outline is to promote student wellbeing, prevent the development or worsening of mental health problems, and improve the effectiveness of education.

The inclusion of parents in the treatment of childhood anxiety is associated with greater improvements in both children and in their parent's management of anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008). Parents play an important role in monitoring progress and reinforcing the skills within the home-environment after they have received parental training techniques (Higa-McMillan *et al.*, 2016). My data has also shown a growth in the parents' understanding of anxiety strategies. Throughout my intervention, it became evident that the parents were becoming more confident in applying the intervention strategies with their child. They also journaled the impact they saw it was having. This demonstrated how essential the parents' involvement has been to support their child in using the strategies in their time of need and in developing their own agency. One parent detailed in the post-intervention questionnaire that he had noticed and valued his child's ability to address his worries, which he described as "invaluable life skills".

My students can be heard expressing the need for parental involvement in clips from my post-intervention interview:

- Audio 1: Pupil A: View of Parental Involvement – access from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h15zbHZY8Fs>
- Audio 2: Pupil D: View of Parental Involvement – access from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVmLFm4LDV8>
- Audio 3: Pupil C: View of Parental Involvement – access from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzi3-BcNb-Y>

One student felt it was essential, as parents had not been in school for some time. Another student felt it was imperative as it gave their parents tactics to help calm them

down, while another student felt that parents are important to reach out to and they can give their child a boost, which is beneficial when worried.

Prior to my intervention, the class teachers involved were focused on teaching the curriculum. Some teachers recorded that the intervention taught them new skills which they appreciated, and gave them the confidence through which they could recognise and support a child with or without worries, resulting in a more confident and happier child, with an improved classroom and an engagement in sport.

One teacher in the post-intervention questionnaire recorded, "I have become a lot more patient and feel more able to cope with a child who has anxiety". This suggests as Wagner, 2012 found, that teachers need support to increase their knowledge and the strategies they employ to deal with problems, stress, exhaustion, and frustration within their own classrooms (Wagner, 2012). The comments of the students, parents and teachers indicated that I was continuing to address my living contradiction and trying to live out my educational values more fully.

Inspiration Beyond the Classroom

In this section, I discuss my public sharing of my research following the evaluation of my claims to my new knowledge. As a trained primary school teacher, all my teaching experience had been with young students between the ages of four and twelve years old. My transformational journey continues in different ways.

Following my Living Educational Theory Research, I was invited to the Froebel Department in Maynooth University to speak and present to 3rd year student-teachers. The lecture was themed 'Teacher as a Change Agent'. I accepted the invitation, which I felt very humbled by. It was a new experience for me to present to student-teachers about an aspect of my practice and how I changed it. A feature of my presentation was a voice recording of my intervention-students asking the third-year student-teachers to try positive self-talk (PST), a strategy they learnt in my intervention which they recommended would improve self-esteem. I found it inspiring that my students had the voice and confidence to share with adult student teachers about a strategy they found helpful. They hoped that the student-teachers would use PST when required. The third-year student-teachers responded by repeating the PST mantra given to them by my students, which the following voice recording captured during a lecture I gave on 5th September 2021 (access from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=000lhSzlqw0>).

When I played the voice recording to my intervention-students, they were overwhelmed at the agency they had created. I learnt that we can all be agents for change in our own way when given the opportunity to do so. My intervention-students recognised this too and expressed their joy at been given the opportunity to share the value of positive self-talk with student teachers. As the inspiration behind this initiative, it has empowered me and given me the confidence to evolve my living-educational-theory by continuing to support my students to be happier by having better educational, social and emotional outcomes.

When I was subsequently invited to present at an online Wellbeing Conference in 2020 with the theme being on Wellbeing and Resilience in the Primary School Context, I accepted with less trepidation than previously. Upon reflecting on my previous presentation,

I learnt that in sharing my improved value-based practice, it could be influential in the students' own learning. With this learning in mind, I accepted a NEARIMeet⁵ invitation in 2021 to present at a global conference, organized by the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) from Dundee University. The conference theme was 'Raising Voices'. Empowered by my learning from that presentation, I wanted to ensure that I could now contribute to a global educational knowledgebase with university students, staff, professors, researchers and the general public. As this online event happened during COVID-19, when there was heightened anxiety for everybody, I intentionally and confidently focused on the learning from my research study and the positive transformational change it had brought to my students, their parents and to my value-laden living-educational-theory. While I have been influenced by my mother, my teachers, my university course lecturers, and my Master of Education Supervisor, I am now proud to be sharing my living-educational-theory with a wider global audience.

These are two comments I received after my online presentation from the Wellbeing seminar in 2020 and the global NEARIMeet at the CARNival conference in 2021:

Aislinn – a stimulating presentation. I wonder if videos of your practice will show the importance of values such as love and passion as well as social justice? (J. Whitehead, personal communication, December 2, 2020).

There is a wealth of psychology here. The relational aspect is enormous. The rich pedagogical relationship is key to the success of this project. The children had agency, were seen as people, and were confident they would be heard. (M. Roche, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Through my own growth, I am contributing to improved learning by others such as student-teachers and global practitioners, whom I may potentially have influenced through several webinars at which I have presented. I now have the confidence to claim that I have improved the educational quality of my practice and developed through it my own living-educational-theory of supporting children to recognise and manage their anxiety through reflection and providing opportunities for their voices and reciprocity in learning. The aim of my research was to analyse, reflect on and transform my teaching practice.

Having come this far, I am now disseminating my new understanding of the concept of relatability, which allows the reader to ask the basic question: 'Is this research applicable/transferrable to my own situation?' (Laidlaw & Mellett, 2021). Researchers investigating unique circumstances cannot be replicated by others, but can be relatable, contributing to a broader picture and inviting further discussion (Bigger, 2021). The concept of relatability is an approach to transforming research knowledge into a form which can readily enter the professional discourse through which educators, researchers, practitioners 'may' enhance their knowledge of teaching and so improve the learning of their learners. It entails the degree of relatedness on whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant to, or applicable for other contexts, or the same context in another time frame (Dzakira, 2012). This might allow researchers and educators to reflect on how my new learnings could be related

⁵ [Network of Educational Action Research in Ireland](#) (NEARI)

to their context and how they in turn might in some way better recognise anxiety in children and support the child to recognise and manage their own anxiety. This could potentially contribute in some way to the reduction in anxiety disorders, which are one of the top contributors to the global burden of disease for young people (Global Burden of Disease Study, 2019).

Conclusion

I began this paper with ‘How my Living Educational Theory research is helping me to improve my practice as a primary school teacher, in supporting children to recognise and manage their anxiety’.

In addressing my living contradiction by completing my research in line with my values of hope, positivity, social justice and empowerment, the transformative changes I found among my intervention students, their parents and class teachers have given me new understandings for an improved teaching practice. Through a greater sense of my own awareness and learning in generating my living-educational-theory, I am empowering children in my current teaching practices to develop a recognition of anxiety and management skills that can be transformational and potentially have lifelong benefits. While confident in my current approach – which I am continually reflecting on and adapting for different ages and backgrounds – I acknowledge that some children may still have hidden worries. However, with increased exposure to the strategies I use, my hope is that this number will continue to be reduced through my efforts to create conditions that enable them to acquire the necessary resources, knowledge, and voice to make decisions that affect their lives (National Policy on Gender and Development, 2018).

My experiences have shown me that children learn more profoundly if they are happy in their work, believe in themselves, and feel supported (DES, 2018). I conclude that my research has improved my practice as it has allowed me to develop flexible strategies that I believe can benefit every child. I am convinced of the need for the promotion of wellbeing among children, which involves their parents and class teachers, to prevent, recognise and manage anxiety in children to have immediate and potentially lifelong transformational benefits.

I am potentially influencing student teachers, educators and researchers through my public presentations, which allows others to adapt my learning to their own situation. The practice of sharing what I have learnt publicly and using my new strategies, such as ‘feelings board’, yoga, deep breathing and explicit wellbeing activities and lessons on worries, with my students is contributing to my own personal and professional wellbeing. I, like Whitehead (2018, p. 4) believe that:

Individuals have a responsibility to live [their] values and understandings as fully as possible in living a loving and productive life and in contributing to making the world a better place to be.

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