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An exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools

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UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

An exploration of teachers' perceptions and
experiences of the student's voice in bullying
situations in post-primary schools

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Master of Arts in Guidance Counselling and
Lifespan Development

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UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Title of Research Study:

**An exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's
voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools**

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**Submission in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Master of
Arts (MA) in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development**

Submitted to the University of Limerick, October 2019

Declaration

The author declares that this thesis which is being submitted to the University of Limerick for the award of Master of Arts (MA) in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development has not previously been submitted, in whole or in part for any degree in the University of Limerick, or in any other institution. I agree that the library in the University of Limerick may lend or copy this dissertation on request.

Signed:

Padraig Doyle

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Glossary of Terms

CBA Classroom Based Assessment

CPD Continuous Professional Development

CSPE Civic, Social and Political Education

DCYA Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education and Science (1997-2010)

DES Department of Education and Skills (2010-Present)

DoE Department of Education

ETB Education Training Board

IGC Institute of Guidance Counsellors

LGBTQIA Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or questioning, Intersex and Asexual and/or allies

NEWB National Educational Welfare Board

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCGE National Centre for Guidance in Education

NGF National Guidance Forum

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PDST Professional Development Service for Teachers

RE Religious Education

SPHE Social Personal and Health Education

UL University of Limerick

UN United Nations

UNCRC United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

WHO World Health Organization

Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. This research aims to establish the manner in which student voice is incorporated in areas relating to bullying. The researcher believes that an empirical gap for such interpretivist research exists, as there seems to be inadequate exploration of this subject. An interpretive paradigm was engaged using semi-structured interviews in this research to amass in-depth information (Thomas 2013). The researcher utilised a thematic approach to analyse the interview data (Guest *et al.*, 2012). The researcher employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic model to identify, analyse and describe patterns in the data gathered. In the primary findings three overarching themes emerged. Firstly, student voice is an integral aspect in school life and needs to be further promoted. Secondly, teacher–student relationship is vitally important in nurturing student voice in all situations, including bullying. Finally, many barriers exist which impede the promotion of student voice. The importance of the role of student council was promulgated by all nine participants, with a feeling, however, that this should not be an exclusively singular approach and that other initiatives were warranted to really cultivate student voice. The role of the pastoral care team in the promotion of student voice was highlighted, with particular attention given to the role of guidance counsellors because of their extensive training and knowledge of the student body. Findings from this study suggest that there is an appetite to incorporate student voice in all educational situations and not exclusively in the context of bullying. It is evident, however, that lack of appropriate training, time and resources are impeding such a valuable endeavour. This thesis concludes with recommendations to inform policy, practice and research in this area.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic under investigation. It will present the context and justification for undertaking the research and will provide a description of the positionality of the researcher. The chapter outlines the aims and objectives of the research and an overview of the methodology undertaken. It concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

The central focus of this research study is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. This study therefore concerns itself with the different perspectives of the importance of student voice in educational settings, particularly in the area of bullying.

Students have often been ignored, excluded or even silenced in relation to articulating their experiences, their feelings or their views on what a school provides for them.

(Fleming 2016 p. 41)

Consulting with consumers to obtain their views in relation to a service or product is common practice in society today. Consultation offers various benefits, including exhibiting an interest in what people are saying and providing valuable information in order to modify services. "In education, providers and policy makers have been slower to realise the potential of consulting consumers" (Flutter and Ruddock 2004, p. 1). Traditionally, student voice in the educational sphere has arguably been restricted. However, it has evolved in recent times, with great potential to enhance educational pursuits in a variety of manners. "Since the 1990s there has been steadily increasing interest in the involvement and voice of young people in education research internationally" (Flynn 2017, p. 9).

Proponents of student voice in educational settings are no doubt excited with the latest climate change initiative involving young people. On Friday 15 November 2019 a Youth Parliament on Climate will be convened in Dáil Éireann, with 157 young people participating. This exciting new initiative is an opportunity for young people to air their views on what Ireland needs to explore in relation to climate change and climate action. This new departure is the culmination of the leadership displayed by students when they exercised their voice about climate change throughout the year. The benefits of listening to the voice of students can be

readily seen in this example. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989) was instrumental in creating a situation that has brought children's rights to the fore. It has been innovative in its approach and recognises the importance of students' positionality and the fact that students can no longer be regarded as passive participants. The fundamental principle

is that students have a right to have a voice, and a say, and that they should to be listened to, in relation to their experiences of schools, classrooms and of the wider education system.

(Fleming 2016, p. 40)

The researcher's interest in bullying has been a lifelong concern and even though there has been substantial time and resources invested in trying to counteract bullying, it appears to be as prevalent as ever. Bullying is a problem in schools and the effects of bullying are real and distressing for all involved. It can be an intricate issue to resolve and requires a whole school approach to be most effective. While staff in schools can achieve success in preventing and dealing with bullying, the inclusion of the student voice in this area brings a whole new level of experience, as students are the authorities on their own experience. The Action Plan on Bullying published by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2013 is clear that students have an important role and responsibility in helping the school to deal with and prevent bullying in the school environment.

While positive initiatives have been introduced in the area of student voice and with issues concerning bullying, we need to endeavour to promote innovativeness where student voice can benefit schools directly in issues relating to bullying.

1.2 Researcher's Positionality in the Study

It is imperative to recognise one's own position on the research topic as well as one's role in the research undertaken (Thomas, 2013). Researcher positionality is important in the context of this research project, as Sultana (2007) suggests it is vital when undertaking ethical research that attention is paid to the researcher's positionality. Therefore, in accordance with Thomas' (2017) viewpoint that positionality should be specified from the beginning, I will outline mine. I am currently training to become a guidance counsellor and am teaching in a post-primary school. My professional experience spans over 20 years in two different post-primary schools and I have a genuine interest in this topic because of my role in pastoral care and teaching Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) during that time. I have always had an acute interest in the area of bullying, while endeavouring to get a better understanding of it. 'Student

voice' has been an evolving interest for me, as I have observed its value in other areas of school life. I am interested in exploring other people's perceptions of how they promote student voice in bullying situations. Consequently, the motivation for this study has been to enlighten my practice both as a teacher and as a future guidance counsellor.

I undertook semi-structured interviews with nine participants. These participants were chosen using snowball sampling and I was acquainted with two of them. Subsequently, it was critical that reflexivity was central throughout the research. In the interest of safeguarding validity, I recognised my own bias through the process of reflexivity (Thomas 2013). To further enhance validity, I used self-reflection through the process of self-journaling and received valuable guidance from professional supervision.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. The central objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To critically evaluate what participant's, understand by the expression of 'student voice' 'and to comprehend their perceptions of how students' voices are in present in the context of bullying situations in their respective schools.
2. To establish what the participants view as the barriers that prevent meaningful student voice in schools including bullying situations.
3. To identify the importance of student–teacher relationships in the promotion of student voice in the educational sector.
4. To explore avenues that would facilitate 'student voice' in schools with particular emphasis on bullying.
5. To propose recommendations for future policy that may inform practice and additional research.

1.4 Research Methodology

I used a qualitative research approach underpinned by an interpretative paradigm, as the research is concerned with people and how they relate (Thomas, 2013). The research was principally interested in the experiences and perceptions of teachers in relation to student voice and bullying. Therefore, this approach seemed most appropriate, as it allowed for a rich description of the experiences of participating interviewees (McLeod and McLeod 2011).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data from teachers who are members of their respective pastoral care teams. I transcribed the interviews personally and a thematic analysis strategy was employed to determine the primary research conclusions. I reflected on the vital issues pertaining to reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethics during the research process (Thomas 2013).

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter: 1 This chapter outlines the context and justification of the research study, the researcher's positionality, aims and objectives, and the research methodology of the study. It concludes with an overview of the six chapters.

Chapter: 2 This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature pertaining to the research study, which is an exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of student voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. It begins by examining literature relating to the role of student voice in education and examines the literature relating to the topic of bullying in the Irish and international context.

Chapter: 3 This chapter outlines the methodological approach underpinning the research study. A rationale for the selected research paradigm and the primary and secondary research questions are clarified. The method of data collection and analysis are discussed, and issues of reliability, validity, reflexivity and ethical practice are addressed.

Chapter: 4 This chapter presents the analytical strategy adopted and the findings from the primary data outlining the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Chapter: 5 This chapter provides a synthesis of the research findings in the context of the primary findings and the literature review.

Chapter: 6 The final chapter concludes the research and encapsulates the overall findings. It provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of the study and outlines a number of recommendations relating to future policy, practice and research. Finally, a reflection on the personal learning gained by the researcher is provided.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This literature review offers a critical analysis of existing research pertaining to the exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of student voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. The literature review initially examines the role of student voice in education both in the Irish and international context to provide different perspectives of the role and importance of student voice in education. The subsequent section of this chapter examines literature relating to bullying in the Irish and international setting. The discussion opens with an overview of bullying and examines the effect it has on all those who encounter it, whether in a traditional sense or a cyberbullying situation. The role of student voice in bullying situations permeates through this section.

2.1 Student Voice

In 1989 the General Assembly of the United Nations espoused the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) consisting of 54 articles relating to the rights and empowerment of children. One of its four guiding principles (article 12) relates to giving children a voice where their views must be considered. The UNCRC is the principal global human rights instrument to acknowledge overtly the civil rights of children. The perception of children was modified with respect to how children were regarded, and this can be perceived as a catalyst in terms of advocating for the rights of children. General Comment No 12 in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009 advocates that "the right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the convention" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, p. 2). Children's right to freedom of expression is further articulated in Article 13.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009 advocates that the state has an obligation to respect the rights and responsibilities of parents or other relevant participants involved "in the upbringing of the child in a manner appropriate to the child's evolving capacities" (UNCRC 1989, p. 2). Smyth *et al.* (2013) contend that the rights of the parents in this regard could restrict children's ability to express themselves enthusiastically and ultimately curtail their voice. Nevertheless, the UNCRC guiding principles have exhibited a significant transformation in the way in which children are regarded. It has been a valuable instrument in providing students with opportunities to express their voice.

2.2 Definition of Student Voice

Children's voice can be defined as the "views of children that are actively received and acknowledged as valuable contributions to decision-making affecting the children's lives" (Murray 2019, p. 2). Student voice particularly "refers to students in dialogue, discussion and consultation on issues that concern them in relation to their education" (Fleming 2015, p. 223). Student voice is central to a rights-based view that gives opportunities "to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively, improving their respective experiences of school" (Fielding 2004, p. 205). Advocates of student voice recognise the 'students' meaningful presence which enables them "to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools" (Cook-Sather 2006, p. 363).

2.3 Advantages of Student Voice

In theory "schools offer an environment in which it is possible to reach a diverse range of young people" (Bragg 2010, p. 32). Advocates of student voice propose that students contribute as researchers and participate in decision-making "including sharing their views on problems and potential solutions in their schools" (Mitra 2003, p. 289). In these situations, they are regarded as "valued co-participants and stakeholders in the school contributing through a shared voice to school change and improvement" (Fielding and McGregor 2005, p. 7). Listening to student voice enables us to observe students' ideas through the lens of the chief actors in the school situation. "Student voice efforts therefore can provide a fresh or new way of seeing problems that had previously been ignored or misunderstood" (Mitra and Gross 2009, p. 135).

Greta Thunberg, a 15-year-old Swedish student, refused to attend school while she handed out pamphlets highlighting her government's inaction on climate change. Her voice has prompted thousands of Irish students in over 37 locations to voice their disapproval of the Irish government's response to climate change. Such engagement on social media suggests they are part of a vocal generation who in effect have limited voice in school situations. While the adolescent voice has effectively free rein on social media and must be monitored when negativity is promoted, it nevertheless does represent what students want and is a platform where they can voice their opinions on issues of concern.

One of the reasons student voice can be so powerful in highlighting attention to topics in a novel manner is that "students have a different positionality" (Mitra and Gross 2009, p. 135).

Treating pupils

as ‘social actors’, not as passive participants, has profound implications for those who work with children, particularly in how power relations between adults and children are conceived and experienced.

(Bragg 2010, p. 59)

This is evident in the practices of some of our international counterparts. “Student voice has experienced strong advocacy in research, education policy and in schools particularly in the UK” (Fleming, 2013, p. 35) and since the early 1990s has been protected through legislation and the inspectorate. In the UK it is obligatory for schools to engage with students regarding their experiences in school. Since 2001 significant research has been undertaken “to explore the dynamics of student voice in relation to student engagement, agency, identity, learning, school reform and the potential to transform school culture” (Fleming 2013, p. 45).

2.4 Student Council – Promoting Student Voice

Student councils are regarded as a democratic medium that enables pupils to express their voice and have an “involvement in the affairs of the school” (Government of Ireland 1998, Pt. V, S26). Section 27 of the Education Act states that students of post-primary schools may establish a student council which should be encouraged and facilitated by the schools’ boards of management. However, this falls short of what was envisioned in the White Paper in Education (DoE 1995), where decision-making was central to the role of a student council.

O’Gorman (1998) suggests that the development of student councils was originally perceived in the context of facilitating student contributions, affording students responsibility and answerability and thus providing them the opportunity to be involved in the democratic process. In 2002 the Minister for Education issued guidelines on the operation of student councils: *Student Councils: A Voice for Students* (DES 2002). It highlighted that school councils offer benefits to the school community by providing members with dynamic learning practices in the democratic process. It can have discernible effects, sharing the responsibility of positive measures undertaken and underlining the idea of the whole school approach. Therefore, “it has the potential to involve disaffected students promoting a sense of ownership in the school” (Klein 2003, p. 104).

Fleming (2015), however, questions the student council’s ability to generate environments where student voice can be heard. He states that “the student council, as a construct for student voice within a rights-based consultative and democratic citizenship perspective, is largely tokenistic and functionally redundant” (Fleming 2015, p. 237).

However not all contributors believe that this is a totally accurate summation. Writers including Riva Klein assert that in schools where there are

effective programmes designed to offer student experiences of meaningful participation, there are lower rates of truancy than in similar schools which do not run such programmes.

(Klein 2003, p. 2)

She suggests, however, that if student councils

don't have a concrete role and fail to represent accurately the view of the student body, then they will be dismissed by all relevant parties and potentially will engender cynicism and alienation.

(Klein 2003, p. 16)

In 2005 Anna Keogh and Jean Whyte published a valuable research project on behalf of the National Children's Office: *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A Study of Enablers, Barriers and Supports* (National Children's Office 2005). It offers great advice on what the role of a student council should involve and provides important information in how to set them up.

2.5 Opinions on Student Voice

Paulo Freire and others challenge schools that silence student voice through inequality. Freire upheld that to alter society and create a more democratic and open-minded world, the mission is "not to take power but to reinvent power" (Freire 1985, p. 179). Educationalist John Dewey believes in the criticality of the voice of the learner, whereby students must be involved in their education for it to be meaningful. "True education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (Hickman and Alexander 1998, p. 229). This resonates in the participation of the student voice in bullying situations, as

the most effective way to obtain the support and co-operation of students in addressing bullying is to involve them in developing ways of challenging discriminatory behaviour by their peers.

(Minton 2008, p. 9)

Enterprises that incorporate student voice can extend the scope of multiple voices in the school environment and could potentially "lead to student participation in developing school reform efforts" (Mitra and Gross 2009, p. 135). One should endeavour to include various groups of students

with different levels of the school's response in different ways and thus over time all students should feel that they have contributed to and therefore own their school's procedures to address bullying.

2.6 Policy and Practice

Historically, various policy initiatives have incorporated student voice in curriculum planning. In conjunction with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), focus groups were used to develop the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme in 2006. Students also had a consultative role in the advancement of a new programme for citizenship education at senior cycle. When developing their code of behaviour, the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) encouraged consultation with students, believing students would be more likely to support a code of behaviour they had a role in developing. In 2012 the DES introduced school self-evaluation, which positioned student voice in a dialogical process of trying to transform and enhance their school experience.

Fleming (2015) suggests that school self-evaluation is certainly advancing student voice but “its motivation and focus, as an externally mandated policy initiative, is clearly on school improvement and performativity” (Fleming 2015, pp. 237–238). The document pertaining to ‘student and parent perceptions of schools’ which relates to bullying recommends that “schools should continue to ensure that they include the voice of students in the school self-evaluation process” (DES 2017, p.13). In 2017 Paula Flynn, in partnership with the NCCA, conducted ‘The Learner Voice Research Study’, collaborating with students, teachers and principals from 20 different locations throughout the country. One of the main objectives of the study was “to support a sustainable structure and response to student voice” (Flynn 2017, p. 3). While acknowledging the positivity of the experience for students, the study highlighted that “some students expressed frustration at not having a chance ‘to do’ more” (Flynn 2017, p. 28). Listening to students is not adequate; students need to “know that they have been heard and to have their input and opinions acknowledged” (Flynn 2017, p. 4).

Seeking student views on school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate.

(Mitra 2003, p 90)

Students’ positionality affords them opportunities other school personnel might not have. Bullying is carried out so shrewdly that members of staff sometimes find it difficult to detect and are unaware of its existence. The reality is that students observe bullying behaviour

regularly and are therefore the most suitable candidates to help deal with it by ensuring their voice is heard.

2.7 Bullying

“Bullying and cyberbullying are clearly vital international social justice issues of our time” (Bauman *et al.* 2013, p. 68). Substantial research has been undertaken and literature around bullying has advanced over the last number of decades. “It is a systematic problem within schools that causes long-lasting effects on students physically, socially and emotionally” (Mitchell 2018, p. 12). The probability is that school bullying has been present since schools have been in existence. Bullying is “an aggressive and destructive form of behaviour, which many children and adolescents use to manage their relationships in school” (O’Moore 2010, p. 23).

2.8 Defining Bullying

“Bullying is a term that’s being, well, bullied. It’s been rendered essentially powerless by being constantly kicked around” (Englander 2013, p. 5). One of the problems associated with bullying is the actual word itself. It is used in a variety of circumstances in an inappropriate manner that can confuse the situation.

Much of the research literature offer a precise definition of bullying, drawing from the pioneering work of Olweus emphasising that bullying needs to be intentional, repeated and involving an imbalance of power.

(Downes and Cefai 2016, p. 6)

Bullying can be defined as “unwanted negative behaviour, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time” (DES 2013, p. 8). “Bullying in schools is a particular problem due to the fact that children spend a significant portion of their time there and are in large social groups” (DYCA 2017, p. 13). The DES proposes that various forms of bullying can arise among students. While not an exhaustive list, this includes physical aggression, intimidation, isolation/exclusion, cyberbullying, name calling, damage to property and extortion. Sexuality and gender-based bullying is another issue that needs careful attention in the school setting. “Adolescence is a difficult time in a child’s maturation bullying exacerbates these difficult times by forming barriers to positive connections with other students” (Harris and Hathorn 2006, p. 50).

2.9 Impact of Bullying

In the 1970s Professor Dan Olweus undertook widespread research in Scandinavia in the area of bullying. He was crucial in persuading educational authorities in Norway to launch a national campaign aimed at systematically reducing bullying. He has published a variety of texts and continues to be a principal authority in this area. Followers of Olweus propose that “it is important to recognise that any pupil can be bullied or can engage in bullying behaviour” (DES 2013, p. 13). Bullying can have an adverse influence on a student’s psychological well-being, including “loss of self-esteem, anxiety, stress, depression, difficulties with schoolwork, reluctance to attend school, and in extreme cases, self-harm and suicide” (DES 2013, p. 31).

2.10 Bullying Policy and Plans

In 1993 the DES circulated the first official response to bullying in Ireland. It attempted to support schools by offering strategies and recommendations to handle bullying. While it was admirable in its approach, the lack of involvement from certain stakeholders, including teachers, seemed to affect its implementation in schools. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 stipulates that all schools must have an anti-bullying policy in place as part of their code of behaviour. Any student-led programme needs to be implemented in conjunction with a well thought out and unified whole school approach. Research has shown that schools “that adopt a comprehensive whole-school antibullying program are often successful in reducing bullying behaviours” (Olweus and Limber 2007, p. 171). However, a “unique characteristic of bullying is that regardless of the helplessness and distress students may feel, they often do not tell anyone of the victimisation” (Gordon 2018, p. 6). This poses challenges for the formulation of the whole school approach when a significant voice is not being heard.

In 2012 an anti-bullying forum took place in Ireland to explore and consider ways to tackle the problem of bullying in schools. Subsequently, the DES (2013) issued its Action Plan on Bullying, providing “a national integrated strategic approach to tackling bullying” (Foody *et al.* 2018, p. 136) in primary and post-primary schools. The plan suggests that

school-based bullying can be positively and firmly addressed through a range of school-based measures and strategies through which all members of the school community are enabled to act effectively in dealing with this behaviour.

(DES 2013, p. 3)

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), in their submission to the DES on working on tackling bullying in schools in 2012, endorsed the whole school approach when dealing with

bullying. The document recommended that guidance counsellors should play a vital role in the whole school approach “because of the specific and unique nature of their training and counselling skills” (Flynn 2012, p. 7). The IGC believes, however, that this must be undertaken in conjunction with other school members. This opinion concurs with the ideology of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) as outlined by Mona O’Moore in *The Four Pillars of Action* (NCGE 2013). O’Moore discusses the centrality of the role of the guidance counsellor while acknowledging the importance of a collaborative whole school approach.

“Bullying can be a complex problem to solve, which requires a comprehensive, multidimensional approach” (Downes and Cefai 2016, p. 6). Positively, the Action Plan on Bullying involved majority stakeholders in preliminary discussions prior to its inception, placing parents and pupils at the centre of its preventative approach. It suggests that

parents and pupils have a particularly important role and responsibility in helping the school to prevent and address school-based bullying behaviour and to deal with any negative impact within school of bullying behaviour that occurs elsewhere.

(DES 2013, p. 3)

The plan highlights the importance of a school-wide approach in the prevention of bullying and challenges schools to “encourage and strengthen open dialogue between all school staff and pupils” (DES 2013, p. 21). The plan suggests that “schools should ensure that they provide appropriate opportunities for pupils to raise their concerns in an environment that is comfortable for the pupil” (DES 2013, p. 21).

While promoting key elements of a positive school culture and climate, regrettably it does not position student voice in any meaningful way. Significantly, it fails to incorporate the student voice in the prevention of bullying. Furthermore, it predominantly focuses on the impact of bullying on the victim, while the impact on the perpetrator and other parties is relatively limited. In 2014 Helen Gleeson, on behalf of the DES and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in conjunction with the National Office for Suicide Prevention, prepared a document on the prevalence and impact of bullying linked to social media on young people’s mental health. One of its main findings was the importance of a positive school climate. It states that

school climate and having trust in school authorities to effectively deal with cases of cyberbullying have been linked to reductions in incidents and higher levels of reporting from students.

(Gleeson 2014, p. 5)

In 2017 the DES published a document entitled ‘Parent and Student/Pupil Perceptions of Schools’ Actions to Create a Positive School Culture and to Prevent and Tackle Bullying’. Based on the whole school evaluation process, both second- and fifth-year students and their parents were surveyed to gather their perspectives on school experiences. Amended in 2014 in light of the publication of the Action Plan on Bullying, this report was based on surveys conducted from 2013 to 2016 to “provide an insight into actions in schools to prevent and combat bullying” (DES 2017, p. 2). Several interesting opinions were evident from the findings, including the importance of school culture and the benefits of positive student–teacher relationships. Certainly, this document is a positive step, as it directly consulted with and included the voice of the student.

Nevertheless, before school personnel can make apt interventions, comprehension of who the students are and their encounters with bullying is necessary. Students may fall into one or more groups – victim, bystander, bully, bully–victim and friends. While no student is exempt from bullying, some people tend to be more susceptible. Birkett *et al.* (2009) suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex and asexual and/or allies (LGBTQIA) students and those who are questioning their sexual orientation report higher levels of discrimination, leading to non-attendance, despair and suicide. In 2016 the National Office for Suicide Prevention found that 50 per cent of LGBT students participating in a study had been bullied because of their LGBT identity or apparent identity.

Bullying can blight the life of many pupils who experience it, while those who get away with bullying others are learning values at odds with any proper preparation for citizenship.

(Smith and Sharp 1994, p. 1)

Bullying and cyberbullying have distressing implications for the well-being of victims, perpetrators, bystanders and the school community at large. “The systematic nature of this epidemic affects not only those who are bullied but also students who bully others and are witnesses to bullying” (Gordon 2018, p. 1).

2.11 Victims of Bullying

“A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus 1993, p. 9). The reality is that any “student, through no fault of their own, may be bullied” (O’Moore 2010, p. 58). However, students can

be targeted for various reasons. “Research has established that they are often introverted, have few friends if any and are especially lacking in self-esteem” (Rigby 1996, p. 225). Olweus (1978) describes these victims as passive and characterises them as more apprehensive, self-doubting, sensitive and generally quieter than others in their conduct. “One of the common effects of bullying is to reduce the self-esteem of victims” (Rigby 1996, p. 50). Students who “are being bullied may develop feelings of insecurity, humiliation and extreme anxiety and thus become more vulnerable” (DES 2013, p. 11).

“It is a fundamental human or democratic right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation of bullying” (Olweus 2001, p. 25). Can we guarantee what Olweus asserts – that a child will feel safe in a school setting? Do we need to modify this by saying ‘safe enough’? It could be argued that Olweus’ declaration does not fit in with the modern movement in schools where we endeavour to build resilience in students because they will ultimately face difficult situations in school that might well threaten their safety. The millennial generation are described as the ‘snowflake generation’, a label that has been attached to criticise their apparent sensitivity. While we all need to develop resiliency strategies, I think it is rather unfair to a generation to be particularly targeted, considering that they have displayed resilience in overcoming legacies left by previous generations.

Short-term effects of bullying can include disinclination to attend school, academic underachievement and potentially premature dropout from school. “It is imperative that [students] should receive appropriate professional support to help them overcome the behavioural and emotional difficulties that hinder their development” (O’Moore 2010, p. 62). “Bullying in its various forms has been associated with various emotional, psychological as well as academic problems in children and young people”. (Downes and Cefai 2016, p. 13)

2.12 Bystanders

Bystanders can be viewed as “the supporting cast who aid and abet the bully through acts of omission and commission” (Coloroso 2003, p. 66). Schools must be cognisant of those who observe bullying behaviours. Bullying is a phenomenon that regularly arises in the company of fellow students, and “a variety of studies have suggested that most bullying incidents are done in the presence of bystanders” (Englander 2013, p. 126). We must remember that with the use of social media not all bystanders are physically present, which presents a different challenge. Bystanders learn about bullying from viewing the actions of both the bully and the students who are oppressed as a result. They are affected in a variety of manners: “some are

sad and apprehensive, feeling that it may be their turn next” (Rigby 1996, p. 65). Others might feel embarrassed and regretful for their failure to intervene, while some might be indifferent to the events occurring. If one accepts that the perpetrators are pursuing control and position, it is desirable their actions be observed, “which can confer social prestige upon the bully” (Englander 2013, p. 128). This requirement for spectators can be beneficial in challenging bullying behaviour. However, in certain instances bystanders can in fact aggravate the situation when they continue to present as the audience the perpetrator so desires. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) argue that if bystanders fail to intervene, they are contributing to the situation by encouraging the behaviour.

2.13 Perpetrators

A distinctive characteristic of children who bully is their aggressive attitude towards not only their peers but also towards adults, like their parents and teachers.

(O’Moore 2010, p. 67)

Bullies sometimes surround themselves with other bullies, strengthening each other’s hostile behaviour, or with those who are described as ‘hangers on’, to aid them in their victimisation. The perpetrator “may crave attention and take on peer leadership roles as a way to gain prestige and power” (Shariff 2008, p. 17). When confronted with accusations, they generally don’t deny it but insist that the victim is responsible for the original relationship which created the situation. Commonly, perpetrators have a more optimistic view of the use of violence and “they are often characterised by impulsivity and a strong need to dominate others” (Olweus 1993, p. 34). They can be calculating and fail to have empathetic understanding of what the victim is going through. In his 1991 study Olweus maintained there were no suggestions that perpetrators lacked self-esteem. This is contrary to an Irish study conducted by O’Moore and Kirkham (2010) who discovered that “their overall self-esteem was lower than that of their peers who did not bully or who were not victimised” (O’Moore 2010, p. 71).

2.14 Bully/Victim

On certain occasions, victims of bullying in turn bully others or vice versa. These are frequently identified as bully/victims (Nansel *et al.* 2001). Research from O’Moore and Kirkham (2001) states that bully–victims are more disposed to anti-social personality disorders and will suffer more psychiatric symptoms in the future. In reference to a Finnish longitudinal study, O’Moore (2010) highlights that in comparison with other participants, “bully-victims had a five-fold increased risk of developing a psychiatric disorder” (O’Moore 2010, p. 85). This is not reflected

in a lot of literature, as the bully–victim is often overlooked. Regrettably, they can be in the most difficult position, as they are often excluded by their acquaintances while not relishing any of the social advantages that occasionally accrue to bullies. “In some cases, bully-victims may turn inward and feel bad about themselves. In other cases, they turn outward and aggress against their perpetrators” (Graham 2016, p. 139). O’Moore and Stevens (2013) suggest that this group are exposed to the most risk factors in relation to self-esteem, social competence, academic performance and potential social rejection.

2.15 Cyberbullying

It is important to note that bullying is multidimensional and can include an act traditionally defined as well as those promulgated by societal trends such as social media, i.e., cyberbullying.

(Mitchell 2018, p. 2)

Cyberbullying can be described as destructive, malicious conduct “that is directed by an individual or group against another individual or group with the help of technological devices, primarily mobile/smartphones and the internet” (O’Moore 2014, p. 17). In Ireland digital media plays a substantial role in the lives of adolescents. “The phenomenon of cyber-bullying has become a matter of increasing concern for school communities and researchers alike” (Minton 2010, p. 134). Social acceptance is a vital and significant component of the adolescent experience and while technology can potentially aid this, it can also cause harm. The elements of anonymity, the provision of an infinite audience, permanence of expression and the relative inescapability from cyberbullying attacks are landscapes that are exclusive to cyberbullying. This is a new phenomenon that was not part of the experience of many teachers and parents during their own teenage years, particularly if they were teenagers before 2008, the year in which the smartphone was introduced, subsequently creating a wide gap between digital natives and digital immigrants, with the latter struggling with digital realities.

The combination of the advent of the internet, the rapid adoption of technologies by young people, and the associated power to influence and mobilize others, presents young people with the unique situation where they can take some control over the messages that are constructed about them and their lives, including those associated with defining, measuring, and addressing cyberbullying.

(Bauman *et al.* 2013, p. 170)

“Cyberspace provides perpetrators of bullying an additional venue within which to enforce social norms, assist dominance and victimise peers” (Bauman *et al.* 2013, p. 56). Various harmful consequences connect “with cyberbullying that reach into the real world” (Hinduja

and Patchin 2015, p. 2). As a result, children's rights are being reviewed. The 2017 publication '*New Media and Society*' deliberates on the rights children have in the newly emerged digital age. Cyberbullying exploitation has been associated with comparative negative consequences compared with traditional bullying, affecting academic achievement, creating apprehension and occasionally resulting in suicide. Traditional bullying has been given a different guise and social networking has brought bullying to a different level. One should never underestimate "the depths of despair that can result from cyber-bullying especially when it is used alongside traditional forms of bullying" (O'Moore 2010, p. 202).

Digital space transcends safe physical boundaries and has effects outside the school gates. Consideration also needs to be given to a school's relationship with cyberbullying and the teachers who are targeted in acts of cyberbullying. An RTE report from Thursday 8 November (2018) highlighted that teachers reported high levels of anxiety and stress resulting from cyberbullying. This account related to a Dublin City University (DCU) survey which found that 10 per cent of 577 post-primary teachers surveyed were victims of cyberbullying. Whether relating to traditional bullying or cyberbullying, the literature provided on pupils bullying teachers, teachers bullying pupils or teachers bullying teachers is relatively limited. While there has been some theoretical engagement over the last 15 years, the topic is "rarely defined, empirically studied, or meaningfully discussed within academic circles" (Espelage *et al.* 2011, p. 2). The DES anti-bullying procedures focus almost wholly on the pupil as the potential victim, with extremely limited reference to all other bullying circumstances.

Students' technological expertise must be employed to help minimise the negative potential consequences that can occur. Student voice is imperative in cyberbullying prevention, as "the role that cyberbullying plays is easily misunderstood, especially to the generation whose most memorable interaction between electronics and real life was fighting over the remote control (Englander 2013, pp. 23–24).

As technologies develop and progress so swiftly and students are absorbed in them from such a young age, their expertise advances, and

while parents and teachers are doing a better job supervising youth at school and at home, many adults don't have the technological know-how to keep track of what teens are up to online.

(Hinduja and Patchin 2015, p. 3)

The challenge is to empower our students to exploit the prospects of the technological age while concurrently safeguarding them from hurt online. The Data Protection Act (2018) was signed into law on 24 May 2018, setting the digital age of consent in Ireland at 16 in order to protect young people.

2.16 Conclusion

In order to diminish bullying, schools must determine the degree to which bullying is an issue by evaluating student insights. “Since the nature of bullying is multifaceted the prevention strategy must also be unique, varied and comprehensive, specific to the needs of the school environment” (Mitchell 2018, p. 4). The emphasis on bullying prevention through the fostering and development of a positive school culture is indeed a noble idea, but it can only be realised using a student-centred approach. The key to achieving relative safety of all students is to ensure that they are instrumental in all areas of the bullying prevention programme.

The purpose of bullying prevention is threefold: positively modify school climates to prevent bullying, reduce aggressive behaviours and promote collective problem-solving that includes students and adults.

(Mitchell 2018, p. 5)

Peer support strategies need to be implemented to give a co-operative sense of accountability, enabling schools to avert and counter bullying. The norm must become one of “helping rather than hindering” (Rigby 1996, p. 252). We can also learn from our international counterparts where much success is evident in promoting ‘student voice’. Bergmark and Kostenius (2011) highlight the successful collaboration in a number of Swedish schools which concentrates on empowering students through consultation and activities that address individual issues. They concentrate on activities that promote student voice by listening to students’ viewpoints and including them in democratic decision-making. This successful endeavour is an example of how the ‘student voice’ can be instrumental in the creation of positive change in educational spheres. The introduction of the UNCRC in 1989 challenged the treatment of children and endeavoured to improve children’s rights. The right to ‘student voice’ was affirmed, prompting various nations to amend their legislation in this area.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' experiences and their perceptions of students' voices in bullying situations in their relevant post-primary schools. In this chapter I will outline the methodology selected for this study. The methodology will address the research paradigm framing this study, before specifying the precise research design selected to approach this topic. Initially I will introduce the primary and secondary research questions used in the various interviews.

3.1 Research Questions

“Research questions provide the backbone of the empirical procedures and the organising principle for the report” (Punch and Oancea 2014, p. 7). To retrieve appropriate data for the research, the questions need to satisfy certain criteria in that they are acceptable, feasible and interesting. It is important to note that “a piece of research is built around a question, not a method” (Thomas 2009, p. 43).

3.2 Primary Research Question

Merriam (2009) proposes that one should formulate a number of key questions prior to selecting a methodology suitable for the research. After examining pertinent research literature, I identified the primary research question for this study as:

“What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools?”

3.3 Secondary Research Questions

The subsequent secondary questions similarly underpin the research study.

- 1) What do the participants understand by the expression ‘student voice’ in the context of bullying situations in your school?
- 2) In relation to bullying, in what ways do participants perceive students having a voice or a say in what happens in the school?
- 3) Does the student have any role in promoting student voice in bullying situations in your school?
- 4) What are the barriers that participants see if any that prevent meaningful student involvement in bullying situations in your school?

- 5) How might/does student–teacher interaction empower student voice in participants’ schools?
- 6) What would facilitate student ‘voice’ in anti-bullying programmes in participants’ schools?

The research paradigm came into focus after the research questions were articulated.

3.4 Research Design: Methodology

Methodology is the lens a researcher looks through when deciding on the type of methods they will use to answer [the] research question, and how they will use these methods for best effect.

(Mills and Birks 2014, p. 32)

This section will detail the fundamental paradigm and the research paradigm utilised. Thomas (2017) suggests that methodology does not merely refer to the selected method for the planned research but is a discourse as to the reason why the methodology is chosen. “Choosing a methodology is strongly linked to the desired outcome of the study” (Mills and Birks 2014, p. 32). The researcher’s methodology takes into consideration the information that a person requires, the contextual situation they find themselves in and the research paradigm which is utilised.

3.5 Research Paradigms: Interpretivist

Paradigms are models, perspectives or conceptual frameworks that help us to organise our thoughts, beliefs, views and practices into a logical whole and consequently inform our research design.

(Basit, 2010, p.14)

In this research I considered the two key paradigms: positivist and interpretivist. Both paradigms have their individual views regarding research. The positive paradigm holds the “view that social science procedures should mirror, as near as possible, those of the natural sciences” (Blaxter 2010, p. 61). The interpretivist paradigm concentrates on a comprehensive study of human behaviour. “The positivist and interpretive subscribe to two specific methodologies: the quantitative methodology and the qualitative methodology respectively” (Basit 2010, p. 15).

Initially I felt that a mixed approach might be appropriate. However, after reflection I realised as a novice researcher that this approach “requires a certain amount of methodical sophistication to take account of the different epistemological requirements of quantitative and

qualitative sources” (McLeod 2015, p. 166). Manageability was an additional factor, and as my study is a small-scale one, I felt a mixed approach was not required. Quantitative research concerns itself with the gathering of numerical data and theory testing. Since this was not the task of this research, I decided not to incorporate a quantitative element into the study. Quantitative research “favours the hypothetic-deductive model, based on the premise that valid and reliable knowledge can only be generated by developing and testing hypothesis” (Basil 2010, p. 16).

O’Moore and Stevens (2013) believe that quantitative research is never satisfactory in isolation in attaining an inclusive and accurate representation of issues like bullying. A purely quantitative approach can neglect the “immense complexity of human nature” (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 11). “Researchers bring to their inquiry a worldview composed of belief and assumptions about knowledge that informs their study” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011, p. 39). I felt that a qualitative approach was most suitable for the study because of the complexity of the study and the in-depth knowledge that was required.

A qualitative study design frame was selected for the purpose of this research study to understand the personal biosphere of human involvement. Bell (2005) proposes that the most important question that needs to be addressed relates to what the researcher requires and why.

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience.

(Merriam 2009, p. 5)

For the purpose of this research, this approach enabled me to study humans, their knowledge and the significance of their experiences, while understanding their beliefs (Thomas, 2013). The fact that I was an active participant who could hear the narratives allowed a connection where the participants’ perspectives could be accurately listened to.

“Participant observation is much more inductive and flexible compared to its quantitative cousin, direct observation” (Guest *et al.* 2013, p. 5). The aim of interpretivist researchers is to discover a realistic opinion of the participants’ view by being an immersed researcher in the lived reality of their world. Interpretivist research proposes to “describe, explore and analyse the ways that people create meaning in their lives” (McLeod 2015, p. 92). According to Bryman (2012), this approach gives the researcher opportunities to immerse himself in the experiences and understandings of the participants in order to elicit senses and advance perceptions.

Therefore, this research enables the participants' rich descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of the student voice in bullying situations in their school environment to be voiced.

3.6 Limitations of the Qualitative/Interpretivist Paradigm

The limitations of this qualitative approach need to be addressed. Cohen *et al.* (2011) highlight that one of these is the subjective contribution involved in the research process. Hammersley (2013), however, contends that this subjective role is crucial in the research. In fact, he contends that it is a key strength affording flexibility that permits the study of multifaceted circumstances. One further disadvantage that has been identified in the qualitative approach is that the findings cannot be extended to the broader populace with the same level of confidence as they can be with the quantitative approach. However, the qualitative approach does initiate an important discourse in relation to this area. Interpretivism is "interested in people and the way they interrelate – what they think and how they form ideas about the world" (Thomas 2013, p. 108). Consequently, this paradigm was most appropriate, as it allows the researcher to acquire from participants the way they experience situations, the meanings they attribute to them and the understanding of what they experience.

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis

In this section a description of the method of data collection will be detailed, including how the participants were accessed and sampled. It will also highlight the method of data analysis.

3.7.1 Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

This section outlines the data collection process undertaken during the research. There are various methods of collecting data in a qualitative approach. The approach can include observations, textual or visual analysis, interviews or focus groups. "Interviews are the most popular method of gathering data for researchers working within an interpretive paradigm using a qualitative methodology" (Basit 2010, pp. 99–100). Interviews are regarded as valuable in gathering rich detail regarding people's experiences. They are

embedded in human experience and flagrantly draw on the participants' subjectivities. They seek the participants' perception of the social world as it is experienced and lived by them and those around them.

(Basit 2010, p. 100)

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers who are members of their respective pastoral care teams. "Semi-structured interviews are guided by a set of questions and prompts for discussion but

have in-built flexibility to adapt to particular respondents and situations” (Punch and Oancea 2014, p. 184). Apart from the previously formulated questions, I also had to be equipped to pose several additional questions which one develops throughout the interview. “The supplementary questions will be linked to the interviewees’ responses to earlier, pre-formulated, questions for the purpose of achieving a more elaborate, in-depth response” (Basit 2010, p. 100).

This is advantageous, as it allows flexibility and adaptability in the process. One further advantage in conducting interviews is that the researcher is getting verbal and non-verbal responses from participants. Bell (2010) suggests these non-verbal responses can provide insights into the opinions of the participants, which can be beneficial to the research process. Researchers need to be mindful that limitations exist when using semi-structured interviews. One such limitation could be that participants might answer in a way in which they perceive the researcher desires. In order to combat this from the outset, the researcher must be authentic and clear about the purpose of the study.

3.7.2 Participant’s Sample

Participants consisted of both genders and had various years of experience ranging from 11 to 31 years. The researcher interviewed teachers in the pastoral care team in different school settings, for example, DEIS, Community, Religious, Education Training Board (ETB) and a Private school. The interviews were conducted face to face as was agreed with the participants. A sequence of prearranged and ethically approved questions shaped the outline of the research. Participants were chosen using snowball sampling, which is advantageous, as this research is explorative and descriptive. Snowball sampling is an

effective strategy for the identification of participants who are able to provide important insights, knowledge, understanding and information about the experience or event that is the focus of the research.

(Offredy and Vickers 2010, p. 139)

It allows access to people who have an interest in a specific area relating to the research topic under discussion. The interviews were all audio recorded and I transcribed them personally. One of the limitations of using this type and size of sampling is that it is impossible to claim generalisability. However, that is not my purpose. This is an exploratory study, the aim of which is to provide a preliminary theme for a new discourse.

3.7.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation.

(Merriam 2009, p. 176)

I undertook qualitative research using semi-structured interviews and after significant consideration decided to utilise thematic analysis. “Thematic Analysis is essentially a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data” (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 2). Thematic analysis is appropriate for a variety of research areas and I feel it is beneficial here, as it works through a widespread assortment of research questions. Guest *et al.* (2012) suggest that a benefit of this method is its “breadth of scope” and suggest it has comparatively fewer limitations than alternative analytical approaches. It offers flexibility and has the “potential to offer an affluent and detailed, yet multifaceted version of this data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 4).

One of the limitations of thematic analysis is the ambiguity surrounding what it is and how it should be used. I familiarised myself with various methods of thematic analysis including Gibbs, Patton, Creswell, and Miles and Huberman. However, I used the outline advanced by Braun and Clark (2006) in which they advocate a six-phase approach when conducting a thematic analysis, as I felt that approach best suited my requirements.

- Step 1 Familiarising yourself with your data
- Step 2 Generating initial codes
- Step 3 Searching for themes
- Step 4 Reviewing themes
- Step 5 Defining and naming themes
- Step 6 Producing the report

In this research I applied Braun and Clark’s phases to each individual interview. I adopted the six-phase approach to identify major themes that were common across the range of interviews. I also identified themes that occurred in one or only a few interviews. This gave rise to major and subordinate themes. I believe that this is an advantageous model, as it minimally arranges and depicts the data set in rich detail. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it also interprets several features of the research topic and that flexibility is integral in the approach. It requires the researcher to critically reflect on the assumptions and conjectures conveyed by this method

of analysis. It is important that the researcher affords a level of awareness and transparency so that the reader can establish the value of the research. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest that thematic analysis needs to be credible and the significance of trustworthiness relates to the investigator's principled obligation to deliver an accurate representation of the experiences of the participants.

3.8 Validity

Merriam (2009) suggests that all research is interested in producing valid and reliable information in an ethical way. "Validity is an important key to effective research if a piece of research is invalid then it is worthless" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 245). Validity is the degree to which the instrument measures what it purports to measure. Qualitative researchers need to understand the requirement for some sort of qualifying check or measure for their investigation. "In qualitative data, the subjectivity of the respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 179). For the exploration to be valid, the researcher must be extremely attentive of bias, ensuring that this does not transfer into the words of the participants.

While researchers are not completely objective, they need to endeavour to be impartial and understand that "other people's perspectives are equally as valid as their own and the task of research is to uncover these" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 180). One way to safeguard the validity of the research is to ensure that the processes involved are clearly outlined to all involved. The researcher must also resist selecting data that suits their predetermined ideas, ensuring that the participants' views are represented truthfully and accurately. My academic advisor was very clear to highlight that all interviews are equally valuable and that an interview that might be diametrically opposed in its viewpoints to all others might be more valuable in the overall sense to the research. Therefore, I was extremely attentive in ensuring that I included all material irrespective of its particular viewpoint in my analysis.

3.9 Reliability

Reliability is defined as the "extent to which a research instrument such as a test will give the same result on different occasions" (Thomas 2017, p. 144). It is a process of evaluating the quality of the measurement process used to gather data in a thesis. For outcomes to be valid, the measurement methodology necessitates initially the importance of reliability. In qualitative research, researchers endeavour to get an insight into the experience of the participants' world.

Since there are many interpretations of what is happening, there is no benchmark by which to take repeated measures and establish reliability in the traditional sense.

(Merriam 2009, p. 220)

Reliability therefore can be problematic because “human behaviour is never static, nor is (*sic*) what many experience is necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences” (Merriam 2009, p. 221). Outcomes need to be consistent with the information retrieved. While the credibility in quantitative research depends on instrument construction, in qualitative research, “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton 2002, p. 14). Therefore, the human instrument needs to avail of training and repeated practice to ensure reliability is at its premium. Strategies that aid a researcher to support reliability in the qualitative field include triangulation, peer examination, investigator’s position and an audit trail. Triangulation helps to decrease the effect of investigation bias. Peer examination assists the researcher to be truthful about the research while allowing peers to contribute to the researcher’s thoughtful reflexive examination. The audit trail enables the observer to trace the progression of the research step by step through the choices taken and processes illustrated. Ultimately the trustworthiness of a qualitative study depends on the credibility of the researcher. While there are guidelines offered to support this, it is imperative that ethical issues are to the fore of the researcher’s thoughts to ensure optimal reliability.

3.10 Reflexivity

The researcher always comes to the research from some position, and the lens of the researcher is always involved in the analysis of data, and of its interpretation and representation.

(Punch and Oancea 2014, p. 50)

Comprehension of this and consideration of the researcher’s position need to be addressed. “Reflective thought is the hallmark of a good research project” (Thomas 2013, p. 24). To deliver a more effective and neutral investigation, reflexivity needs to be dominant in our thought processes. Researchers must question the assumptions and preconceptions that they bring into the research process and which could shape the outcomes. Obviously, objectivity needs to be addressed to ensure that the researcher’s pre-formulated ideas are not damaging to the research process.

Because reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research, understanding how it may be impacted by the characteristics and experiences of the researcher is of paramount importance.

(Berger 2013, p. 219)

Clearly, researchers have their own personal values, and this necessitates incorporating various measures to maximise impartiality.

3.11 Positionality

Thomas (2013) suggests that an interpretivist researcher must express his/her positionality. All researchers come to their investigations with some 'position' irrespective of who they are or what their study entails. The fact that they are undertaking the project in the first place suggests that they have an interest in the topic. "There is no such thing as a 'position-free project'. Even the detached objective external researcher occupies a position with respect to the research" (Punch and Oancea 2014, p. 50). I have worked as a teacher for over 20 years and have always had an interest in the issue of bullying. 'Student Voice' has been an evolving interest for me, as I have observed its value in other areas of school life. The fact that I am not undertaking research in my own school does not diminish my obligation to be reflexive in my approach. Reflexivity is a crucial aspect of the process in order to recognise my positionality.

3.12 Ethical Issues

"Ethical responsibility lies at the heart of any research" (McLeod 2015, p. 62). When research involves human beings, it raises many multifaceted issues and ethical implications need to be to the forefront of the researcher's thoughts. The primary objective is to protect the participants involved in a manner that best serves them. Researchers need to cultivate a trusting relationship with the participants, advance the "integrity of research; [and] guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organisations or institutions" (Creswell 2009, p. 87). In doing so we must ensure that the research is ethically sound. Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that undertaking qualitative research requires a delicate approach to ethical issues, as the researcher may have access to material that is largely private. Researchers must

inform themselves of the ethical issues involved in carrying out research in their field, so their work can be viewed as credible, trustworthy and scholarly.

(Hearne 2013, p. 4)

Confidentiality needs to be at the fore and anonymity must be preserved, ensuring the outcomes will have no adverse effect on the participants. The management of risk is a vital consideration when undertaking this project. Cohen *et al.* (2007) suggest three areas that need to be addressed in relation to ethical guidelines. Trainee practitioners need to adhere to university ethical procedures, and maintaining professional boundaries is crucial. (1) I worked closely with my

academic advisor, ensuring that we examined all relevant literature while following the relevant ethical guidelines required by the University of Limerick. After various modifications, ethical approval from the University of Limerick's Education and Health Sciences (EHS) faculty was sought and approval was granted during April 2019.

(2) The IGC provides a code of ethics which affords valuable guidelines that

can serve as a reference point when specific issues arise in the research process such as duty of care, levels of confidentiality guaranteed and the sharing of data.

(Hearne 2013, p.7)

Using such guidelines improved ethical standards and encouraged trust and discretion in the research process. I gave "clear, comprehensive information on the planned research and its nature in order to allow participants to give their informed consent to participating in the interviews" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 50).

(3) At a personal level it is vital that my research is engrained in ethical awareness and decision-making. I endeavoured to be trustworthy, respectful, responsible and fair throughout my research, acting according to the core values on which ethical decision-making is based. Developing an individual code of ethical practice is beneficial to both the researcher and participants. The qualitative study's dependability is reliant on the trustworthiness of the researcher. While institutional and professional guidelines can help a researcher to overcome ethical dilemmas, "the burden of producing a study that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner lies with the individual investigator" (Merriam 2009, p. 234). The researcher must endeavour to be mindful of the ethical concerns that permeate the research procedure and to scrutinise their personal ethical alignment relating to these matters. Discretion and anonymity are central in the thought processes of the researcher during the interviewing process, considering that they are aware of the participants' identity.

Respondents may feel their privacy has been invaded, they may be embarrassed by certain questions, and may tell things that they never intended to reveal.

(Merriam 2009, p. 231)

Therefore, participants were informed from the outset that they could terminate the interview at any time if they were uncomfortable for any reason. Researchers must avoid being overly biased, as participants are being interviewed "to discover their perceptions of the social world, not to impose our own views on them" (Basit 2010, p. 117). The information retrieved and the

findings detailed should not be fabricated to make them philosophically suitable or to conciliate a particular group. “Ethics in research should be an integral part of the research planning and implementation process, not viewed as an afterthought or a burden” (Mertens 2010, p. 12).

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the paradigmatic position and the methodological approach followed for this research project. The qualitative paradigm took the form of semi-structured interviews with participants. The qualitative data collection method was discussed as well as the data analysis and the use of thematic analysis to facilitate it. Issues of sampling, validity, reliability, flexibility and ethical issues were discussed. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the research using thematic analysis.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the data analysis strategy and findings from the nine semi-structured interviews with teachers who are members of pastoral care teams in their respective schools. Subsequent to the completion of the interviews, I analysed the data using a thematic approach in line with Braun and Clarke’s 2006 framework. Ethical standards were to the forefront throughout the process and ensuring anonymity was the main priority. I used pseudonyms and the names of the participants or their respective schools are not disclosed. In this chapter I will outline the data analysis strategy I employed and will present the three themes and five sub-themes I identified.

4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

I acquired an “in depth understanding of individual experiences” (Kidd 2006, p. 86) by adopting Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, which permitted me to recognise, analyse and record various overlapping themes that arose from the data retrieved.

Figure 4.1 Thematic Analysis

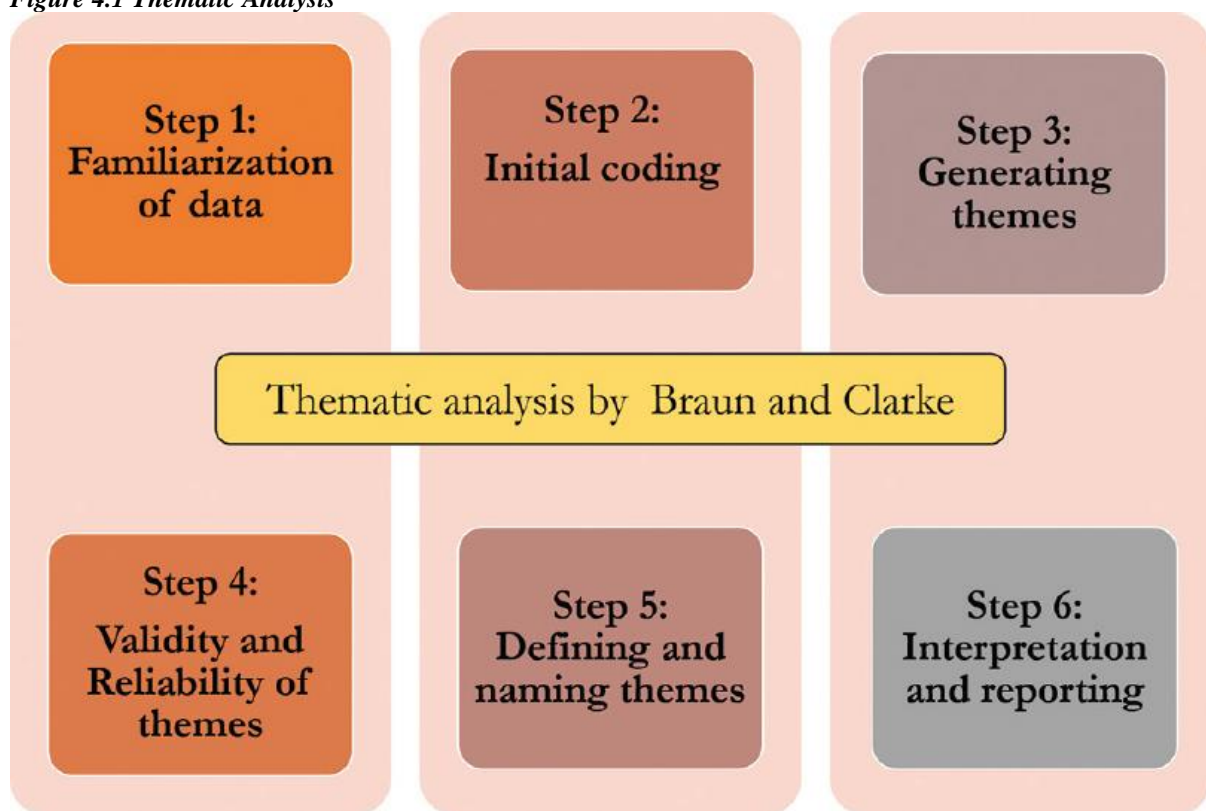


Image Courtesy of: (Indian Journal of Pharmacology, 2016)

My initial step was to become familiar with the data. I undertook this by transcribing the nine semi-structured interviews from the audio recordings. This afforded me the opportunity to ensure accuracy of the detailed information provided by the participants on their experiences. It helped avoid the possibility of misinterpretation of the data retrieved and highlighted the variety and accuracy of observations made. It allowed me to immerse myself fully in the process, whereby I gained important knowledge and information about the participants' experiences. I examined and re-examined the audio recordings and the transcripts to ensure accuracy, which helped me to familiarise myself with the data.

The second step involved generating codes so I could identify certain patterns and describe significant features of the information from individual interviews which I retrieved. This information and the codes were accumulated to classify certain themes which appeared frequently throughout the research and were thought-provoking and significant to my topic. The third step according to Braun and Clarke (2006) consists of categorising the codes, allowing the emergence of themes and sub-themes. This was accomplished by using handwritten notes and colour coding. I was constantly comparing transcripts while analysing them individually to establish potential patterns in the data. In step four I revised and contemplated potential themes and made links between them. I endeavoured to identify all themes by reviewing the transcripts again. Step five involved defining and naming themes, which resulted in the identification of three main themes and various sub-themes which relate to the initial research questions. The penultimate step was to present the themes and sub-themes in the findings chapter.

The findings will be discussed and analysed through the three major overarching themes and five sub-themes which emerged from the data supporting these themes. They provide a snapshot of the experiences of the pastoral care team participants. I will now present my findings after analysing the data.

Figure 4.2 Table of Interviewee Profiles

Client Pseudonyms	Gender	Position	School
Noelle	F	Teacher (15–19 years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – all boys
Donal	M	Teacher (25 + years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – all boys
Peter	M	Teacher and guidance counsellor (30 + years’ experience)	Medium school (251–600) Religious – all girls
Siobhan	F	Teacher and year head (20–25) years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – all girls
Tim	M	Teacher and year head (20–25) years’ experience)	Medium school (251–600) ETB – mixed
Rita	F	Teacher (15–19 years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – mixed
Louise	F	Teacher, chaplain and year head (20–25 years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – mixed
Paul	M	Teacher (10–14 years’ experience)	Medium school (251–600) ETB – mixed
Grainne	F	Teacher and year head (30 + years’ experience)	Large school (601 +) Religious – all boys

Figure 4.3 Overarching Themes

<p>Theme 1: Student Voice is important in the life of the school and needs to be nurtured.</p>	<p>Theme 2: If there aren't positive relationship between students and teachers, the student voice doesn't develop effectively.</p>
<p>Theme 3: Barriers to nurturing student voice</p>	

4.2 Theme 1: Student voice is important in the life of the school and needs to be nurtured.

The first overarching theme I identified relates to the participants' belief about the importance of having a student voice in the educational system in Ireland. All nine participants highlighted that student voice is an integral part of our education system and needs to be nurtured effectively. Student voice is essential across all aspects of school life and must be both authentic and meaningful for the student. Noelle believes that student voice relates to how comfortable and free students are to speak about issues that concern them. She highlights the structures needed and with which the students are familiar, so they are "able to voice whatever concerns they have with regard to themselves or others". Siobhan suggests it is about empowering students to involve themselves in all aspects of student life. She believes that their "opinions, values and their beliefs are given a forum" which can be communicated to all relevant personnel.

Tim tells us that there are a number of initiatives in place to promote student voice. However, he suggests that we "don't get enough of it". He feels that if students are treated fairly "they will be empowered to give their voice", which he believes to be critical in the school environment. Tim has seen this evolve in his school over the years, as first years stated, "they were listened to and they were only in the school a year". However, Tim accepts that sixth year students would offer a contrasting viewpoint had they been asked about exercising their voice throughout their time in school.

Paul perceives that student voice needs to be all encompassing and believes that students should be given a meaningful role "in both policy and practice within the school". He advocates that schools should be more democratic and students more involved in the decision-making process. Peter states that in situations where an initiative is not promoted by the student voice it becomes

largely tokenistic and didactic. He believes that what is required is “engagement from students saying this is what we think would work best”. He is clear that it is about what students want and not what teachers think students want.

4.2.1 Sub-Theme: Certain structures and practices already nurture and support student voice.

I identified a number of positive structures and initiatives that nurture and support student voice in participating schools. These include the role of the pastoral care team, the student council, peer mentoring, SPHE classes, the prefect system and restorative practice in bullying situations. All interviewees identified the important role of the pastoral care team in the promotion of student voice in bullying situations. Tim believes the pastoral care team must have a positive attitude and actively “look for the voice of the student”. He suggests that members “may have a natural inclination” towards the promotion of student voice, which is very important in enhancing it. Peter concurs and suggests that students’ perception, even if it is not the case, is “that somebody on the pastoral care team has a little more of the student interest at heart”. He is adamant that guidance counsellors play a pivotal role, as they are seen “as more approachable” and can gain great insights because of their engagement with students – a view shared by Siobhan. Noelle states that the pastoral care team are the “experts generally” and that their “enthusiasm and energy mean they would go the extra mile to make sure the student is happy”. She trusts that they are “experienced in understanding and having heard the pain that bullying has caused” and are therefore student centred in their approach.

Louise feels the pastoral care team play a vital role, as much of their work involves dealing with situations where they are trying to establish the reasons students are struggling, aiming to get the students to talk. She reasons that it is important that students are aware of who is involved in the team as this makes the team more accessible. Donal recommends that the members “need to be upskilled due to the very sensitive information” they deal with. He states that the pastoral care team is “a voice for those who can’t seek help anywhere else”.

All the participants professed that the student council played a significant role in the nurturing of student voice. Donal is very positive about the role that the student council plays in his school. The fact that it involves nine to ten Leaving Cert students along with representatives from other years is the reason it is highly effective. He proposes that the creation of a student council liaison officer gives students “a good dynamic there and you would be surprised who talks up”. He suggests that the most effective role that students are involved in relates to the

writing of policies in student friendly language. “It’s their language formatted by us, but it makes so much sense because it’s done by them”.

Grainne believes because of the large representation on their student council, students “most definitely feel they have a voice” in the school and like other interviewees she feels their involvement with reviewing school policies enhances the student voice in all areas.

Student peer mentoring is seen as a valuable method in the promotion of student voice in schools. It involves senior students exchanging their knowledge and experience with younger students. Noelle proposes that peer mentoring, peer voice and peer experiences can have more of an impact on students, “as they hear it from their own fellow students”. She feels that the mentoring programme is particularly successful because of the way it is evaluated, allowing the mentors to highlight to the co-ordinators “if there are any issues they feel need to be acted upon”. Peter reiterates the significance of the mentoring system and the vital role of training. Mentors need to know “how to deal with a situation where a student has been bullied and they are given very clear guidelines what to do with that information”.

Five of the participants feel that certain subjects lend themselves to promoting student voice in schools. Noelle suggests that SPHE has “always been a very good platform for students to be able to express themselves” and is clear that it offers a valuable bullying programme. Siobhan asserts that in SPHE classes “there is an openness and a feeling of trust and security”. Rita utilises SPHE classes using restorative practice for class initiation, as she believes it creates “an open relationship”. Restorative practice is an approach that endeavours to restore relationships affected by bullying. Other SPHE teachers “want to do it” so the school provided training for this. The fact that religion became an examinable subject in Louise’s school meant that there was more of an onus on SPHE and SPHE teachers to provide a platform no longer as readily available through religion.

Three of the participants advocate restorative practice as the most appropriate approach to promote student voice in bullying situations. Donal affirms that after years of using other systems he described as “reactive”, he believes the best approach is using restorative practice, which allows students to express their voice in a positive manner. He suggests “the key is the students know everything”. It involves educating students and following pre-agreed steps to ensure that the student voice is heard in whatever capacity. Donal highlights that “surveys give us a whole lot of information which underpins the practice”. It is a successful practice according to Tim because perpetrators of bullying “are never aware of the impact they have; they don’t

realise it". He feels using this approach gives all those involved in bullying in whatever capacity the opportunity to talk about their experiences and "encourages" others to share their identifications. Tim believes the key to this approach is that "you are creating the space for students to express their emotions". Rita believes it is an integral component in promoting student voice in her school and incorporates additional practices in the classroom which allow students to get "to know each other in a different way".

4.3 Theme 2: If there aren't positive relationships between students and teachers the student voice doesn't develop effectively.

The focus of my study relates to bullying, and while the theme is a general one, I am now going to focus on the particular optic of bullying. To enable students to communicate about important and difficult experiences such as bullying, it is important to have a positive student-teacher relationship. All participants overwhelmingly suggest that the most important influence on generating a strong student voice in schools relates to the relationship that exists between students and teachers. It is commonly recognised by educational writers that cultivating positive relationships between students and teachers has a beneficial, valuable and enduring effect on the lives of students. Peter thinks that the relationship between students and teachers is essential in promoting student voice but feels it "does not just happen by chance". He advocates a proactive approach, which he sees as essential, and says that in his school it has been "purposefully developed". This approach, he stresses, has "led to a very trustful relationship, where teachers and students are engaged, not just at a superficial level". He suggests that the informal dealings that students and teachers are involved in can in fact sometimes be more effective than structured events.

Siobhan proposes that if a good relationship exists and students "feel they are being listened to, then they will come forward more often". She advances this point by suggesting that staff members should be encouraged to get involved in informal events in school, as she feels this enhances the student-teacher relationship. Her belief is that if students observe teachers in a more relaxed environment outside of the classroom setting "they see a side of you that they might not see". These informal events give teachers a distinct platform to encourage students at a different level and Siobhan feels that it "really opens up a huge channel for you to engage more fully and deeply with students". This is a view shared by Donal, as he is convinced that a different group dynamic is created when teachers are involved in informal activities with students. "You have more understanding and they understand you too. You understand the

body language and you see things better and you have those conversations outside the classroom which you cannot have inside”.

Rita is unequivocal in her belief that “it’s all down to relationships”. It is obvious that her school fundamentally agrees with this, as it runs a variety of initiatives promoting positive relationships. However, she does propose that certain teachers are in a better position to develop these relationships than others. She suggests that some teachers are particularly busy with exam classes, which limits their involvement in informal events. Grainne reasons that student–teacher relationships have dramatically improved in recent times and feels that one of the main reasons for this is the change that has been taking place in teaching methodologies. She feels the new approaches where students are active in their own learning combined with a less didactic approach are conducive to developing relationships that enable students to “feel more confident, more competent and more comfortable expressing their voice in a classroom situation”.

4.3.1 Sub-Theme: The overall ethos of the school is vital in the promotion of student voice

School ethos “refers to the character, atmosphere or ‘climate’ of a school” (Hughes 2016, p. 1). School ethos can be described as the characteristic spirit of a school and a number of participants highlight the importance of ethos in the school setting. Donal describes that the ethos “has to be a living reality”, so pretension does not exist. Students are the people who can sense most profoundly and intuitively the atmosphere of the school. Rita believes that in her school approachability is “all down to the ethos of the school” and states that the school is following the vision of its founder and continues to develop his vision. Noelle suggests that “the ethos and dynamic of the school is extremely important” and links the positive ethos of the school to the students’ ability to approach anybody in the school to voice their issues.

4.4 Theme 3: Barriers to nurturing student voice

The final theme that was identified relates to the barriers that impede the effective nurturing of student voice in educational settings. Such barriers include lack of time and resources, insufficient training, and fears of making a disclosure about bullying incidents. All the participants believe that these barriers are negatively affecting opportunities for students to voice their concerns and ideas and that this is outside of their control. These barriers are conveyed through three sub-themes.

4.4.1 Sub-Theme: Lack of time and resources impacts the nurturing of effective student voice.

Time constraints and lack of resources have a negative impact on the effective development of student voice. Participants all suggested that lack of time and resources is a major factor inhibiting the promotion of student voice. Peter maintains that teachers are overburdened and suggests that “lack of time is a major factor in hindering various good initiatives including the promotion of student voice”. He proclaims that “there is too much change” and adapting to these changes requires time, which is not being accommodated. Siobhan concurs with Peter and suggests that even time for planning is restricted. The area of bullying and student voice requires a lot of planning and involvement of students. She suggests that students are under pressure in their own lives and their time is at a premium – a concern echoed by other participants – and that taking students out of class can affect relationships with other teachers.

Tim maintains that “if time was not a factor more teachers would get involved in initiatives” and is critical that substitution is no longer as freely available as it used to be. Louise suggests that the problem centres on ‘when’ the students express their voice. Because of various commitments, teachers are not always able to deal with student voice in immediate situations and management may be required to put substitution in place. However, this is not appropriate in all situations. Grainne has a similar opinion and thinks that teachers are under serious time pressure “there doesn’t seem to be enough hours in the day anymore”. She admits that at times she brushes over student interaction and suggests to the student that “it is not the forum” for such disclosures. She is reticent about such an approach but firmly blames lack of time.

Participants also feel that lack of resources is a contributing factor in the limitation of student voice. The school’s geographical location is an issue for Grainne, as the cost factor inhibits the school bringing in guest facilitators and she proposes “their travel expense alone is huge”. Paul concurs and suggests that facilitating guest speakers is problematic, as “the cost is astronomical”. Even though his school has DEIS status he is frustrated that it is restricted in terms of funding and believes this hampers the opportunity for the student voice to be developed. He furthers his assertion by highlighting that even when teachers are interested in being educated to undertake student voice initiatives, there is “a huge cost to get people trained”.

4.4.2 Sub-Theme: In an age where young people’s voice is actually an issue, teachers identify a lack of training.

This sub-theme was easily identifiable, as there was an overwhelmingly frustration at the lack of suitable training for both students and teachers. Seven participants expressed concern about the availability of training, a fundamental element in the promotion of student voice according to all interviewees. The importance of continuing development and training is integral in the teaching profession. In order to be proficient in all aspects of their role, teachers require continuous professional development. Unfortunately, according to seven of the participants, this is not only an area that is lacking in the promotion of student voice but is a concern generally in the education system. There is limited training available for students also. Ultimately training is required to provide skills to both students and teachers. Paul is adamant that in order to promote student voice it is essential to have “appropriate training for teachers and students”. Noelle feels that all teachers should receive training and adequate “time to do it properly”. Tim is frustrated with the restrictions around access to training, stating that “you can’t do it [promote student voice] without training”.

Rita believes training is essential and is forthright about the need to make sure teachers are “sure they know what they are talking about”. Siobhan is explicit about the training required because of the “complexities” of this area. She highlights the fact that students are vulnerable and need highly competent, responsible teachers who are trained in the issues that they are facing. She believes that tutors and those who are directly involved with students at a personal level require additional training and her colleagues have intimated that “they wish they had more skills on how to deal with students who come to one on one and make a disclosure”. Louise believes training needs to be “interactive” to be effective and believes that as teachers we need to be in a position “to give the skills and the confidence” to students who are enduring difficult bullying situations. She is highly critical that initiatives that were successful in her school were removed partly because of the lack of training and resources.

4.4.3 Sub-Theme: In situations of bullying, student voice can be inhibited by fear of recriminations and potential escalation of the issue, but restorative practice can help overcome the fear.

While exploring the barriers to nurturing student voice, I identified that fear and concern about disclosure of bullying incidents was a primary concern for both parents and students. Three of the participants believe that student voice in the context of bullying can be restricted because

of the fear students and parents have about making a disclosure and the effect it might have on the victim of bullying. Peter believes that students have “a fear of not wanting to tell” because of the potential recriminations that might occur. He believes that this can only be overcome through re-enforcing the message that you are in fact helping somebody rather than getting them in trouble. Noelle echoes these sentiments and believes “their greatest fear is that it would escalate”. She develops this and suggests that parental influence can inhibit students from “telling an adult about what is happening”, highlighting that teachers are sometimes “not allowed to be that good adult because parents are restricting us from doing anything about the bullying”. Donal believes the only way to counteract this mentality and to genuinely promote student voice is to adopt a restorative practice in school. While he accepts that students fear “getting a fellow peer in trouble”, this can be overcome by using restorative practice and educating students in the process. He regards restorative practice as a proactive approach where student voice is central and further asserts that it is the only way that student voice can be promoted in bullying situations in schools.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from the nine semi-structured interviews with teachers who are members of the pastoral care team in their respective schools. It highlighted the data analysis strategy and presents the findings under three overarching themes and five sub-themes. The next chapter will explore the relationship between the literature review and the findings of the study.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critically construe and integrate the primary research findings in relation to the research questions and the literature analysed in Chapter 2 (Thomas 2013). The chapter will outline the overall findings emanating from the overarching themes and sub-themes that arose from the research study as well as the key issues that were identified in the literature review.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

This study was influenced by the research questions, which aimed to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. Even though the research was conducted on a small scale, it offers a snapshot in time of nine teachers' experiences, which provided insight into their views. The primary research question asked about teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. In order to consider the topic, various subsidiary questions framed the study and sought to find out:

1. What do the participants understand by the expression 'student voice' in the context of bullying situations in their school?
2. In relation to bullying, in what ways do participants perceive students having a voice or a say in what happens in the school?
3. Does the student have any role in promoting student voice in bullying situations in their school?
4. What are the barriers that participants see if any that prevent meaningful student involvement in bullying situations in their school?
5. How might/does student–teacher interaction empower student voice in participants' schools?
6. What would facilitate 'student voice' in anti-bullying programmes in participants' schools?

Through the interview process, insight was gained into teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student voice in bullying situations. The findings suggest that there is an appetite to nurture student voice in educational settings but highlight several barriers that impede such an endeavour. The findings did, however, highlight certain areas that are integral if schools are to promote student voice to a position where they can hear what students are saying and be

proactive in their response. This chapter will discuss the key findings of the research in relation to the literature available in this area.

The overall findings highlight a number of key issues:

1. The importance of nurturing student voice in all aspects of school life
2. The role of student voice in bullying situations
3. The role of the student council in the promotion of student voice
4. Over-reliance on the guidance counsellor in the pastoral care team in relation to bullying.

5.2 The Importance of Nurturing Student Voice in All Aspects of School Life

Student voice should permeate all educational endeavours in a school environment and not be exclusively restricted to bullying. In fact, it should underpin the whole school experience of students in the Irish educational system. Both the literature review and the findings support this view. Fleming (2015) is clear in his synopsis that student voice relates to issues that concern students and highlights various initiatives such as pedagogical insights where student voice should be heard. Fielding (2004) and Cook-Sather (2006) concur and believe that students should have the opportunity to have a meaningful dialogue that would enhance their future school experiences.

Klein (2003) believes that students should be active participants in their education and should ultimately be in a power-sharing relationship with school management. She suggests that education is about fostering students to be enthusiastic, flexible, socially and emotionally knowledgeable and “questioning participants in their education and in the wider world” (Klein 2003, p. 2). This questioning spirit can be advantageous, according to Mitra (2003), as it provides opportunities for students to contribute their views on issues regarding their education.

It is an exciting time in Irish history as a Youth Oireachtas is to be convened in Dáil Éireann on 15 November 2019. Arguably this is a result of the reaction of Irish students to Greta Thunberg, a Swedish student who raised awareness of the risks posed by climate change. Greta held politicians to account when she began a demonstration outside the Swedish parliament. The *Irish Times* reported that over 10,000 Irish students joined the international climate change protests when students went on strike on 15 March 2019. Student voice was evident in the demonstrations and it is no coincidence that in response to this the government is to convene this first ever Youth Parliament in the history of the State.

Student voice “initiatives and approaches impact positively on children and young people, their schools, the people who work in them and ultimately society in general” (Klein 2003, p. 115). Creating a truly democratic school where all voices are heard and acted upon is a development that benefits everyone – a view espoused by all the participants in this research. The literature review indicates there is an appetite for nurturing student voice in educational practices. Flynn (2017) states in ‘The Learner Voice Research Study’ that students have the potential to add significant knowledge when they are afforded the occasion to have a say on educational issues. In fact, she suggests that relevant bodies should be questioned about the under-representation of student voices in educational discourse. Klein (2003) suggests that ‘The Euridem Project’ (2000) was a valuable research project, as it highlighted the correlation between affording students a voice and augmented school effectiveness. This appetite for nurturing student voice, evident from the literature review, is unanimously endorsed by all the participants.

Unfortunately, the Irish education system is behind its international counterparts in this endeavour. As outlined in the literature review, various initiatives have been established in England to strengthen the role of student voice, including protective legislation and the involvement of the inspectorate. In 1992 the approval of the UNCRC provided a forum for discussion about student voice in Irish education. The White Paper on Education published by the DES in 2005 included contributions from all members of the school community except for students, referenced the importance of a shared dialogue. The fact that student representatives were not involved seemed like a hollow attempt at nurturing student voice.

The subsequent Education Act (1998) did, however, position students’ involvement in the operation of the school. It proposed that “students of a post-primary school may establish a student council” (DES 1998, 27.3). This was undoubtedly a positive step, but at this point it was the lone noteworthy action nurturing student voice, a sentiment echoed by one of the participants of the study. Student perspective was not incorporated in the DES pilot project on whole school evaluation (DES 1999). This seems extraordinary considering it related to a whole school activity. Rigby (1996) suggests that policies will be ineffective without the optimistic endorsement of students, a belief that Grainne supports. In its defence, the DES did note its intention to include student representation going forward. However, this did not materialise until 2004, when whole school evaluation at post-primary level introduced interviews with student council members to establish their experiences of school life (Fielding 2013). This was further developed in 2009 when questionnaires were employed to a representative group to amass their perceptions on school life. According to one participant,

this was “tokenism at its best, it was a piecemeal gesture undertaken to satisfy some external groups who were advocating for student voice”.

The introduction of school self-evaluation, adopted by the DES in 2012, is regarded in educational settings as a positive step in nurturing student voice (Fleming 2013). Grainne feels that this self-evaluation approach, while noble in its intention, is far from what is required if you are genuinely going to empower students to partake purposefully in a school setting. In contrast, Tim believes that there has been an improvement in the nurturing of student voice in schools, as his students suggested they were “listened to and they were only in the school a year”.

While Tim is appreciative that students’ views have been incorporated at some level, he echoes sentiments felt by all the participants that there are many barriers to nurturing effective student voice. The DES proposes the importance of nurturing the student voice, but according to the findings, the reality on the ground is that they are not creating feasible structures to advocate the necessary changes to facilitate it. Flynn (2017) highlights that it is not enough to listen to students; their views must be acted upon. All participants believe that in the current educational climate this is an extremely difficult task because of lack of time, training and resources. Smith and Sharp (1994) suggest that scarcity of training manages to act as a brake on the inclination of staff to involve themselves in bullying situations, as they can lack belief that they can function efficiently.

Mitra (2003) suggests that students may convey ideas and beliefs that teachers might question and find objectionable. Tim echoes these sentiments, but he recommends that some teachers need to overcome their fear of the power of student voice. He believes that some may feel that students “might be criticising them”, which needs to be addressed, as we “all need a bit of direction”. There is a dearth of research evidence on generating appropriate conditions for nurturing student voice in Ireland. While it is obvious there are good initiatives in the participants’ schools, there is a chasm between the theory and aspirations relating to student voice and the actual reality in schools in Ireland. Participants’ frustration with this situation was obvious. What is needed is an authentic approach from both the DES and school leaders. It is obvious from both the literature review and the findings that there is a desire to nurture student voice in educational endeavours which should permeate throughout all school enterprises. There is an understandable requirement to explore this topic further in order to

encourage, develop and revise the concept of student voice and the practices that nurture it. I will make a recommendation about this in the concluding chapter.

5.3 The Role of Student Voice in Bullying Situations

If a school is to respond effectively to bullying situations, it is essential that student voice forms part of the school's endeavours to deal with bullying incidents. It is particularly difficult to involve student voice in bullying situations if it is not central to the culture of the school already. Students' positionality and their awareness of what is happening on the ground places them in a prime position to contribute to the response in such situations. Both the literature review and the findings overwhelmingly support this view. Minton (2008) stresses the importance of the centrality of the student voice when challenging bullying behaviour in schools. He is not in isolation, as Mitra and Gross (2009) believe that student participatory voices can lead to successful school reforms in relation to bullying. The literature review highlighted that bullying is prevalent in schools in Ireland. This is espoused by Minton (2010) Kirkham (2001) and O'Moore (2014). O'Moore (2013) suggests that bullying exists anywhere that human interaction takes place, a view not contradicted by any of the participants in the research study.

While DES policies advocate for student involvement in a school's response to bullying situations, the reality is that this is not always reflected in what happens on the ground. O'Moore in the NCGE document *The Four Pillars of Action* explicitly states that "bullying must be seen from the young person's perspective" (O'Moore 2013 p. 5). Smith and Sharp (1994) suggest that even though schools endeavour to learn about the intricacies and range of bullying, a certain proportion is probably concealed within the peer culture of the students. This potential concealment needs to be addressed. Minton and O'Moore (2003) stress that it is imperative that the hidden voice of students who are involved in bullying must be heard, a view supported by all the participants.

The literature review highlighted the effects of bullying on all who are involved and suggests they have a lot to say, but for various reasons haven't found their voice. Smith and Sharp (1994) believe that students must be able to express their emotions and requirements in a clear and authentic way. One could be forgiven for doubting the DES commitment to the importance of student voice when one observes the lack of certain stakeholders' involvement in the Department of Education's first official response to bullying in 1993. Two of the most important stakeholders' viewpoints were never sought: those of teachers and students. This is

remarkable considering that these two stakeholders are at the coalface of bullying situations in the school environment. The ensuing literature concentrates on the importance of a whole school approach where the voice of students plays a central role. This concurs with the participants' responses, as all participants feel that students can be pivotal in assisting in bullying situations as part of a comprehensive whole school approach. Noelle feels that "this is imperative, as students will get more involved if they see other stakeholders participating".

The DES Action Plan on Bullying (2013) was regarded as a new departure that highlighted the importance of school-based measures and strategies. This plan and the document relating to parent, and pupil perceptions of schools highlighted the importance of student–teacher relationships in the context of bullying. O'Moore (2013) suggests that student–teacher relationships can have a positive influence on students who are involved in bullying situations in schools. This resonates with all the participants who believe that the most important factor in the nurturing of student voice in bullying situations is the relationship that exists between teachers and students. Minton and O'Moore (2003) concur with this viewpoint, as they believe that internal school relationships are crucial if one wants to get students to speak about their experiences. Noelle suggests that if students see teachers listening to and acting on the more mundane issues "then they [students] will be more likely come to you with concerns like bullying".

The DES Action Plan on Bullying (2013) challenges schools to foster and strengthen dialogue, affording opportunities for the student voice to be exercised in bullying situations. While the Action Plan (2013) does not incorporate the student voice in the prevention of bullying in a meaningful way, it does promote the importance of school climate, which is further developed by Helen Gleeson in the NCCA document 'The Prevalence and Impact of Bullying Linked to Social Media on the Mental Health and Suicidal Behaviour Among Young People' (2014).

What is interesting is that participants were particularly vocal about the importance of dealing with cyberbullying, as they feel it is a major concern. Englander (2013) suggests that this developing attention relates to the impact of cyberbullying on students' emotional and physical well-being. Noelle's school therefore invested a lot of time in training senior students to deliver programmes relating to cyberbullying, as she believes "they are the experts, not us". This concurs with Hinduja and Patchin's (2015) belief "that many adults don't have the technological know-how" to deal with cyberbullying.

A further interesting finding of the research is that three of the participants suggest that the best approach to nurturing student voice in dealing with bullying situations is to employ restorative practice. This approach concentrates on developing relationships in schools and finding resolutions to conflict through dialogue. O'Moore (2010) believes that the restorative approach is effective, as it substitutes punishment and finds ways to discover activities that are corrective and reformative. She suggests it should be used whenever possible. This is interesting, as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), in its anti-bullying support material, highlights the restorative approach as an effective strategy to deal with bullying. It highlights that restorative practice has become more widespread in schools over the past 20 years, particularly in Great Britain, Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. Donal is uncompromising in his analysis, basing it on his previous experiences that it is the only approach that works in a school setting. He believes that the student voice does not surface in other approaches, as the students "don't want to be seen as a rat".

O'Moore (2013) does admit that there could be resistance to this approach, but believes that even with restricted time for training, teacher interest in such a valuable strategy could be awakened. Resistance can be understood, as the practice opens a door to a new mentality and culture modification. This proves to be a concern for five of the participants, as they don't feel that adequate training is provided to support such a new enterprise.

It is obvious from the literature reviewed and the findings from the participants that student voice could and should play a pivotal role in bullying situations in schools. Certainly, an appetite for such is evident from both literary advocates and participants. However, according to all involved, whether adopting the restorative approach or otherwise, adequate training and resources need to be provided. Currently this is a concern among both authors and participants, as they feel it is a barrier to nurturing student voice. Flynn (2017), in conjunction with the NCCA, stresses that teachers should be afforded continual professional development (CPD) opportunities to assist in the development of embedding a philosophy of listening to pupils in schools.

5.4 The Role of the Student Council in the Promotion of Student Voice

The student council can be pivotal in fostering student voice in educational settings, depending on the internal structures of an individual school. If the correct structures are in place and councils receive the necessary support from management, they can promote the student voice in an effective manner, particularly in bullying situations. Student councils must also ensure

that they accurately represent the views of the student body. The literature and findings concur with this view. The Education Act published by the DES (1998) offered the prospect for student councils to be formed in post-primary schools. Although it did not live up to what the White Paper in Education (1995) anticipated (Fleming 2013), it was the first meaningful approach to include student voice in the Irish educational system. While decision making was not central to the role of the student council, it was a new and exciting development. Keogh and Whyte (2005) propose that student councils offer a means for young people to be actively responsible and to voice their views, particularly in areas as important as bullying. It is not surprising that all participants highlighted the student council as a potentially effective method of nurturing student voice, as it was the initial construct to deliver student voice in an educational setting. Student councils can provide a framework where students have the autonomy to exercise their rights and experience first-hand the democratic process (Klein 2003).

Flutter and Ruddock (2004) deemed participation emerging from discussion with students as potentially transformative, a view on which all participants in the study readily agreed. In fact, three of the participants suggested it was the starting point in the discourse. It is apparent, from both the literature and the participants' responses, that the student council can be approached from a variety of perspectives. On the one hand Fleming (2013) suggests that in certain situations the student council is effectively tokenistic and functionally redundant, whereas Klein (2003) would have a somewhat more optimistic viewpoint, believing it can offer a feeling of ownership for students in the school that is vital in bullying situations. Contrasting viewpoints are also apparent among the participants of the study, as they expressed varying opinions as to what makes student councils effective in the promotion of student voice. Donal and Grainne believe it relates to the size of representation; others feel the key is the efficiency of the student council liaison officer; while others believe it relates to the council's ability to truly represent the entire student body in their submissions. Three of the participants believe it is crucial that the student council be involved in writing and reviewing school policies, as this shows a depth of student engagement, exactly what the White Paper on Education (1995) published by the DES envisioned. The document 'Student Councils: A Voice for Students', published by the DES in 2002, advocates active participation and contribution from students in the formulation of school policies such as bullying.

Klein (2003) is largely positive about the role of student councils, believing that they can provide far-reaching advantages to the whole school community. However, he does sound a word of warning, asserting that if student councils do not have a defined role and inaccurately

represent the student body, they will be disregarded and provoke scepticism and disconnection. This view concurs with several of the participants' responses. Peter believes that the "student council that becomes removed from the student body" is totally ineffective. Similarly, Noelle suggests that "if they don't have their finger on the pulse they are failing in their duty of representation". Klein (2003) believes that these situations can be avoided when the elected personnel are held accountable and frequently converse with the school body on its actions. Keogh and Whyte (2005) concur, as they believe that communication with the student body needs to be improved in terms of retrieving students' opinions and giving feedback, which is vital in relation to bullying.

Flutter and Ruddock (2004) suggest that tokenism and restricted democratic participation in decision-making has been a continual and frequently mentioned characteristic of students' experiences of student councils, an interesting viewpoint as agreed by one of the participants, who cited inadequate representation as an example. Paul was critical of management's approach to the process of electing student council representatives, as once they were elected in first year they continued in that role until they graduated.

Fleming (2013) contends that the council's actions are monitored through school management. Contrastingly, two of the participants believe that senior management does not inspect the workings of the student council and is relatively apathetic to its existence. Keogh and Whyte (2005) believe that to get the optimum from student councils you need full support from school management. This is an interesting observation, as respondents who felt their student council had managerial support believed in its overall success and effectiveness. However, this is not always the case. Paul is also critical of managerial support, citing the lack of continuity of the student council co-ordinator, as it has been a different person every year performing this duty.

What is evident from the findings and literature review is that student councils can be an effective way of nurturing and developing student voice in schools. All participants felt that a student council was the primary method of enabling the students to have a voice, which can be successful in dealing with bullying. Therefore, it is important that it is approached and implemented correctly. Good practice suggests that schools should set up student councils as a platform for student voice, but otherwise one needs to question where the other opportunities are to nurture student voice.

Forde *et al.* (2017) suggest that while there has been progression in terms of legislation on students' involvement in the education system, advancement on comprehending students'

participation has been leisurely. However, the Minister for Education and Skills published the Student and Parent Charter Bill on 10 September 2019, which is a welcome new proposal. One article of the bill proposes to amend Section 27 of the Education Act 1998, which required the student council to promote the interests of the school; this has now been modified to specifically promote the interests of the students.

It is obvious that there are conflicting viewpoints as to how effective student councils can be in the advancement of student voice. If the student council reflects the interests and concerns of the student body and has genuine support from management, then it can be a valuable resource in the nurturing of student voice in areas such as bullying. However, if best practice is not adhered to, then student councils can be tokenistic and effectively futile. In Ireland official structures like the student council have been implemented, but students' experiences outside of these mechanisms have been largely unexplored. Therefore, there is a belief that we should endeavour to provide opportunities to nurture student voice in other efforts alongside the student council if student voice is to be truly augmented.

5.5 Over-reliance on the Guidance Counsellor in the Pastoral Care Team in Dealing with Bullying

Best practice dictates that a whole school approach is the most effective method when responding to bullying situations. While the pastoral care team in schools plays a central role in whole school interventions, specifically in bullying, schools tend to be over-reliant on the guidance counsellor in this team because of the guidance counsellor's training and expertise. Farrington and Ttofi (2009) advocate a whole school approach in bullying situations and O'Higgins-Norman (2008) develops this point by asserting that any initiative intending to address bullying in a successful manner must be nurtured as part of a whole school approach. This whole school approach is endorsed by the DES in its Action Plan (2013).

Within the context of the whole school approach, one must be cognisant of the role that the pastoral care team plays in nurturing student voice in bullying situations. All participants believe that the pastoral care team has a key role in promoting student voice and is in a pivotal position to do so. One issue that emanated from the findings, however, is the belief that guidance counsellors have a unique role to play in dealing with bullying situations in schools, a view clearly espoused by four of the participants. As evidenced in the literature review, the IGC and NCGE publications, alongside international research, highlight that while guidance

counsellors have a central role in bullying situations this role must be part of an integrated whole school approach.

Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) suggest that evidence points to guidance counsellors being able to respond to bullying in a uniquely positive way as a result of their training. While this is complimentary to the profession, one needs to be careful of going down this avenue, as over-reliance on the role of the guidance counsellor must be avoided. Flynn (2012) asserts that the guidance counsellor should not be the exclusive voice in this area. The DES Action Plan on Bullying (2013) suggests that leadership should be provided by all stakeholders, including students, to ensure that concrete steps are taken to contest and respond to bullying. However, according to three participants, bullying situations in their schools are simply left to the guidance counsellors. Byrne *et al.* (2004) suggest that in the past there was an impression that the guidance counsellor's role was to work with many students engaged in bullying incidents. This research evidence suggests that in certain schools this impression is a lived reality.

While guidance counsellors are well positioned to support students in bullying situations, it should not be their remit exclusively, as all school personnel have an important role to play. Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) propose that guidance counsellors are one element of a larger system that has an influence on bullying. Grainne suggests that there is an over-reliance on the guidance counsellor's expertise. The findings portray that the reality on the ground is not as straightforward as the literature suggests. Noelle believes that the guidance counsellor in her school is the first point of contact for students and surmises that this person probably knows students better than do the other members of the pastoral care team. This in-depth knowledge is potentially critical; as Gordon (2018) points out, students often fail to tell anybody of the distress they are suffering. According to Noelle, guidance counsellors have a heightened awareness of students' situations; nevertheless, she does not believe it should all be "landed on their shoulders". McCoy *et al.* (2006) suggest that one of the reasons that this can materialise is because of staff perceptions of the role of the guidance counsellor. Foxx *et al.* (2017) agree with this sentiment and expand the point by suggesting that teachers have broadly divergent views on the role of the guidance counsellor.

Paul reveals that in his school members of the pastoral care team avoid dealing with bullying situations because of inadequate training. This concurs with Hearne and Galvin's (2014) inquiry into a case school where teachers had not obtained any specific training in pastoral care in their teacher training or in their teaching career and some felt unqualified when dealing with

certain pastoral situations. Therefore, the guidance counsellor ends up picking up the pieces. This is a serious concern, as O' Moore underlines in *The Four Pillars of Action* (2013) that all members of the school community need awareness-raising programmes to assist them in comprehending how to avert, recognise and deal with bullying.

Grainne believes that there is an over-dependence on the guidance counsellor and indicates that the guidance counsellor in her school was under additional pressure because the pastoral care team did not meet during the year. In schools where pastoral care is robust it can still be difficult to unearth the pressures and difficulties that students encounter in their lives. O'Higgins-Norman (2008) highlights that pastoral care teams can be vital in increasing consciousness and handling change in relation to bullying.

If pastoral care teams are not able to meet and perform their expected duties as a result of different variables such as lack of training or time, there seems to be an over-dependence on the guidance professionals to undertake additional duties. While guidance counsellors play a crucial role in the prevention and resolution of bullying in schools, they can't be the lone voice. All stakeholders who are interested and informed in the area of bullying can be instrumental in reducing bullying incidents in the school environment, according to O' Moore (2015).

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I initially presented the importance of student voice permeating all school endeavours. I then looked at student voice and the vital role it can play in bullying situations because of the positionality of the student. From this I examined the student council's role in promoting student voice, which can be powerfully influential if it gets the necessary support. Drawing on the literature and my findings, I then looked at the guidance counsellor's role as part of the pastoral care team in the whole school approach to bullying.

Findings from my research suggest that student voice is a valuable resource in the overall educational enterprise of post-primary level schools. Specifically, regarding bullying, students' positionality means that student voice is crucial in bullying situations. Where schools incorporate the concept of appreciating student voice, they are more likely to have an effective student council and participants in my research have indicated that effective student councils can be positively influential in bullying situations. While bullying is an issue best challenged by employing a whole school approach, there are parties that are best suited to work collaboratively with students in bullying situations, such as the pastoral care team. However, because of lack of training and resources, the burden falls principally with the guidance

counsellor. In the next chapter I will introduce a recommendation that might enhance this situation. This chapter has critically discussed the overall findings emanating from the study, highlighting four main issues originating from the three overarching themes and five sub-themes that emerged. Chapter 6 presents the overall conclusions and proposes recommendations as a result of the study.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the main findings and general conclusions in the context of the aim and objectives of this research study. The strengths and limitations are addressed and a number of recommendations for policy, practice and future research are presented. The researcher's reflexivity is discussed as well as personal learning gained.

6.1 Overview of Findings

The overall aim of this research study was to explore teacher's perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. This was accomplished by employing an interpretivist approach using semi-structured interviews. Nine participants were interviewed in order to gather primary qualitative data and an analysis of the overall findings was undertaken. Overall the findings clearly identified the importance of the student voice in all educational pursuits including bullying. Even though I specifically wanted to ascertain teachers' perceptions of student's voice relating to bullying situations, I was encouraged that each participant saw the value of student voice permeating through all educational endeavours. However, the challenge is not just to listen to students, schools must ensure that students understand that they have been heard and their contributions and opinions have been recognised (Flynn 2017). The positionality of the students affords them an opportunity to understand issues at a level where other stakeholders might not be in a situation to do so.

The importance of positive relationships between school staff and students was highlighted as integral in nurturing student voice in the school environment. If students feel that their views are valued by teachers, then they will be more likely to express their thoughts and opinions on various matters including bullying. Bullying is a real problem despite the amount of attention that it has garnered over the last number of decades. One area that has not been fully explored is the potential role of the student voice in assisting other stakeholders in the whole school approach when dealing with bullying. Considering that students are directly involved in whatever capacity in bullying situations it is an issue that needs to be addressed.

A crucial issue identified in the study was that certain barriers existed which prevented nurturing student voice in bullying situations. These included lack of time, resources and inadequate training which ultimately denied willing teachers the opportunity to advance student voice which was unanimously agreed by all the participants. The level of frustration felt was

obvious with the barriers as it restricts teachers' ability to contribute to the promotion of student voice. In certain cases where the spirit of volunteerism was evident teachers concern was lack of confidence and competence to address pertinent issues. CPD needs to be provided to ensure that teachers are equipped with the relevant skills in order to promote student voice. While one must be cognisant of budgets, we must become innovative as to how we can overcome such obstacles as lack of training, resources and time.

We must also be mindful that the whole school approach is promulgated as best practice in most educational practices however there is a noticeable concern that schools can be overly reliant on certain systems and people. Student councils can be effective in nurturing student voice if they are conducted properly. The situation is that in a number of instances they are effectively the main agency which promotes student voice in schools. This is a situation that needs to be addressed. The findings highlighted the concerns of participants who believe the guidance counsellor is being relied on too heavily in certain bullying situations, which is contrary to the whole school approach advocated by the DES.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

6.2.1 Strengths

This research study includes a number of strengths. A key strength of the study is the methodology employed to examine the topic in hand. The use of the interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to obtain the narratives of nine members of different pastoral care teams. The researcher therefore was provided with robust descriptions of the members experiences which achieved depth rather than breadth (Blaxter *et al.* 2010). The methodology used provided a unique occasion for interaction between the participants and the researcher which provided a richness through diversity of experiences where they shared their lived experiences with the researcher (Thomas 2013).

Another strength of the study is that the exploration of 'Student Voice' in relation to bullying is a research area which has been relatively neglected in Ireland in the past and it is hoped that this study will stimulate a scholarly discussion going forward. Therefore, it addressed a gap in empirical evidence on the subject. Another asset in this research was that it was gender balanced and participants had varied years of experience coming from different educational backgrounds. Throughout this study the issue of reliability, validity and reflexivity was central ensuring that it was an authentic exploration. Transcripts were reviewed frequently and meticulously to ensure accuracy of content.

6.2.2 Limitations

The interpretivist paradigm has been criticised in relation to semi-structured interviews. The responses can be open to interpretation if the researcher embraces a subjective position. Personal bias can be an issue in qualitative studies (Cohen *et al.* 2007) therefore the positionality of the researcher was clearly identified, and a methodical approach utilised to ensure that bias was minimised. One likewise needs to be mindful when conducting semi-structured interviews that respondents bias can be in evidence in both the suppression of information and providing the researcher with information, they think the researchers desire (Hearne *et al.* 2016). Personal reflexivity was to the fore throughout and this is vital when undertaking qualitative research as interpretative research is subjective. The researcher noted his thoughts throughout the process, in particular when gathering and analysing data retrieved in order to be transparent. When undertaking interviews, I noted observations in my journal, and this led me to be better in terms of my preparation for further interviews. My journal also allowed me to keep my subjectivity under review.

The fact that the sample size was limited means the findings cannot be generalised therefore it is problematic to recognise conclusive trends in the data (Thomas 2013) The study did however provide thick, rich descriptions of the nine participants experiences which were authentic and enlightening.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Policy, Practice and Research

The findings have led to the formation of recommendations for future policy, practice and research.

A. Policy

- I discussed policy in relation to student voice in chapter two, and I highlighted in the discussion chapter the Minister for Education and Skills new bill ‘The Student and Parent Charter’ which is a positive approach which places students interests in a central position. This progressive approach could be a hopeful sign that student voice will become more central in policy developments in the future. An amalgamation of student perspective with input from other stakeholders would result in a more well-balanced and thoughtful whole-school approach. It is recommended that the DES develops policy and publishes literature that specifically guides school on nurturing student voice in educational endeavours. Never has there been a more apt time for the DES to circulate

literature, given the current media coverage of successful student voice initiatives in relation to climate change.

B. Practice

- Extending student voice beyond the limits of the student council as a matter of principle is an endeavour which I am interested in. I have an idea which I think might work and it relates to collaborating in a community of practice with teachers who are passionate about nurturing student voice. I will undertake this initially at a local level and then possibly look to extend its breadth. It would involve sharing and devising initiatives which would nurture student voice. In other educational domains the sharing of resources between departments and schools can be very advantageous when confronted by limited availability of time, resources and inadequate training. This approach could be a very valuable learning tool for all stakeholders involved. Collaboration with a knowledge of initiatives outside of one's own school body could help alleviate the current pressure placed on guidance counsellors and student councils in being the primary advocates when promoting school initiatives or when dealing with bullying situations.
- We also need to undertake further qualitative surveys in schools in order to ascertain rich descriptions of student's experiences and to obtain their opinions as to how we can nurture student voice. The community of practice group which I intend to establish would provide an ideal starting point to begin an exploration of this topic by assembling important knowledge through productive use of surveys.

C. Research

- Additional research in the area of nurturing student voice in bullying situations would be valuable as there is a dearth of research in this area. This would enable a wider geographical breadth to be explored and generate a greater and broader variation in findings.
- As I highlighted earlier some of our international educational counterparts have been highly successful in nurturing student voice. I recommend that we explore the systems that are proving to be productive and incorporate these practices into our educational endeavours where it is appropriate. The NCCA in partnership with colleagues from the Netherlands, Slovenia, Hungary and Scotland are part of an Erasmus project 'The Bridge to Learning Project' (2016-2019) which seeks to empower students to contribute

significantly and collaboratively in enhancing their experience of school. This international collaboration is positive, and I recommend that we continue this dialogical approach and focus on areas such as student voice in relation to bullying.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to personal Learning

Reflexivity relates to our awareness of how our own experiences, feelings and sentiments inform us during the research process (Etherington 2004). I undertook a reflexive approach throughout the research study which involved reflecting on how I interpreted and analysed the data collected during the research process (Thomas 2009). This approach sought that any preconceptions I had in relation to teachers' insights or experiences did not influence my study. To ensure reflexivity I kept a research diary which I found very beneficial as I recorded various activities, reflections and feelings throughout the research process (Berger 2013). I also received very valuable advice from my research supervisor during discussions that enhanced the reflexivity of the study as it challenged my discernments and assumptions in relation to the study.

The importance of training was highlighted in the findings and what I have learned is it is vital to avail of CPD to ensure that my knowledge base is extended in relation to promoting the student voice. The study also identified many positive approaches in the promotion of student voice that I can incorporate into my own practice. The participants provided me with compelling descriptions of their practices within the school environment. The passion they displayed was infectious and it has challenged me to advocate even more in promoting structures that support student voice.

I do believe that it is an exciting time for the promotion of student voice considering the government's recent announcement of a Youth Parliament convening in the Daíl in November. This was as a result of students voicing their opinions about the inaction of the government on climate change. Hopefully it will be a catalyst in establishing new policies and practices which promote the voice of the student in school settings. Research is undertaken by practitioners "for the purpose of advancing their own practice" (McLeod 1999, p.8). Thomas (2013) suggests that undertaking research might enhance the practice of practitioners. Ultimately the personal learning gained from undertaking this study will enhance my professional practice in my future role as a guidance counsellor and my existing role as a teacher.

6.5 Conclusion

Initially in this research exploration I introduced the topic under investigation and subsequently provided an overview of relevant literature pertaining to the area. I then outlined the methodical approach which underpinned the research study before presenting the findings in chapter four. In chapter five I provided a synthesis of the research findings. Chapter six concludes the research study. It provided an overview of the findings in the context of the aim and objectives of the study. It addressed the strengths and limitations of the study and proposed recommendations for future practice, policy and research. Finally, the chapter concluded with a reflection of my personal learning acquired as a result of the study.

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VOLUNTEER INFORMATION SHEET

A qualitative exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools.

Dear Teacher, (Member of the Pastoral Care Team)

I am a postgraduate student on the MA in Guidance Counselling & Lifelong Learning at the University of Limerick. For my MA dissertation in the University of Limerick, I am carrying out a qualitative exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences of their students' voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools. This information sheet will tell you what the study is about.

What is the study about?

The study aims to explore teachers' (who are members of the pastoral care team) perceptions and experiences of their students' voice in bullying situations in their respective schools.

What will I have to do?

You will be invited to take part in an interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded. Your involvement in the study will take place at a time and venue that is suitable to you.

What are the benefits?

The study aims to provide rich textural qualitative data concerning the teachers' perceptions and experiences of the students' voice in relation to bullying situations in their respective

schools. I believe it will inform my future professional practice and that of my colleagues with pastoral care roles in second level schools. The benefit of this study for participants/teachers and the teaching profession at large is to initiate a dialogical process on exploring student voice in bullying situations in our schools and to perhaps raise an awareness of opportunities we, as a profession, are not currently availing of. Exploring student voice is beneficial because it will hopefully lead to our students feeling they are being listened to, that their input is valued, their voices are being heard and they have an active part in what is otherwise a 'policy' in our school.

What are the risks?

There are no apparent risks. You might decide that you don't want to answer a question. If this happens, you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to. Should you need to, you can pause or terminate the interview without giving a reason.

What if I do not want to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to take part or to stop your involvement in this study at any time and without any consequence.

What happens to the information?

The information that is collected will be kept private and stored securely and safely on the researcher's computer. The computer is protected with a password and the data is encrypted. The transcript of the interview will be anonymised, and an alias will be used in place of your name. Your school will also be anonymised.

Who else is taking part?

Teaching members of Pastoral Care teams are being asked to take part. I hope to recruit ten members from a range of different schools. I hope to have a mix of genders and ages.

What if something goes wrong in the interview?

In the very unlikely event that you find the interview distressing the interview can be paused or you can terminate the interview.

What happens at the end of the study?

At the end of the study the information will be used to present findings in my dissertation.

The information will be completely anonymous. All anonymised data gathered from the research will be stored securely and safely by the University of Limerick for seven years, after which it will be shredded.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact me at 17123216@studentmail.ul.ie. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the study?

At any stage should you feel that you want to stop taking part in the study, you are free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about being in the study.

Contact name and number of Project Investigators:

Principal Investigator

Gerry Myers, Lecturer, School of Education, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 213374
Email: gerry.myers@ul.ie

Other Investigator

Padraig Doyle
Postgraduate Student
School of Education
Email: 17123216@studentmail.ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Padraig Doyle

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No: 2019_03_13)

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

*Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office*



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PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Title of Project: A qualitative exploration of teacher's perceptions and experiences of teachers of the student's voice in bullying situations in post-primary schools.

Should you agree to participate in this study please read the statements below and if you agree to them, please sign the consent form.

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I understand that the results of this study may be shared with others but that my name will not be given to anyone in any written material developed.
- I understand that my place of employment will not be identified in any transcript of the interview or in the researcher's dissertation.
- I am fully aware of what I will have to do, and of any risks and benefits of the study.
- I know that I am choosing to take part in the study and that I can stop taking part in the study at any stage without giving any reason to the researchers.

This study involves audio recording of the interview sessions. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that the interview will be audio recorded and I agree to this. However, should I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I know that I can ask for a summary of the interview, which will not include anybody's name. I understand what will happen to the transcripts and recordings once the study is finished.

I agree to the statements above and I consent to taking part in this research study.

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date: _____



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Dear (Teacher's name),

I am currently in my second year of the MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development in the University of Limerick. I am undertaking a study on teachers' perceptions and experiences of the student voice in bullying situations for my MA dissertation.

In carrying out this study, I wish to recruit teachers who are members of the pastoral care team in their respective schools who would be willing to participate in an audio recorded interview lasting approximately one hour. This interview aims to gain insight into teachers' experiences and perspectives of their students' voice in bullying situations in their schools. I am seeking to recruit teachers from a broad range of schools. I would be most grateful if you would consent to take part in this research project. If you participate in this study, your anonymity and the anonymity of your school is guaranteed.

Please find enclosed an information sheet detailing what will be required of participants. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at the email address below.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Padraig Doyle

Email – 17123216@studentmail.ul.ie



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Guideline Schedule of Questions

1. "Student Voice' encourages a culture of inclusion, engagement and meaningful participation" (Fleming, 2016). What do you understand by the expression 'student voice' in the context of bullying situations in your school?
2. In relation to bullying, in what ways do students have a voice or a say in what happens in the school?
3. Does the student body have any role in promoting student voice in bullying situations in your school?
4. What is your experience of the student voice in bullying situations in your school if any?
5. What are the barriers that you see if any that prevent meaningful student involvement in bullying situations in your school?
6. How might/does student-teacher interaction empower student voice in your school?

7. What would facilitate 'student voice' in anti-bullying programmes in your school?
8. What is your perception of pastoral care teachers' role in the promotion of the student voice in this area?

Appendix V

Extract from Research Diary

Interview 1: Paul

Date: 03/05/2019

I was very apprehensive prior to my initial interview even though I had spent a considerable time preparing for the interview linking the questions to the overall aim of the research study. I was very nervous that the recording device was working and was overly conscious of monitoring it throughout the interview. On reflection I don't think I explored enough of the interviewee's responses which would have enabled me to delve deeper into the participant's experiences. This interview was the shortest and after reviewing the transcripts and analysing the interview I observed a number of areas where I could have probed a bit more. I did diary my initial reflections immediately, which proved to be very helpful with the ensuing interviews.

Interview 2 Noelle

Date: 05/05/2019

I felt much more relaxed during this interview, I was conscious of my previous mistakes and used many of the core counselling skills that I was exposed to during my training. The participant was extremely knowledgeable and passionate about the subject area, which excited me. She spoke at length and I did a lot of clarifying to ensure I understood what she was saying, which worked well, as it helped build up a good rapport between us. I gained a lot of valuable information from this interview which was beneficial for my research study and my future professional practice.

Interview 3 Siobhan

Date: 18/05/2019

The participant was very nervous initially feeling that she might not be able to contribute enough to aid me in my research study. I was very mindful of my supervisor's advice and highlighted to her that her information would be of value irrespective of the fact that she felt her school had limited exposure in the promotion of student voice. While she was obviously nervous, I felt my counselling skills enabled me to help her relax as the interview proceeded. As it turned out she provided me with rich descriptions of her experiences and was very honest about her school's role in the promotion of student voice. I also think that her initial

apprehension related to the fact that she was over an hour late for the interview and was extremely apologetic even though I reiterated that I was not concerned about it.

Interview 4 Tim

Date: 27/05/2019

Tim had a great deal of experience and was very willing to share his knowledge with me. He was very relaxed and spoke at length on each question. He was very descriptive in his language and was very interesting to listen to. I did have to refocus on a number of occasions as I was so interested in what he was saying and in his storytelling style. He did by his own admission meander a bit and I had to clarify on a number of occasions. Once the interview was over, I began to transcribe immediately as I felt I needed to do so in order to have it fresh in my head. I also noted my thoughts and feelings in my diary, which I found helpful when undertaking my thematic analysis. I am grateful that this was not my initial interview, as I don't think I would have gained so much without the use of clarification.

Interview 5 Donal

Date: 06/06/2019

I was totally overwhelmed by this interview. Donal was extremely enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the topic in hand. His extensive knowledge was apparent from the outset. His relaxed approach showed me that he was very comfortable and interested in the area of bullying. He was forthright in his belief that the practice of restorative justice is the only approach that is successful in the promotion of student voice in bullying situations in schools. He outlined various examples and statistics which proved restorative justice was highly effective in his school. I found myself totally immersed in his dialogue and it felt more like a conversation than an interview. While this was advantageous in some respects, I feel that I missed opportunities to probe and clarify certain aspects of the conversation which would have provided me with even more rich descriptions of his experience. However, he did provide me with extremely valuable information for my research study.

Appendix VI

Map of Themes

