Holy Cross NS

NCSE Practice-Based Research Programme 2025/26
School Research Summary

School and project details

Name of school: Holy Cross NS

Practicing teacher lead: Emma Connolly (Teacher A)

Research theme: The Effects of Universal Design for Learning on Reducing Stress and Increasing Motivation Among Primary School Children with a Focus on Children with Additional Educational Needs.

Research aim: The aim of this research is to reduce stress and increase motivation and engagement among learners with a focus on learners with AEN, through the implementation of the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

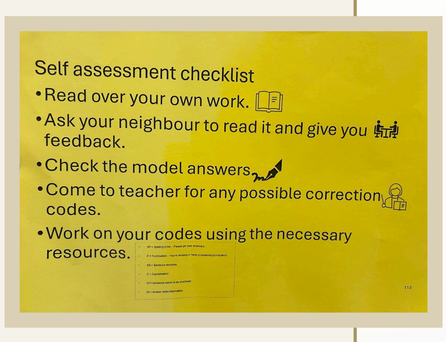
Research in practice

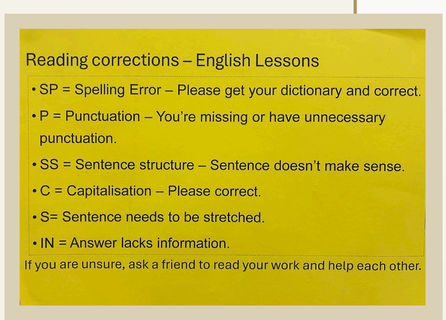
Methods

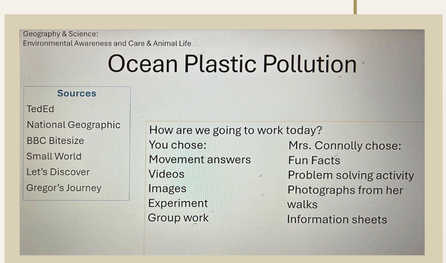
A mixed method approach was used. Teachers' observations and experiences were captured through open-ended feedback forms. Surveys with both open and closed questions were used to collect information from students.

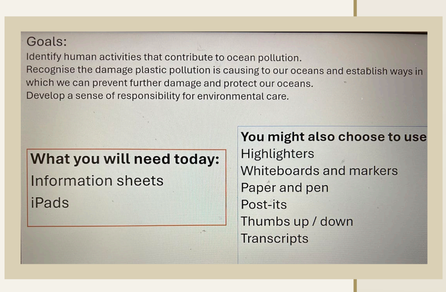
Each teacher implemented the principles of Universal Design for Learning within their classroom. This provided students with multiples means of engagement, action and expression and representation. The extent to which the principles of UDL were implemented varied among teachers, dependent upon their experience of the framework as is shown below.

Teacher A	Co-design of lessons and assessments with the students. Strong use of student voice. Assessment as learning. Flexible seating. Community of learning. Dual coding
Teacher B	Movement / Flexible seating
Teacher C	Community of collaboration
Teacher D	Dual coding
Teacher E	Movement / Flexible seating









Teacher A implemented the three principles of UDL across all subjects and throughout the classroom environment and culture. For example, students were actively involved in co-designing lessons and assessments, their voices were central to decision-making, and assessment as learning was used to support their engagement and ownership of learning.

Flexible seating was implemented by teacher A, B and E. Teacher A provided a flexible seating system, giving the students autonomy over their choice of seats. Teacher B allowed more movement within the children's seat, such as fidgeting, resting on the desk etc. and Teacher E also offered movement within their class and strategically arranged seating with the aim of reducing anxiety among learners. Teacher A also allowed for a choice of movement throughout the day as the students required it – led by the students.

Teacher A and C fostered a community of learning where 6th Class supported and guided Junior Infants over a period of weeks with a variety of lessons and tasks. Teachers A and D provided visuals to support written and verbal instructions.

Participants

Teachers and students were involved in the research. This included 5 mainstream classroom teachers from Junior Infants to 6th Class. Student involvement in relation to student feedback was focused on 21 students from 6th class.

Impact of our research

These findings are being used to inform interested teachers on the benefits and challenges faced when implementing UDL.

The power of the students' voice was very evident. When the students felt heard and developed the skills required to use their voice in matters that concern them, there was a significant decrease in stress among all children. Furthermore, children with AEN developed confidence in voicing their opinions on how they accessed additional resources that were available to them.

Research findings

This research generated several findings.

Flexibility within the learning space.

Teacher A provided a flexible environment through a choice of seating arrangements. Teacher A noticed that overall, this created a less stressful environment for the majority of students, as they were not concerned about sitting somewhere they did not feel comfortable. Furthermore, for children with AEN teacher A observed that they were not anxious about being separated from the people who made them feel comfortable. However, for a very small number of students, a choice of seating did cause anxiety at times, and some structured seating was introduced to support these students. Teacher B also allowed for movement within seats and provided a less rigid seating environment. Teacher B noted that this resulted in a smoother running of lessons as they were not stopping to correct seating positions. Additionally, Teacher B stated that the children appeared more relaxed and noticed an increase in engagement. Teacher E increased the number of opportunities for movement within the class to support children with AEN and noted a decrease in stress among students with ADHD and stated that there was an overall increase in engagement.

Community of Learning

An increase in motivation was noticed by teachers A and C when collective learning activities were organised between 6th Class and Junior Infants. This practice provided the junior class with more opportunities for oral language expression and questioning. Furthermore, children with AEN in 6th Class became more confident in their own abilities as they developed relationships with the younger children through continuous collaborative learning experiences.

Dual Coding

Teachers D and A used visuals to support written and verbal communication. Teacher D used visuals in addition to scaffolds such as word banks and clarification of vocabulary to support word problems in math lessons. This reduced the barriers for children with AEN and *"confidence and engagement improved"*. Teacher A supported verbal instructions and guidelines with written and pictorial forms for the children. They noted a much less stressful environment than before, as there was a significant decrease in repetitive questions about the task at hand and children with difficulty processing directions auditorily or who had difficulty focusing, were able to access the information required repeatedly and at their own pace.

Co-Design

A significant increase in engagement was noted when students were provided with options on how to engage with tasks and when multiple means of representation were used to present content. When students were asked which forms of representation helped them to understand what they were learning, 17 out of the 21 students chose more than one means. When students were asked which forms of engagement helped them to understand what they were learning 15 students chose multiple means. One student commented that *"lessons are good because Mrs. Connolly gives us different ways to work things out"* and *"we get to use different utensils"*.

Student Voice

Student voice was at the core of Teacher A's classroom. Students co-designed the environment, assessments and lessons with the teacher. Teacher A continuously gathered feedback from the students through surveys, a suggestion box and informal conversations. Feedback gathered from students signified that there was a reduction in stress among learners with one student stating *"when I wake up I don't feel drenched and I don't feel bad coming in this year"* and another saying, *"I feel that this year, I don't mind waking up and coming to school"*. This was also evident based on teachers' observations.

Assessment as Learning

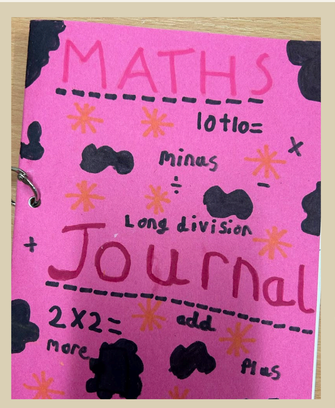
Teacher A facilitated assessment as learning within her class through the use of model answers, peer reviews and self-reflection using journals and discussion. The students stated, *"I can see my mistakes" "it makes me understand it more"* and *"I know what words to use now and how to use them"*.

Challenges

Finally, Teacher A encountered external challenges to the implementation of the principles of UDL in her classroom. Due to the alternative approach of assessment, from summative assessment to assessment as learning, there were concerns raised that the children were not progressing, due to the lack of a paper trail through the traditional weekly written assessments such as the 'Friday spelling test'. Furthermore, the children using their voices were at times seen as disrespectful by people unaware of the approach, rather than recognising it as them being provided with the opportunity to make mistakes and learn to use their voices in a safe environment. It is also important to note, that it can take time for the students to adapt to a more student led environment.

Our top three findings

1. The implementation of UDL reduced stress for children in all classes involved.
2. All teachers noted an increase in motivation and engagement across all classes involved.
3. The successful implementation of UDL is dependent upon teachers' familiarity with the framework and level of experience in implementing the principles.



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