Eglish National School, Galway

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

We are a small, rural primary school located in East Galway, in the west of Ireland. Our school has 31 pupils and serves a diverse community experiencing educational and socio-economic disadvantage. We place a strong emphasis on inclusion, wellbeing, positive relationships and providing a nurturing learning environment. We are particularly passionate about outdoor education, practical learning and creating meaningful opportunities that broaden our pupils' experiences, build confidence and help every child reach their potential.

School and project details

Name of school: Eglish National School

Practicing teacher lead: Clodagh McGrath

Research theme: Fun Friendship Fridays is a relationship based positive behaviour strategy.

Research aim: To investigate how mixed age, mixed ability and mixed background play based activities influence relationship building, friendship formation, belonging and cooperative behaviour across the school.





Research in practice

Methods

The project followed an action research cycle of observing, planning, acting and reflecting. Fun Friendship Fridays took place three Fridays per month. Pupils worked in deliberately mixed groups on baking, STEM, gardening, music, art, team building, card games and other hands-on activities. Evidence was gathered through staff observations and reflection, pupil voice and informal feedback, and an end of project staff, pupil and parent survey.

Participants

There were 39 students and 9 adults involved in this research. This included the whole-school pupil cohort, from Junior Infants to Sixth Class, participated alongside teachers, SNAs, SET staff, visitors and the principal. Pupils were actively involved through mixed-group participation and by helping to shape activity choices.

Research findings

The research showed that regular, structured opportunities to learn and play in mixed age groupings had a very positive effect on pupils' happiness, behaviour, friendships and sense of belonging. Children looked forward to the sessions, spoke about them during the week and became more confident mixing with pupils outside their own classes. Staff feedback was unanimous: all respondents said they enjoyed FFF, believed the children enjoyed it and wanted it to continue.

Our top three findings

1. **Happier pupils and improved behaviour**
   Children were visibly excited and happy, while clear expectations and a consistent weekly structure supported a major improvement in behaviour and positive participation.
2. **Increased opportunities for inclusion**
   Mixed groupings enabled children to build relationships with peers they would not normally play or work with. Confidence, belonging and positive interaction grew across age and class groups.
3. **Leadership and peer learning**
   Older pupils naturally supported, guided and taught younger children. This strengthened responsibility, empathy, teamwork and shared achievement while allowing younger pupils to learn in a relaxed way.



Impact of our research

The findings have confirmed Fun Friendship Fridays as a valuable whole-school approach rather than a once off activity. The school intends to continue the initiative, retaining mixed-age groupings, predictable routines, pupil choice and opportunities for older children to lead and support younger pupils. Future planning will build in more outdoor and seasonal learning, rainy day alternatives, and occasional community-focused projects promoting empathy and kindness.

Staff, pupil and parent feedback indicated that all involved were eager to keep it going in the future, with 100% of survey respondents expressing a preference for it to continue into the academic year 2026/2027.

Fun Friendship Fridays supports inclusive practice by creating meaningful opportunities for pupils of different ages, abilities, backgrounds and needs to learn, play and succeed together. Mixed groupings, practical activities and peer support remove barriers to participation, allowing every child to contribute, develop friendships and experience a genuine sense of belonging within the school community. Older pupils and staff provide natural guidance and encouragement, ensuring that individual differences are recognised as strengths.

Fun Friendship Fridays aligns strongly with the Redeveloped Primary Curriculum by providing playful, active and integrated learning experiences that promote pupil agency, collaboration, wellbeing and the development of key competencies. Implementing the initiative gave teachers valuable practical experience and increased their confidence before formally beginning the Redeveloped Primary Curriculum in September 2026. During formal training days, staff frequently recognised aspects of the new curriculum and commented, *"Oh, that sounds like Fun Friendship Fridays,"* showing that many of its approaches were already embedded in the school's practice.

Fun Friendship Fridays aligns with Universal Design for Learning by providing varied, flexible and engaging ways for all pupils to participate, learn, communicate and demonstrate their strengths.

Fun Friendship Fridays had a very positive impact on pupil and staff wellbeing, creating a calm, happy and welcoming atmosphere throughout the school. The initiative helped to develop a culture of friendship, cooperation and shared enjoyment, with substitute teachers and visitors regularly commenting on the noticeably positive energy and sense of connection in the school.

The process gave staff clear evidence of the initiative's impact and created time to observe pupils in authentic social situations. It strengthened collaboration among teachers and SNAs, increased staff interaction with pupils across the school, and highlighted the value of pupil voice. Most importantly, it demonstrated that enjoyable, inclusive and well structured shared experiences can improve wellbeing and behaviour, create genuine friendships, develop leadership and build a more connected school community.

BRIATHAR DÉ MO LÓCHRANN
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