NCSE PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH PROGRAMME 2025/26

SCHOOL RESEARCH SUMMARY

School name: St Aiden's NS

Practising teacher lead: Anne Moriarty

Research theme: Implementing Irish Sign Language for Inclusion

Research aim: To introduce ISL school-wide, with a focus on enhancing the inclusion of all pupils and improving participation in school life, particularly, but not exclusively ASD pupils (with varying needs from emotional regulation to non-verbal), as well as EAL pupils, many of whom were newly arrived in Ireland with little English. The main areas of focus were pupil communication with peers; expression of needs; participation in activities and issues that arise from miscommunication.

Methods

Qualitative action research: pre and post implementation teacher data, based on a checklist around our main research aims. Pupil focus groups post implementation, with representatives from across the school.

The entire pupil cohort (79 pupils) were involved in the implementation; the teacher data focused on 22 pupils; the focus groups comprised of 24 pupils, mixed age, gender, ability from 1st-6th classes.

Research findings

Our biggest finding was the pupils' successful and effective use of ISL to communicate feelings/emotions on a daily basis, throughout the school. Teachers also identified ISL as a useful communication tool when words are too much for specific pupils.

Overall, following the introduction of ISL there was a marked improvement in pupils' ability to manage issues that arise from miscommunication across all classes, as a result of broader overall communication (not necessarily on yard) and the level of mutual understanding this afforded pupils. This was evidenced from teacher data about pupils and the number of incidents that arose on yard.

The enjoyment and motivation pupils got from learning to communicate in a 'new' language.

All pupils (and teachers also) had a new understanding and newfound empathy for the language learning process, as it positioned all of us as complete beginners.

Impact of my research

There is a greater school-wide awareness of the broader possibilities in teaching pupils to communicate effectively with each other and with teachers through ISL. Short, direct phrases (Calm down, Stop, I'm sorry....) seem to be more palatable when signed. 'It was amazing to communicate without words' (5th class pupil).

ISL also opened up new teaching and learning possibilities within the classroom, such as using ISL during Irish class, using ISL when correcting maths quietly with peers within class, greetings and expressing emotions. This benefited all pupils, particularly those whose first language is not English, therefore Irish poses an additional language challenge.

ISL significantly impacted the expression of emotions, as part of our Zones of Regulation process in all classes. It has now become part of our daily whole school practice to do a daily emotion check-in using ISL.

The entire school worked together on an ISL song, I can sing a Rainbow, which we videoed to share with parents. There was such a sense of togetherness and wellbeing in the singing, signing and recording of this.

What benefits have you found as a result of conducting your research?

ISL gave a means of communication to a dysregulated child when words were too much for him. This was a significant breakthrough for all. Key ISL phrases also helped teachers and ISAs (SNAs) to help pupils to regulate while minimising talk. We aim to maintain and build on this expertise each year.

It gave specific children the confidence to share expertise with peers; one pupil had become interested early in our implementation, practised really hard at home and then shared with peers and helped them to become more expert.

There was so much joy for the pupils in learning ISL. It has motivated them to engage more fully and has encouraged them to plan ahead for continued learning. Our 'Heads Together' pupil committee compiled a list of phrases pupils would like to learn.

Teachers will use this list to inform further teaching and learning. It would be helpful to compile a list of phrases and themes, differentiated for each class level and to have coordinated themes across the school, such as food, clothes, weather.

A note of caution, ISL is not a panacea for inclusion, but it does indicate a positive and motivational impact on children's engagement with peers and expression of needs. However, there are other variables that also impact children's peer relationships that must be factored in.

Time and expertise: It was necessary to designate a certain amount of time weekly to the implementation of ISL. This did not factor in the preparation time needed for teachers as only two teachers had done a Fliúrse Summer course on ISL. Time, dedication and expertise, which all teachers gave graciously throughout this research project, are essential to maintain the success of the implementation.

Our teachers favour maintaining the approach going forward. Pupils also favour continuing to learn and use ISL.