



# Exploring Teachers' Experiences of Action Research



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## Introduction

- Action research is where the participants of the practice are also those carrying out the research (Kemmis, 2009), and its purpose in education is to (i) bring about meaningful change in practice, (ii) improve student outcomes and (iii) empower teachers (Stringer, 2008; Manfra, 2019).
- This small-scale study aims to evaluate whether a literacy-focused action research project carried out by teachers in primary and secondary schools in the Mid-Munster region achieved the outlined purposes.
- NEPS and the STAR Project invited schools with Traveller and Roma students enrolled to participate in a project which aimed to raise students' reading ability.
- The project involved teachers being supported to deliver an evidence-based intervention over 3 months, and collect and interpret pre-and post-intervention data.
- Eight schools are currently participating, with post-intervention data being collected in December 2021. Interventions currently being used include Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984), Toe by Toe (Cowling & Cowling, 1993), SRA Reading Laboratories, Precision Teaching and SNIP (Smart & Smart, 2007).

## Study Aims and Rationale

- This study had three research questions: (i) was the project relevant to teachers' practice? (ii) did partaking in the project meaningfully impact their teaching practice? (iii) what were the barriers and facilitators of undertaking the project?
- As scientist-practitioners, NEPS psychologists are well-placed to support teachers undertake action research, which can, in turn, enhance teachers' well-being, classroom practises, and student outcomes (Sullivan et al., 2021).
- Understanding teachers' experience can enhance NEPS future service delivery of similar projects.

## Methodology

- The study employed a qualitative design.
- Semi-structured interviews with five teachers (two primary, three post-primary) were conducted
- Subsequent data was explored using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

### RQ1: Was partaking in the project relevant to teachers' everyday practice?

- 60% of participating teachers stated **yes**, partaking in the action research project was relevant to their everyday practice.
- All participants who responded 'no' were post-primary subject teachers.

### RQ2: Did partaking in the project meaningfully impact teachers' teaching practice?

- 100% of participating teachers stated **yes**, partaking in the project meaningfully impacted their teaching practice.

### RQ3: How did partaking in the action research project meaningfully impact teaching practice?

- Theme #1: Opportunity to trial/pilot new ways of supporting students literacy needs (100%)
- Theme #2: It highlighted the importance of attuning interventions to students' specific literacy needs (80%)
- Theme #3: Opportunity for teachers to upskill (80%)

#1: "Everybody wanted to try something new to see if it would work for us [...] it could be something for the future that we could roll out every year"

#2: "...it's making sure it's targeted to the specific students, that we use all the evidence, we had the PPAD-E, the WRAT-5 [...] It's ensuring you're not just doing SEN for the sake of it"

#3: "I wanted to try out a new program and the action research project gave me the opportunity to do that"

### RQ3: What were the barriers to undertaking an action research project?

- Theme #1: Timetabling constraints (100%)
- Theme #2: Finding specific literacy supports for post-primary (60%)
- Theme #3: Within-student factors (40%)

#2: "It's harder to get the literacy resources for second level, that suit what the students need and be at their level as well"

#1: "It's very difficult in secondary school to give targeted interventions to the people who need it, because you're much more rigid with regard to the timetable"

#3: "...I don't know if what we're asking to do [sic] for some of them is beyond their ability"

### RQ4: What were the facilitators of undertaking an action research project?

- Theme #1: Peer support (opportunity to share experiences, discuss with other schools and teachers; 100%)
- Theme #2: Exterior Support (NEPS advice, availability, resources, webinars; 100%)
- Theme #3: Accountability (80%)

#1: "Sometimes if you're the only learning support teacher, you are on your own, there's nobody to run something by somebody - it was lovely, to have a group of learning support teachers all sitting down together and talking about what was happening for them"

#2: "...to know that NEPS were there if we had a problem, that email or text, that there was someone that we could go to, sometimes we don't have that"

#3: "To be in contact keeps us on track, there's a clear deadline, and that all helps [...] it keeps you on track and keeps you motivated"

### Other notes of interest:

- 100% of participants reported both they and their students enjoyed taking part.
- 100% of participants noted their primary motivation to take part was to improve student outcomes.

## Discussion

- Results highlight that partaking in the project was enjoyable, brought about meaningful change in practice, and allowed teachers to upskill and trial new ways of supporting their student's needs.
- Future action research projects should continue to provide opportunities to share experiences and provide structured support and resources from NEPS. Consideration may be given to supporting teachers timetable the intervention, choose appropriate interventions and manage expectations of student progress.
- Limitation: the data may be positively skewed as TEP interviewing was also involved in providing support to teachers during the action research project. To obtain objectivity, non-involved peers reviewed initial codes and final themes.

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