

**A Comparison of the Teaching Experiences of School Teachers  
in Ireland and the United States.**

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**Abstract:**

This comparative study examines the working experiences of primary or elementary school teachers in Ireland and the United States. In comparing the two, the researcher aims not only to increase the field of research – for such a comparison has never been reported – but also to make certain suggestions for improvement to the Irish experience. Six teachers were interviewed, 3 in Ireland and 3 in the US, using open-ended questions in a semi structured interview. Resulting data was later analyzed and discussed. The main differences in experience were found to be between socioeconomic groupings, rather than based on a geographic divide. Suggestions were made which could increase parental involvement in student education and reduce instructional downtime given over to discipline.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction:**

### **1.1: Brief Introduction:**

This research project is a comparative study of the every-day work experiences of primary school teachers in Ireland and the United States. As all participants are teachers, in theory these experiences should be much the same – teaching children of similar age, in what is theoretically a similar setting – yet the supports offered to the teachers vary widely from country to country. These supports might include something as simple as the help and advice of their fellow teachers, the support offered by interested and involved parents, a principal willing to listen and advise, or even initiatives taken at a higher level. Perhaps government initiatives to combat educational disadvantage or programmes aimed at promoting fluency and numeracy among students. These supports can directly influence their experiences in either a positive or a negative way.

This report aims, not only to investigate the experience of teaching here in Ireland and in the United States, but also to highlight the supports enjoyed by Irish teachers. It will also propose possible alternative supports, perhaps chosen from those available to the American participants, which may enhance the day to day work experiences of primary school teachers at home. It shall examine the effectiveness, from the teachers' perspective, of various Government and Department of Education and Skills initiatives, as well as the more local inputs, such as the effect of parents and fellow staff members on the participants' experience of teaching.

**1.2: What form will this research take?**

The participants are six school teachers, three working in the United States and three in Ireland, all teaching in a primary school, known as elementary school to the American cohort. Each participant will be individually interviewed, on the areas of their day to day experiences of teaching, perceptions of the supports available to them, and supports in the field of education generally. It is intended that these semi-structured interviews be kept quite informal, with open-ended questions allowing for free flowing responses. Recorded interviews will be transcribed and thoroughly studied. Thematic analysis of the data collected will follow. Emergent themes will be examined and discussed further, and recommendations and conclusions shall be drawn from this discussion.

### **1.3: Education and Educators as a Field of Study:**

Large amounts of tax money are being spent on tackling educational disadvantage on both sides of the Atlantic, and education for all is protected and assured by the UN Human Rights Charter. Surely the supports offered to, and the experiences of, educators should also be of paramount importance? It is worthwhile noting that initiatives in education and the money spent thereon, do not actually equate to initiatives in teaching necessarily, or to supports for the teaching staff themselves. However, the following initiatives are listed as the participants of this study will be asked to comment on the effectiveness of government's initiatives on local education, and to illustrate the size and importance of education as a field of study for research.

By examining general everyday teaching experiences in the US and Ireland, this research will also investigate the 'on the ground' effects of some of each government's education initiatives. It will touch on, among other things, levels of parental involvement in the education of their children – an area addressed in the United States' No Child Left Behind Act. Whether or not the initiatives eventually discussed shall include, for instance, the No Child Left Behind Act or the Reading First Program, the DEIS initiative or the Educational Disadvantage Committee will depend on the participants' responses to certain of the interview questions.

#### **1.4: Some Initiatives in the area of Education in Ireland:**

Currently, Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to an education, and that primary education is compulsory (United Nations, 2011).

Various initiatives have been offered by the State, aiming to improve the levels of educational attainment in this country. These are aimed not only at children of primary school-going age, but many of the people of Ireland, including marginalized peoples, early school leavers, adults and members of the Travelling Community.

These initiatives around education are extremely important and beneficial to the country as a whole. To take the example of Traveller education, of the 13,134 Travellers aged 15 or over in the 2006 census, the CSO reported that over 7,000 had either only primary education or no formal education at all (CSO, 2006). The previous year saw the introduction of the 5-year strategy for Traveller Education, 2005 to 2010, being carried out by the then Department of Education along with the Advisory Committee on Traveller Education and the Educational Disadvantage Committee (Citizens Information Board, 2011).

In May of the same year, the Department of Education and Science issued DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Social Inclusion, to help children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, and enabling schools



offer out of school support and outreach programmes (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Another state initiative, the School Meals Programme, made up of the Urban and Local Projects schemes, aims to supplement the diet of disadvantaged students. Through this programme, sandwiches, fruit, and milk are provided to children in need during the school day. In 2005 the Urban Scheme was providing school lunches to 60,000 children in 400 urban primary schools. In the previous year, 41,000 students in 450 underprivileged schools benefited under the Local Projects Scheme (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Back in 2000, the then Department of Education and Science launched its Back to Education Initiative, as one of the key pillars of its Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (Citizens Information, 2011).

Back to today, third level education is to be ‘transformed’, according to Tanaiste Mary Coughlan T.D, by the launching on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, of the National Strategy for Higher Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Under this strategy, the country is to see the establishment of new technological universities, and supports are to equally available to full and part time students.

In 2004, the EPSEN Act or Education for People with Special Educational Needs Act, was passed. It provides for the “provision of education plans for students with

special educational needs” (National Disability Authority, 2011), allowing, where possible, children with identified special educational needs to be educated alongside their peers without the need for special schools or separate classrooms. It is the responsibility of the principal – and not the teacher or even Special Needs Assistant, should the child have one – to ensure the plan is put into action, and that the goals set down in the plan are met.

### **1.5: Some Initiatives in the area of Education in the United States:**

#### No Child Left Behind:

The No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, aims to “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (US Department of Education, 2011). In its statement of purpose, Section 1001 of the Act provides for “greater decision making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance”. While this is a welcome step towards educational equality for all children, it does not elaborate on what the repercussions for teachers of underachieving students might be. On the plus side for teachers, the Act also aims to provide staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development, and affords parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children.

#### Thrive by Five: The Washington Early Learning Fund:

This fund is run not by the Department of Education, but by the Bill & Melina Gates Foundation, together with their collaborators. They estimate that more than half of all children entering kindergarten already lack some skills they will need to succeed. They feel this uneven playing field is leaving these children open to low-paying jobs or unemployment, and possibly even jail time later in life. By offering families and children a range of proven early-learning supports, including expansion of quality child care,

parenting education, and supportive home visits for parents, they aim to better prepare children and families for learning and the school environment. They are showcasing their approach in two communities, and are hopeful that these successful models will be expanded into other communities in Washington State and beyond. Their overall objective is to “help ensure greater opportunity for all Americans through the attainment of secondary and postsecondary education with genuine economic value” (Gates Foundation, 2011).

#### The Reading First Programme:

This programme, from the US Department of Education, aims to ensure that all children can read fluently by the time they complete the third grade – equivalent to second class here in Ireland. Funds can be applied for by states, once various criteria are met, and are then awarded to their schools as needed. Rather than being a programme all children can compete for equally, however, this programme is specifically geared towards school districts where a significant number of school children live at or below the poverty line. According to the US Department of Education (2011) the funds each state is awarded under the Reading First programme shall be used to “[increase] professional development to ensure that all teachers have the skills they need to teach these programmes effectively”.

## 1.6: Literature Review:

In reviewing the literature for this study, it has become apparent that no direct comparative study of teaching experiences in the United States and Ireland has been undertaken. Various reports have been carried out in the area of teaching generally. Irish teachers' experiences have been examined, with DBS & Murphy (2010) for instance, and earlier Mangan (2006), reporting on the stress levels suffered by Irish secondary school teachers. DBS and Kennedy (2010) have even looked at teaching in the Irish prison system.

A comparative study carried out by O'Sullivan, Wolhuter and Maarman (2010) compares the Irish and South African experience, not of teaching itself, but of only an element of teacher training – the comparative education subject offered as part of their preparation. Teacher training is, in fact, the subject of much sociological research. Karamustafaoğlu (2009) compared the training afforded to teachers in what he called the 'developed countries', in this case the United States and Britain, with the level and type of teacher training offered in Turkey. Pini & Gorostiaga (2008) also interested themselves in the area, comparing training in the United States with that in the Latin American countries. Stephens, Tønnessen and Kyriacou (2004) examine teacher training in Norway, and compare it to the British model of teacher training. Further, the experience of teacher education and training for Finnish teachers is examined by Jyrhämä, Kynäslähti, Krokfors, Byman, Maaranen, Toom and Kansanen (2008). Many more articles have been written around the preparation of students for teaching roles, the

foregoing being just a sample. While this is definitely an interesting field, it seems to be nearing a saturation point.

Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hamalainen and Poikonen's (2009) analysis of teacher wellbeing is highly informative and useful to the present research, as it deals with the effectiveness of professional learning communities. Professional Learning Communities are "seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement" (SEDL, 1997), so the impact of such a support on the experience of teaching will be greatly useful in this study. Webb et al (2009) limit their interest to teachers in England and Finland, however.

A great number of journal articles deal with issues in teaching using only U.S. based research. Stichter, Stormont & Lewis (2009), for instance, focus on attempts to increase educational achievement, and compare levels of time lost to instructional disruption in higher and lower income schools. They discovered, as one might expect, that teachers in lower income and under-served schools spent less time actually teaching and more time in discipline than their higher income counterparts. Early & Shagoury (2010) examine the impact various challenges and supports had on the experiences of new teachers at under-served urban American schools.

Charles Silberman has written extensively on the US education system, concerning himself particularly with the area of educational disadvantage. His seminal work, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*, may be 40 years

old, but is still an important work today. Silberman analyzed the comparative merits of the school systems in the United States and United Kingdom, praising the open style of explorative education the latter offered, and criticizing the formulaic and unimaginative education offered in the former. Silberman's most important contribution was the light he shone on how US teachers were taught, and the focus he placed on humanism in education. His essential message was that the better a teacher understands a child and considers a child's feelings, the better he or she can teach that child.

Kozol (1992) exposed the shameful differences in school standards, and ignited a nationwide debate in America about the quality – and inequality – of the US public education system, with his book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*.

Poisson (2009) examined teacher burnout in disadvantaged Dublin schools. Aydogan, Dogan, and Bayram (2009) looked at burnout among Turkish teachers. Like Poisson (2009) and Aydogan et al (2009) Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small & Jacobson (2009) also dealt with levels of teacher burnout, this time in the United States. Their study looked at the experiences of teaching, and is of particular interest to this research, as it examines the role of teacher supports and experiences in contributing to burnout. Ransford et al found that where supports offered to teachers were perceived to be high and effective, the level of teacher burnout was low with happier and more efficient teachers. Where supports were perceived to be low, the burnout and subsequent drop out rate among teaching staff was relatively high.

Ransford et al's (2009) research suggests, then, that any study of teachers' perception of their experiences and the supports they are offered is a worthwhile endeavour, as these perceptions can directly affect their teaching. Their explorations were on US teachers only, while this study shall compare the American experience with the Irish, thereby making this research an addition to the current body of knowledge.



### **1.7: Conclusion:**

This comparative study of the every-day work experiences of primary school teachers in Ireland and the United States, is being carried out in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts degree, with Social Science Specialization, at Dublin Business School, School of Arts, Dublin.

This introductory chapter outlines the ideas behind the particular research question under examination. It aims, through, among other things, the detailing of certain government and department schemes in the area, to illustrate the size and importance of education and the educators themselves as a field of study for research.

A review of the literature available reveals much research has been carried out on different areas of education and teaching, from curriculum in teacher training, to on the job teacher training assignments. Comparative studies have been carried out on teaching in other countries, but mainly on teaching while a student teacher, and no study compared the Irish experience with that in the United States. It became apparent, on examination of the current literature, that the teaching experiences of fully qualified primary school teachers in Ireland are largely or wholly ignored in current sociological research. In this way, a gap in research was established. This study aims to go some ways towards filling that gap.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology:**

### **2.1 General Introduction to Methodology:**

The title of the research project is ‘A Comparison of the Teaching Experiences of School Teachers in Ireland with those in the United States’. The research question centres on the teaching experiences of teachers in national school in Ireland, as compared to those of teachers working in elementary school in the United States. This project aims to highlight what is working for our teachers and what supports they enjoy or require, and to identify areas for improvement.

This chapter outlines the methods used in conducting this research. It covers materials and apparatus used in the study, information on the method of analysis to be carried out, general information on the participants, design of the study, the procedure involved in collecting data, and finally, some ethical concerns a researcher must consider. It aims to enable you, the reader, to replicate this study should the need arise. As this research project aims to examine the experiences of individual teachers, the materials and methods adopted are those best suited to garnering this type of information: methods allowing for the drawing out and recording of personal experience, and the free flow of opinion from the participants.

## 2.2 Materials and Apparatus:

The materials required to conduct this research were:

- A questionnaire, which was prepared for the semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions. The questionnaire was drafted, tested and redeveloped, so as to ensure relevance of questions to the research question generally. A copy of this questionnaire is attached. (See Appendix I.)
- Skype, an online communication portal, allowed for face to face interviews with the American cohort.
- Voice Memo Application for iPhone 3, was used for recording of some of the interviews.
- Later, a Dictaphone was used to record some of the interviews. The particular make and model used was Digital Voice Recorder VN-520 by Olympus.
- Qualitative Research Computer Package NVivo9 was used in the analysis of the data collected, and for coding and theme discovery.
- A password protected secure computer was used for storage of confidential data once collected for the duration of the research study.
- Any hard copy material collected or compiled was stored in a locked drawer while not in use. Such material was later shredded and disposed of ethically.

### **2.3 Method of Analysis:**

A qualitative approach was taken, as this allows more data rich material than a quantitative study might. As Flick (2007) points out, “rather than fundamental considerations determining the decision for or against qualitative or for or against quantitative methods, the decision should be determined by the appropriateness of the method for the issue under study and the research questions” (p.41). As there is no strict hypothesis to prove or disprove, no null hypothesis or alternative one, analysis and findings are more fluid and data led with this approach, with themes emerging from the data, and not imposed upon it.

As the day to day experiences of teachers, and how they view their working lives, are the main areas of interest, a qualitative approach to the research was required. As Creswell (1998) advises, the researcher, by using a qualitative approach, aims to build a complex, holistic picture, to analyze words, to report the detailed views of informants, and to conduct the study in a natural setting. To this end, a semi structured interview with open-ended questions allows for expansion and free flow of answers and opinion from the participants. Interviews were planned, with loose open-ended questions preset, which allowed for conversational flow and uptake of key points by researcher and participant alike. Analysis of these interviews will be data led, with themes emerging from the data gathered. This more fluid, less rigid approach is far superior to the more structured approach of a quantitative method in gleaning the type of information required in this study. This view is supported by the vast majority of the research referred to in the

preceding literature review, wherein most research was carried out using a qualitative approach.

#### **2.4 Participants:**

Participants were six full-time teachers. Three of them teach in Dublin, in different schools to increase variation in experience. The other three participants teach in the United States. Two of the American based teachers are teaching in Miami-Dade, Florida schools – again in separate schools – and the third in Manhattan, New York.

All participants were female, under 45 years old. Most have been teaching for less than 10 years, with one outlier having almost 20 years experience. None of the American cohort are American-born, though one has been living there since childhood.

The participants, having been apprised of the reasons the study was being carried out – as coursework by the researcher in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the BA (Hons) in Social Science – all willingly agreed to participate without payment or other benefit to themselves.

For reasons of confidentiality, the participants will not be named in this research project, but rather will be referred to as one of participants 1 through 6, or P1-P6. This will be covered in more detail under the heading Ethics at section 2.7. In chapters 3 and

4, where the participants' responses are reported and analyzed, the Irish cohort are participants 1 to 3, or P1-P3, and the American cohort are participants 4 to 6 (P4-P6).

Access to the Irish sample was clinical. The researcher approached three schools, which had already been identified, and made a request to the principal and teachers to interview one among them. For this approach, a letter from the college was required and obtained by the researcher, outlining the nature of the research project and request.

Access to the American sample was gained by means of a form of snowball sampling. A teaching contact introduced the researcher to some of her friends and colleagues, though, unlike regular snowball sampling, she herself was not interviewed as she is a family member of the researcher.

## **2.5 Design:**

As this research comprised a comparative study of the teaching experiences of two distinct groups of teachers, one group working in the US and the other in Ireland, it was necessary to split the participants along geographic lines. One group of participants who collectively came to be known as the American Cohort, consisted of three teachers working variously in schools in the United States. The other participants, the Irish Cohort, consisted of three teachers working in separate Dublin schools. The participants were interviewed individually, and did not meet any member of their cohort or other participant in the study over the course of the research.

All participants were interviewed using the same basic questionnaire, and although their individual answers led each interview in a slightly different direction, the general flow of all interviews was the same, with the same topics being addressed and ending up with the same question to finish.

These recorded interviews were later transcribed, and using the NVivo 9 computer software package, deeply analyzed for themes and content. Findings and discussion of the emergent results is contained in later chapters.

## **2.6 Procedure:**

Suitable participants, being primary school teachers in one of the two locations under study, were identified and approached by the researcher, and permission was sought to interview them. An access letter, supplied by Dublin Business School, was given to the Principals involved, outlining the course requirement for students of BA Social Science at the college. In certain cases, a face to face meeting with the principal was required, to ensure it would be appropriate to allow the researcher conduct interviews, both concerning school policy and inside the school itself. Permission was granted to conduct the interviews, and the participant teachers were approached.

Before agreeing to be interviewed, all participants were advised of the nature of the research study being undertaken. It was explained to them that they could opt out of the interview at any time up to submission of the research project. Their anonymity was assured, and the method of referring to them only as Participant 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 within the final published work was explained to each. Further, it was explained that all data would be held securely, on a password protected computer for the duration of the research and would then be disposed of responsibly, with confidentiality protected. Once it was clear all participants understood the nature of the study, their informed verbal consent to their participation in the study was then sought and obtained.

The interviews were conducted in different locations. The Irish cohort were all visited in their place of work, after the children had returned home for the day, and



interviewed at their desks. Members of the American cohort, on the other hand, were interviewed at their homes after school, at approximately 5pm local time, or 10pm GMT.

Through the use of Skype in the case of the American cohort, all six interviews in this study were carried out face to face. All were also recorded, with the prior consent of the participants, to ensure the accuracy of later reporting.

All interviews followed the same lines, opening with a request to describe an average day at work, and loosely followed the interview questions as originally designed by the researcher. However, being open-ended and semi-structured interviews, the questions veered from the correct order and exact wording from time to time, owing to the conversational tone aimed for in the research. This allowed the participants expand on points and elaborate more freely than a strict adherence to preset questions would have permitted.

## **2.7 Ethics:**

Participants in the study were assured anonymity. Neither their own identity nor that of their school would be made known through the study. It was explained to them that their individual comments could be quoted, whole or in part, to substantiate a finding or illustrate a point within the study, but no such quote would be attributed to them by name, and nothing that could distinguish them as the participant quoted would be made public.

They were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time up until final submission of the research project, and that should they wish to do so, their input would be omitted from the final analysis. Participants were informed that they could also stop the interview at any point and decide not to go ahead with it.

The matter of storage of their collected data was broached, and participants were assured such information would be stored on a secure password protected computer and any paper records which might be used over the course of the study would be stored in a locked drawer when not in use.

A letter containing the contact information of the researcher, the college and the project coordinator was made available to the participants, and they were advised they could request access to the finished report, should they wish to see it.

## **2.8: Conclusion:**

This chapter outlined the methods used in the compilation of this research study. It briefly touched on why these methods were chosen, and the benefits thereof. It contained information on the participants and how they came to be chosen to take part in this study. Information on participants was kept general enough to ensure the anonymity they were assured of. The procedure followed when conducting the interviews themselves, as well as a brief look background work on the construction of the interview questionnaire itself is also included.

What materials are required to conduct a study of this nature are listed, to enable verification by a later researcher.

Importantly, this chapter covers ethical concerns faced when carrying out research into people's personal experiences, highlighting the consideration given to confidentiality, and to respect between researcher and participant.

It is hoped this methodology chapter has elaborated enough on the methods employed in carrying out this work, as to enable the reader conduct a similar report, should they wish to, in validation or contradiction of the researcher's findings, reported hereunder.

## **Chapter 3: Results:**

### **3.1: General Introduction to Results:**

This chapter outlines the results of the research undertaken. The participants provided interesting and insightful comment on teaching experiences generally, and the most important and recurrent themes of their interviews are presented hereunder.

The research question under investigation in this study – does the experience of teaching young children in Ireland differ greatly from the experience of teaching young children in the United States – is addressed, as the experiences of teachers teaching in both locations are presented. These results will be analyzed and discussed in the next chapter, Chapter 4 Discussion, but for now are outlined by theme and without detailed interpretation.

For ease of reference, the results are grouped under theme headings. These themes are: Perceived Support Network, Government Initiatives in Education, Parental Involvement, Behavior/Discipline and Conflict & Conflict Resolution.

The reader is reminded that Participants 1 to 3 (P1-P3) are members of the Irish cohort, and Participants 4 to 6 (P4-P6) are members of the American cohort.

### 3.2: Perceived Support Network:

All participants were questioned on whether they felt they had support at their school, should they experience trouble, with a student, a parent or otherwise, or with the workload generally. Without exception, the participants felt they were supported and had someone they could turn to.

Some highly praised their school principal, with P3 – a member of the Irish cohort – stating “Our principal is like our mother, she’s totally approachable and extremely kind. She’s just, I don’t know, she’s really good to us.” P1, also a member of the Irish cohort, claimed her principal was:

very hands on in the running of the school. She’s always around. Even when you first start in the school, it’s quite obvious that she’s there to lend a hand. If you need the advice she’s there... if I felt I needed a second opinion, I’d always feel I could ask.

While all spoke highly of their principals, their fellow teachers were perhaps seen as the biggest support to all of the participants, on either side of the Atlantic. All have the help of their same-grade counterpart(s) in their school, and meet regularly to plan upcoming workload, or to brainstorm any issues. P2, for instance, advised “you’d have other teachers too. There’re two classes, two senior infant classes, and there’s two teachers so you’d probably discuss it with her, with the other teacher with you in your cohort”.

P6, a member of the American cohort, even benefits from a second teacher in her room with her at all times. She says “most of the time the assistant teacher is more like a co-teacher, teaching lessons and doing half the work”. P4’s school also operates a two teacher per room policy at some grade levels, but she herself does not have a second teacher in her room. Participant 4 comments “some [teachers] co-teach, with larger classes, but two teachers sharing the teaching responsibility”.

Special Needs Assistants in the classroom, co-teachers, assistants for various subjects and even student teachers on training placements in their classrooms are all mentioned by the participants as a great source of support and help to them. P1 even claimed that while she did not need a Special Needs Assistant for any of her students at the moment she “could do with one, almost for the assistance... I’d love one”.

### 3.3: Government Initiatives in Education:

When asked to list any government initiatives in the area of education, the participants were split. Some could provide a list with relative ease, whereas others found it harder. P1 and P2, both teaching at middle class/middle income schools in Dublin, were unable to list the four or five requested of them. P1 answered “well, our school isn’t a DEIS school, you know, a disadvantaged school, so we don’t actually have any of that”. P3 who teaches at a DEIS school, also in Dublin, listed five easily, and commented on their effectiveness and her hopes for their future. She claims:

First Steps is a fantastic programme. It’s being rolled out in DEIS schools across the country. This is a DEIS school, you know? It basically targets children in what it calls disadvantaged areas in order to improve the standard of English. It is so user friendly. Really well laid out. It’s really working in the classroom I think. Any teacher I have met that is using it loves it. It’s great.

The American cohort was also split in their responses. P4, a teacher in a privileged school (having previously taught in an underprivileged school), could list initiatives, but was only affected by one, No Child Left Behind. When asked if any initiatives were working, her answer was:

I suppose the only one that impacts me at all in this school is No Child Left Behind, and that's because the standards increase every year, and for a repeatedly A level school, which this schools is, it's pretty tough to make AYP, that's adequate yearly progress, to the degree you are expected to.

Asked the same question, P5, teaching in an underprivileged urban school, stated “none of them are working. Not one; they just create paperwork... It's just a pain”. P6 currently teaches at a private elementary school, so no government initiatives or special funding are applied to her school.

When asked about whether or not books were provided free to students, the participants also gave varied responses. P1 and P2's schools did not offer free or subsidized school books to pupils, while P3's school often forfeited the reduced fee it charged for books, as parents often could not afford even their subsidized price. P4, 5 and 6 all offered free books to their students, regardless of income level, though in the case of the children at P6's school, cost to the school of their books are covered by their yearly school fee.



### 3.4: Parental Involvement:

Participants spoke of the levels of parental involvement at their schools, and in the education of their students generally. Responses varied widely. Participants 1, 2, 4 and 6 reported high levels of parental involvement, and to communication with parents and caregivers regularly, whether it be at drop off and collection times or by design. Some participants had parents come in to the school to volunteer their time to help with reading, or to be of assistance in some other way. P2 states:

You will have the parents that will send in word saying I'm available if you need help or that. Some parents would come in to, say, the infant classes or that, to help out with reading, 'cos it's quite demanding getting the reading done... Someone might offer to come in and help out that way.

Participant 4's experience of parental involvement is extremely positive. She reports having received calls from worried parents on discovering a B grade in a report card. She describes them as "hugely supportive and involved". She claims the level of concern among parents for their children's education is:

Literally unbelievable - I worked in a very low-income school previously and the difference is astounding. I have had parents offer everything from their personal printers and projectors to offers to help with grading and photocopying. Nothing is too much trouble.

Participants 3 and 5 gave a very different account. They did not see much of the children's parents. P3 would see them at drop off and collection times, but would not be approached for any information or with offers of assistance, as many of the other participants would. She calls the parents' involvement in their children's education "practically non-existent", adding:

We try to encourage parents to help with homework and reading and that. Some will sign the reader every night, but most don't even bother. It's an ongoing battle to get the parents involved. It's really frustrating, to be honest.

### **3.5: Behaviour/Discipline:**

The issue of behaviour and discipline was also a divisive one. Participants in both cohorts gave mixed responses. P3 and P5 particularly reported having serious issues with the behaviour of some of the students at their schools, though P3's current class pose no behavioural problems themselves.

P1, P3 and P6 had issues but these were with one particular student in each instance. All participants listed the issue as their standout moment of their year so far, as this was so unusual. P1 reports the misbehaviour has since been managed and corrected, while P3 and P6 continue to experience difficulty with the student involved.

While P3s class is currently well behaved, she has not always found this. While she describes this year's class as "adorable", she goes on "I have taught other years with very disruptive children though. They'd fling things. Chairs, crayons, bags. There'd be bags being thrown around the classroom. It was madness."

Participant 6 reported having had to approach a parent concerning the misbehaviour of a student. This resulted in that parent beating the child to such a degree as to leave the teacher no option but to report the matter to the authorities. Both parents were subsequently arrested and released. P6 must remain available to them to discuss

their child's education and behave with them as though nothing happened. She reports feeling unable to broach the issue of their child's continued behavioural problems. She closes her interview by saying "the girl's behaviour continues to be really disruptive but I can't tell her parents".

The extent of misbehaviour some teachers report dealing with is minimal. All but participant 5 report being happy with their class's behaviour overall and do not have any ongoing issues with their class.

Participant 5 had most trouble with unruly students. She reports being constantly disrupted during teaching, to break up a fight or remove a student who is threatening to hit another, "every thirty seconds on average". She says: "I practically have a hole rubbed in the emergency buzzer trying to get security down here to break up fights or remove a student who is threatening to hit another".

Participants 2 and 4 report least disruption, with no mention of any misbehaviour, aside from "the odd time" (P2). P4 has never been disrupted while teaching at her current school, stating: "In my previous school, it was almost constant, I mean that literally, but now not at all. The children can be rambunctious and loud, but they are well mannered, and certainly not poorly behaved".

Modes of discipline at the participants' schools were addressed. Again, responses varied. The Irish cohort spoke of stars awarded for good behaviour and forfeited for bad, or merit books being kept on each student. One participant (P1) said she chooses to accentuate the positive rather than focus on the negative with her class. "Praise is great. Catch someone doing a good thing and put a sticker on it". P6's students are "given a warning that if they can't behave they'll have to move away from the group... They have the option of coming back when they are settled enough to join the group again, this works for most kids".

In the case of P5, whose students can resort to physical aggression very quickly, the mode of discipline reported is more aggressive too. She often has to "call security to have them removed and then write up a scam later." After a student is removed and the letter written it is placed on their file for future reference, acting as a paper trail and proof of their behaviour. She explains "if the kid needs to be staffed, like, if he needs to be sent to a special class or school for kids with emotional problems or behavioral problems, there's a history".

Discipline at P3s school is, in the main, based on the star system referred to above, but sometimes a student's behaviour will be dealt with more severely. She reports that a child at her school – he is in first class - is currently on a year's detention and has also been sent home for his violent behaviour, ranging from hitting and throwing things at his teachers, to holding down and punching a female classmate in the face. She must now regularly give up her lunch break to sit and supervise his lunchtime detention.

### **3.6: Conflict and Conflict Resolution:**

Conflict and how it is resolved was also an important theme of the interviews, throwing up large differences in experience between participants. Participants 3 and 5 saw most conflict among students at their school. These conflicts would often be physical once the children had a chance. According to P3 “getting physical rarely is an issue in the classroom, they wouldn’t really dare, would they, but once they get out onto the yard, there would be daily physical fights. Seriously, daily.”

Participant 5 sees physical fights regularly too. She says “about a tenth of the time there's a fight, usually because the others are egging them on with that "eee eee eee" chant.”

Participant 4 does not see anything like that at her current school, but reports having seen much of it at a previous school, where it was a “different story entirely”. While there, she had to break up a lot of fights, “often while yelling at a student to press the emergency buzzer for security and shouting at the ring of cheering, yes, cheering, cheering students who surrounded the fight to go back to their seats.”

P3 reports physical aggression as a first resort for the children at her school and that they do this because “their parents tell them to”. She explains “they say that if they are hit or have a name called to hit back. We tell them to tell teacher first...but it’s usually physical first.”

For Participant 5's students, the threat of violence is always a first resort as well.

She claims:

They always progress to threats of physical aggression, "I'm gonna slap you in your face" that sort of talk, but only about a fourth to a third of the time do they actually amount to a face-off, like where they're circling each other sometimes as close as two inches from each other's faces, I mean it would be funny if it weren't so serious and sad, they're like dogs.

Participants 1, 2, 4 and 6 report no violent conflicts in their schools, and the methods for resolving what few conflicts do arise are quite different from the foregoing. P6 advises "we send the kids to "The Peace Place" a corner of the room with a curtain that can give privacy." While there, the children are expected to "work it out themselves first and if they can't then they can get help from a teacher".

The boys in P2's class may sometimes argue in class. She deals with this by simply telling them to be nice to one another, and finds this generally works with the boys. If it escalates to a shove on the yard, however, she says "they would have to shake hands and get over it. That would be the worst, thankfully".

For Participant 4, the matter of conflict resolution is not an issue at her current school, as she has "never even witnessed a confrontation more serious than "but I wanted to answer that question and you yelled out the answer and that was frustrating to me"."

### **3.7: Conclusion:**

In this chapter, results of the research were presented without analysis. Using quotes from the interviews conducted as part of this comparative study, emergent themes were presented, grouped under headings for ease of reference. Themes covered included

1. Perceived support network
2. Government initiatives in education
3. Parental involvement
4. Behaviour/Discipline
5. Conflict and Conflict Resolution.

The next chapter shall examine these themes in greater detail, analyzing them with reference to the research question, and the aims of the current study.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **4.1: General Introduction to Discussion:**

In this chapter, the results presented in chapter 3 shall be interpreted and discussed. Special attention shall be paid to the original research question, and to other research in the field generally. As with all research, limitations of this study exist, and will be acknowledged and considered. Conclusions shall be drawn, and implications for future research suggested.

### **4.2: Research Question and Aims of Study:**

The research question underpinning this comparative study was “does the experience of teaching young children in Ireland differ greatly from the experience of teaching young children in the United States?” Its purpose was to examine, compare and contrast the experiences of Irish and American teachers in their everyday working lives. It aimed also to highlight what is working for teachers in Ireland, and to identify possible areas for improvement of their working lives.



### **4.3: Results Discussed:**

In comparing US and Irish experiences of teaching, various similarities emerged. It was found, for instance, that there was a greater correlation in the number of work days for public school teachers, whether in Ireland or the United States, than there was between US public and private schools. According to the research, public schools in both countries are in operation for approximately 184 days annually, while the American private school operated for approximately 20 fewer days. In contrast, the Irish teachers must work eighteen extra hours as their professional development (in accordance with the Croke Park Agreement) whereas the US teachers enjoyed an average of between eight and ten planning days spread throughout the school year. The fact that American teachers have more planning time, paid days off for planning and correcting, allows them to be more creative.

What actually emerged in this study was not a great difference between the experiences of teachers in the US versus Ireland, but rather, a stark contrast between the experiences of teachers teaching different socioeconomic groupings. Hereunder, these findings are discussed under the theme headings used in results section.

### **4.3.1: Perceived Support Network:**

According to the data collected, teachers in both continents rely most heavily on their colleagues as a major source of support and advice. All participants express feelings of confidence in their support network at their schools. Principals and same grade teachers were most relied on, with other teachers and even the students' parents making up the larger network of support perceived. This supports Webb et al's (2009) praise of the supports offered by colleagues in a professional learning community.

None of the Irish cohort suggested turning to the Employee Assistance Service for Teachers run by the Department of Education and Skills with VHI, though this is part funded by tax money and purports to support teachers with issues in any aspect of their working lives. Equally, no participant referred to anything learned in their teacher training as useful when they experience issues at work. This supports Laker, Laker and Lea's (2008) assertion that teachers come to rely most heavily on the informal supports of their colleagues over the formal supports offered by, for instance, their teacher training.

### 4.3.2: Initiatives

The interviewees in the United States were more aware of government initiatives than their Irish counterparts. Two of the three members of the American cohort were able to identify five government initiatives, while the third worked in a private school which did not receive federal funding, and as such was neither bound nor assisted by any federal initiatives. Only one Irish participant was aware of more than one government initiative, and she was employed at an economically disadvantaged school which benefited from numerous programmes.

This suggests most government initiatives in education are seen to serve only the lower socioeconomic groups. In both countries these initiatives were applied far more in schools serving poorer students. The participant teaching at the poorer school in Ireland was full of praise for these initiatives, suggesting when they are taken up, they are worthwhile and serve a purpose. She was hopeful for the future of these projects and looked forward to seeing their results down the line.

In the poorer US school, conversely, the participant called the initiatives a useless waste of time and money. This same participant reported numerous issues in her day to day teaching, from violent outbursts by students, to lack of parental involvement and the repeated and imminent replacement of upper management at the school. Her unwillingness to implement these new initiatives supports Ransford et al's (2009) report,

wherein it was reported teachers perceiving low levels of support are less likely to implement changes and take on new initiatives than teachers experiencing support.

#### **4.3.3: Parental Involvement:**

The data collected indicates a pronounced difference in the levels of parental involvement across the social spectrum. In both the United States and Ireland, the participants who taught in schools serving lower-income students reported a far lower level of parental involvement than their higher-income counterparts. This positive correlation between socio-economics and parental involvement was manifested not alone in terms of the physical presence of parents at school-events or in volunteering roles in classrooms, but also in the relative levels of their intellectual involvement, for instance, reading logs left unsigned, lack of interest in their children's homework, and in many cases parents neglecting to pay for even subsidized school books.

In the case of one participant, teaching underprivileged children, numerous attempts have been made at her school to foster the parent/teacher partnership. While Ratcliff & Hunt (2009) suggest it is the responsibility of the school to ensure such a partnership exists, this research would suggest this is not workable in practice, and teaching staff can only do so much in bridging the gap.

#### **4.3.4: Behaviour/Discipline:**

The data indicated that while the general behavior of students varied year-to-year and class-to-class, there was a clear link between the typical levels of physical aggression and violent confrontation between students and the socio-economic status of the school, with students attending schools in economically deprived areas exhibiting far greater levels of violence in conflict than their higher-income counterparts.

The discipline plans as cited by the Participants were very similar, although it must be noted that those teachers employed at schools in economically deprived neighbourhoods were obliged to deal with more aggravated student violence, on a more routine basis, than the Participants who worked at schools in more economically advantaged neighbourhoods.

In terms of general disruption to teaching due to student misbehaviour, the study showed far more instructional down time for teachers in lower income schools than for teachers teaching at more affluent schools. This would certainly concur with Stichter, Stormont & Lewis's (2009) assertion that teachers in schools serving poorer students lose more teaching time to disruption due to student misbehaviour than teachers at richer schools. While Stichter et al limited their study to the US, this current study shows their results to apply equally here.

#### **4.3.5: Conflict and Conflict Resolution:**

The data shows a strong link between the socio-economic status of schools and the manner in which students resolve conflict. This correlation exists between schools in similarly advantaged or disadvantaged areas, regardless of whether they are in Ireland or the US.

School teachers with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, in both countries, reported resolution of conflict through talking it out, shaking hands, even working through the issue in a designated 'Peace Place'. Contrast this with the often violent conflicts reported at lower income schools, where violence is often a first resort.

#### **4.4: Limitations of the Current Study:**

Time constraints did not allow for the inclusion of more participants as each participant was interviewed individually, and then their responses were thoroughly examined and analyzed until saturation point was reached. More participants might have diluted the level of analysis there was time to perform.

Also, with studies of this nature – where the researcher is involved as directly as the personal interview requires – the personal opinion of the researcher may be brought to bear on the study, however unintentionally. The discussion section will invariably be written from a personal viewpoint, and so is herein presented to the reader as the researcher's findings only, and not as incontrovertible fact.

In the case of the Participants themselves, outside stressors which may have impacted on their experiences were ignored, as the study focused only on what they experienced in the classroom and the school generally.

As the researcher and all Participants were female, it could be argued there was a certain gender bias to the research, but seeing as no question related to gender, and neither do the findings contain any reference to the Participants' gender, this appears to have had no bearing on the study.

#### **4.5: Implications of this Research:**

The research indicted a marked contrast in the levels of violence and physical aggression exhibited by students attending schools in economically deprived areas on both sides of the Atlantic and their more affluent counterparts. Teachers in socio-economically deprived areas lost a significant amount of instructional time due to discipline problems in the classroom.

One possible ameliorative step may be a greater focus on positive conflict resolution and anger management skills in schools which serve these lower-income populations. Stress and anger control strategies such as counting to ten, breathing deeply, and walking away from a volatile confrontation, are examples of child-friendly techniques which could ultimately reduce the time lost to disciplinary matters. It is reasonable to assume that the instructional time saved by fewer discipline-related interruptions would be of great benefit to students in less affluent school districts, who have traditionally lagged behind their more economically advantaged contemporaries in terms of academic achievement. If in Irish schools, particularly in underprivileged communities, twenty minutes per week could be devoted to an open-circle class meeting, a technique widely used in more affluent school districts in the United States, it may yield two or three fold that time in productive teaching time for our teachers.

The research also highlighted a stark contrast in the levels of parental involvement exhibited by families in differently advantaged communities. This has a strong direct



impact on the working lives of teachers. Those employed in more affluent school districts, both in Ireland and the United States, benefit from the administrative assistance of many parent-volunteers (known as class-moms in the US). These parents take numerous tasks off the shoulders of teachers, such as photo-copying, class library organization, and occasional correction of class work. Such volunteers can even be of assistance during instructional time by working one-on-one with a struggling student or a small group. This instructional assistance could involve keeping the student(s) on task and focused, redirecting a student who had become distracted, or reading a story aloud with a small group using such easily-taught techniques as choral-reading, echo-reading, or read-aloud (Burns, 2001).

Future research on the area of teaching experience might focus more on the experiences of the qualified primary school teacher than it has in the past, as so much has been written around teachers in training. The secondary school teacher also features widely in current literature, so primary is a good focus. While this study focuses on primary teachers' experiences, a longer study with more participants could reveal far more about their working lives.

This study suggests much more needs to be done to address the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Research into this area would be extremely beneficial not only to the teachers and students directly affected, but to the future of this country and its economy.

#### **4.6: Conclusion:**

The findings of this comparative study say more about the rich and poor divide than they do about a geographic divide. The experiences of teachers teaching in schools serving the children of higher socioeconomic backgrounds differed from the experiences of their counterparts in lower income schools much more than any difference based on location. Teaching time lost for staff in addressing poor behaviour, leisure time lost for pupils in serving punishment, even lack of support for the education process by parents appear par for the course at some lower income schools. This serves to highlight an inequality in the education system across the board. It backs up Kozol's (1992) findings, which exposed the shameful differences in school standards for rich and poor, and ignited a nationwide debate about the quality – and inequality – of the US public education system. This research suggests the same can be charged against the Irish system.

This study, in fact, supports much of the current literature that exists on the area of teaching, albeit mainly from an American point of view. This body of work adds to that current literature by extending its scope to include the Irish primary teaching experience, where previously there had been a gap.

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## Appendix I:

### Interview Questions:

Describe an average day at work for you?

Do you teach only one class all their subjects/is your school departmentalized?

Is your daily timetable subject to change?

Are teachers expected to also get involved in extra-curricular activities (if any are offered)?

How long does working year run?

How many days in school year?

Have you staff days/training days? How many?

Have you teacher planning days? How many?

How about sick leave?

Are any issues you may have, discussed officially at staff or school board level?

What is the level of parental involvement at your school?

Do they get involved in children's education?

Have you met all parents outside of one P/T meeting?

Can you list 5 gov/state/d.o.e. initiatives in education?

Are any of them working for you?

Are you seeing any benefit?

Are they making a difference?

Are any patently not working?

Is there a stigma attached to any of the various assistances in your school, eg. free meals?

Are books provided for students or do parents/teachers have to purchase their own?

Are there computers in your classroom/school? If so, what is ratio of computers to pupils?

Do you have a teachers aide or any special needs assistant(s) in your classroom?

Is there much interruption to your teaching due to student misbehaviour?

What is the standard mode of discipline in your school when a child misbehaves?

Are there arguments between students in your classroom?

If so, do they ever progress to physical aggression?

How long do they take to escalate from verbal to physical?

Has there been any standout moment or incident lately? What was it and why did it make such an impact?