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Title	How is research disseminated, accessed, and utilised in Irish schools?
Authors	Barrett, Courtenay A.;Prendergast, Mark
Publication date	2025
Original Citation	Barrett, C.A. and Prendergast, M. (2025) 'How is research disseminated, accessed, and utilised in Irish schools?', School Psychology International, 01430343241309031. https://doi.org/10.1177/01430343241309031
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1177/01430343241309031
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Download date	2026-11-03 15:35:25
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16865



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How is research disseminated, accessed, and utilised in Irish schools?

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Abstract

In Ireland, as elsewhere, there has been growing recognition around the importance of using research evidence to inform educational policy and practice at both a national government and individual school level. Despite such importance, there is currently a dearth of empirical, peer-reviewed studies regarding the use of research evidence in the Irish education system. With this in mind, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Autumn 2023 with seven educational researchers based in higher education and ten teachers based in both primary and secondary schools. The purpose was to examine how research is utilised at both the individual- and systems-levels in Irish schools. In terms of findings, researchers and teachers noted there was insufficient dissemination, access, and utilisation of research in schools. Participants suggested that the use of research evidence in Ireland focused on the dissemination of the research process (e.g., how to conduct research as part of self-evaluation processes) rather than the dissemination of research findings (e.g., results from efficacy studies). However, all participants acknowledged that the use of research evidence to inform practice is nuanced and complex, and is dependent upon many factors such as the type of research (e.g., methodology, subject area) and the context (e.g., national policies in Ireland). Implications for research and practice, as well as potential pitfalls when using research to inform policymaking, are discussed.

Keywords: school, education, Ireland, research utilisation, dissemination, access

How is Research Disseminated, Accessed, and Utilised in Irish Schools?

Educational researchers, policymakers, and teachers use a variety of terms to describe the types of evidence they use to make decisions, such as “research”, “data,” and “knowledge” (Honig and Coburn, 2008). Although some use these terms interchangeably, others have distinct definitions of each. For example, “research” might refer to a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalisable knowledge, while “data” might refer to formative and summative student performance data, feedback from the school community, or programme evaluation data collected within the local context (Honig and Coburn, 2008). “Knowledge” might refer to the integration of evidence or information with meaning (Brown and Duguid, 1991) and “teacher or local knowledge” might refer to information gained through experience or firsthand observations (Honig and Coburn, 2008). However, all these terms emphasise that schools and educators should make informed or rational decisions based on these sources of information, as opposed to political, ideological, or intuitive reasons, which are presumably less likely to improve student outcomes and the effectiveness of educational systems (Honig and Coburn, 2008).

Importantly, there is a wide variety of types of research that can inform educational service delivery, both in terms of the content or topic area and the type of research design employed. A significant body of research has employed highly controlled, causal research designs (e.g., randomised controlled trials) to increase the internal validity of a study and likelihood that improvements in student outcomes can be attributed to the instruction or intervention being examined. However, social sciences research, which examines the basic processes of human development, cognitive development, language acquisition, motivation, and

individual and group differences, is also critical for informing educational services (Honig and Coburn, 2008). These types of studies may employ a variety of research designs including observational or correlational studies, secondary data analysis, or qualitative methods, some of which may emphasise external validity over internal validity. Further, critics of highly controlled research studies (e.g., RCTs) may be more inclined to implement other methods, such as participatory action research and other community-based approaches, in which researchers and practitioners co-design research studies (e.g., Malone and Hogan, 2020). In sum, all these types of studies may constitute research evidence and may be used to inform the content and format of programmes and practices (e.g., curriculum, instruction, and assessment), structures (e.g., school or classroom composition), the types of special services provided (e.g., planning for students with special needs), and resource allocation decisions to increase equitable outcomes in schools (e.g., resources provided to marginalised ethnic groups).

In Ireland, there are a variety of professional and government-based organisations that encourage evidence-informed decision-making in education. Since its establishment in 2006, the Teaching Council (the professional standards body for the teaching profession in Ireland which operates under the aegis of the Department of Education) has continued to advocate that research by, and for, the teaching profession is essential for supporting teachers' learning and practice. For example, 'Research' is identified as one the key themes in their 2022-2027 Strategic Plan (Teaching Council, 2022), and their CROÍ (Collaboration and Research for Ongoing Innovation) Research Series was developed to support a culture of shared learning and evidence-informed practice. At the government level, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is committed to making policy decisions based on quality research data (NCCA, 2023). For example, the recent reform of the primacy school mathematics curriculum in 2023 was

underpinned by research, consultation, deliberation and close work with schools. At the school level, the Department of Education (DES; 2012) school self-evaluation guidelines (SSE) placed much greater emphasis on the gathering and use of data for decision-making and accountability purposes (Young et al., 2018). It required schools 'to gather evidence about teaching and learning practices, to analyse the evidence and to reflect on the findings to reach conclusions and to make judgements about their strengths and weaknesses' (DES, 2012, p.2). Through these examples, the value of putting research evidence at the centre of educational policy is apparent, although little is known regarding the extent to which research has influenced school-based decisions in Ireland.

There has been a significant body of work identifying the various types of evidence used to inform educational decision-making and the processes by which research is disseminated and accessed (e.g., Honig and Coburn, 2008; Weiss, 1980). However, most of this research has been conducted in other countries (e.g., USA) or in other contexts (e.g., healthcare, government). There is currently a dearth of empirical, peer-reviewed studies in Ireland regarding the use of research evidence in the education system. In one of the few existing publications in this area, O'Connor (2024) presented results from a quantitative survey of educational researchers examining the extent to which their research had influenced policymaking. The findings showed that educational researchers in Ireland reported disappointing levels of research uptake by policymakers. Building on the work of O'Connor (2024), the present study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with ten school teachers and seven educational researchers to better understand how research is disseminated, accessed, and utilised at both the individual- and systems-levels in contemporary Irish primary and secondary schools.

How Education Research is Disseminated and Accessed

For research evidence to inform decision-making, researchers must disseminate their findings, and policymakers and teachers must access them (Knott and Wildavsky, 1980). There are several barriers to accessing traditional forms of research dissemination (e.g., academic journal articles) by policymakers and teachers, such as the inability to subscribe to expensive academic journals, limited background knowledge and skills needed to understand scientific research studies, and lack of time or interest in consuming research (Weiss, 1980). In Ireland, specifically, a variety of barriers prevent researchers from disseminating their work widely, including a lack of time, funding, and dissemination outlets as well as a disconnect between schools and higher education (Barrett and Prendergast, 2024). Further, lack of time, lack of awareness, a school culture that does not support the use of research evidence, the inaccessibility of research, and the disconnect between schools and higher education have been identified as barriers to the access and implementation of research in Irish schools (Barrett and Prendergast, 2024; Gleeson, 2008).

To circumvent these barriers, research has suggested that schools look to professional organisations, individual consultants or researchers, or other intermediaries to learn about research (Rycroft-Smith, 2021). When research is disseminated or accessed through interpersonal or social interactions, then intermediaries support the communication and interpretation of research, infusing meaning into the findings based on the local context (Davies et al., 2008; Palinkas et al., 2016). In these social interactions, trust is a key factor, both in terms of whether the research findings themselves are trustworthy and credible, but also whether the intermediary delivering the research findings is credible (Ouimet et al., 2023). Further, there has also been growing interest in alternative methods of dissemination such as social media (e.g., X formerly

known as Twitter) and other public forums (in Ireland, examples include RTE Brainstorm https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/ and a Teachers' Research Exchange [T-REX] platform https://www.t-rex.ie/). O'Connor (2024) highlighted the need for a centralised research-to-policy system in Ireland, which considers the capacity for policymakers to consume research evidence (demand), timely and relevant studies (supply), and intermediaries or knowledge brokers to translate and communicate research findings to policymakers (mediating mechanisms). However, little research to date has identified the precise channels through which research is disseminated and accessed for use in Irish schools, and this study addresses that gap in the literature.

How Education Research Informs Decision-Making

Research regarding evidence-informed decision-making in education highlights the complexity of the decision-making process and how decisions, particularly at the systems- or policy-level, are comprised of numerous micro-decisions over time by a variety of individuals (O'Connor, 2024; Weiss, 1980). There are three ways in which evidence can inform educational policy and practice: conceptual, instrumental, and symbolic (Nutley et al., 2007). Conceptual use of research evidence occurs when research gives educators' insights into the educational process, furthers their conceptualisation of educational problems, or is a source for new concepts or ideas (i.e., enlightenment), thus indirectly influencing educational decisions (Cain, 2015; Weiss, 1977). This type of research use employs an information processing approach, in which research contributes to the general knowledge or capacity of the decision-maker thereby supporting improved decision-making (Palinkas et al., 2016). On the other hand, instrumental use occurs when specific research findings are directly applied to make a pending decision (e.g., selecting a specific curriculum) or to answer a predetermined question. Although this type of utilisation may have been what academic researchers hoped for from the evidence-based practice (EBP)

movement, it is the rarest (Ouimet et al., 2023; Weiss, 1980). Finally, symbolic use, also referred to as political or tactical use, occurs when research evidence is used to support a predetermined notion or achieve a political or strategic goal (O'Connor, 2024; Ouimet et al., 2023). Our study explores how these types of research use manifest in the Irish education system, potentially uncovering new ways of using research evidence, as no study has yet examined how this framework generalises to the Irish context.

Current Study and Research Questions

Our interdisciplinary study is the first to include the perspectives of both educational researchers and teachers to examine how research is disseminated, accessed, and utilised in Irish schools. Our study addressed the following research questions:

(1) How is educational research disseminated, accessed, and utilised in Irish schools?

(2) How do Irish teachers assess the quality of research evidence?

(3) What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using research to inform educational policy and practice in Ireland?

Method

We collected these data as part of a larger study on research use in Irish schools (Barrett and Prendergast, 2024). Our positionality permeated the research process. We are both mid-career academic researchers who have prior experience as classroom teachers, with the first author having additional experience as an intermediary or knowledge broker. Further, we are diverse in our socio-demographic characteristics, which influence our worldviews and values, as an Asian American woman and Irish man. Finally, we both have experience conducting and valuing a wide range of methodological approaches including quantitative, qualitative and mixed

methods research, which allowed us to value each form of research and data referenced by participants.

Sample and Recruitment

Seventeen individuals, ten of whom were teachers and seven of whom were educational researchers, participated in this study. However, almost all the participants had experience with both teaching and research, such that most of the teachers had research experience (i.e., teachers-as-researchers) and most of the researchers had formerly been teachers. All the participants identified as Irish and approximately 58% identified as female (n = 10), with the remaining participants identifying as male (41%; n = 7). Participants represented a variety of geographic regions in Ireland, including Cork, Waterford, Tipperary, Dublin, Limerick, and Galway. Three participants had between 1 and 5 years of professional experience (17.6%), four participants had between 6 and 10 years of experience (23.5%), six participants had between 11 and 15 years of experience (35.3%), and four participants had over 15 years of experience (23.5%). See Table 1 for pseudonyms for each participant and their characteristics.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (*N = 17)*

Number	Name	Current Role	Years Experience
1	Joan	Primary Teaching Principal	6-10
2	Barry	Primary Teaching Principal	1-5
3	Emma	Primary Teacher	6-10
4	John	Primary Teacher	11-15
5	Edel	Secondary Teacher	1-5
6	Julie	Secondary Teacher	>15
7	Patrick	Secondary Teacher	11-15
8	Cathal	Secondary Teacher	6-10
9	Michael	Secondary Teacher	6-10

10	Cormac	Secondary Teacher	11-15
11	Ruth	Education Researcher in HE	11-15
12	Eimear	Education Researcher in HE	>15
13	Lisa	Education Researcher in HE	11-15
14	Norma	Education Researcher in HE	1-5
15	Megan	Education Researcher in HE	11-15
16	Tom	Education Researcher in HE	>15
17	Claire	Education Researcher in HE	>15

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Michigan State University. Two semi-structured interview protocols were developed, one for teachers and one for educational researchers, which can be found in the Online Supplementary Materials. Both protocols were drafted to meet the aims of the study and the literature review, were piloted with an Irish school teacher with over 30 years of professional experience, and then revised based on his feedback.

After the protocols were developed, recruitment and data collection began. We used a purposive, snowball sampling procedure (Palinkas et al., 2015) to recruit participants. Emails were sent to prospective participants and participants were asked they knew of any colleagues knowledgeable in this area who might be interested in participating as well. When participants indicated they were interested in participating in the study, a virtual interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time for both the interviewer and interviewee. Before beginning the interview and recording, participants provided informed consent and completed a survey of demographic and employment history information. Then, the semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45-minutes, such that participation in the entire study took approximately 1-hour.

Both authors conducted the semi-structured interviews in Autumn 2023 using either Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed using transcription software (otter.ai). Throughout the data collection process, both authors completed memos and audit trails describing their thoughts, feelings, wonderings, assumptions, and decisions made throughout the interviews to increase the credibility and dependability of our study (Ahmed, 2024). We also met regularly to engage in peer debriefing to discuss preliminary findings and increase the confirmability of our study (Ahmed, 2024). This also allowed for a reflexive process in which we discussed how our own experiences, both within and external the Irish educational system, and within and external to the research and practice communities, influenced how we interpreted participants' perspectives to contribute to the credibility of our findings (Ahmed, 2024). Finally, the transcripts were cleaned by the authors, and all identifying information was removed to maintain participants' anonymity.

Data analysis was iterative and ongoing, wherein both authors would share notes and memos with each other throughout. We employed a thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to analyse the data. We used an inductive or "bottom up" orientation to guide the analyses. Open coding (emergent) allowed us to understand the process through which educational research is disseminated and accessed in Ireland, how practitioners assess the quality of the research, and the benefits and drawbacks of using research to inform practice (Miles et al., 2014). We then used these open codes to identify higher-order themes from the data, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022) phases of data engagement, coding and theme development. Both authors contributed to the analytic process, with continued and iterative

discussions of the data over numerous meetings until both authors felt that the final themes reflected participants' experiences and perspectives. To establish trustworthiness, we engaged in numerous strategies throughout the research process to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of our findings (Ahmed, 2024). In addition to the strategies we employed throughout the data collection process, credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the educational system, with both authors collectively having over 20 years of experience in teaching, conducting educational research, and translating research into practice, which allowed for us to deeply understand the participants' perspectives. Further, we triangulated our findings from the interviews with our direct observations in schools, which were conducted as a broader part of the research process, as well as our roles as initial teacher educators.

Findings

A total of five major themes were identified, namely: (a) disseminating research to schools; (b) accessing research in schools; (c) assessing the quality of research (which had four subthemes; see Figure 1); (d) research utilisation in Irish schools; and (e) drawbacks and challenges of using research in Irish schools. The first three themes were pertinent to specific participant subgroups (i.e., teachers or researchers). For example, the dissemination of research findings pertained primarily to researchers, whereas assessing the quality of research to inform the adoption and implementation process pertained primarily to teachers. Thus, we describe these themes by subgroup. The two remaining themes (and subthemes), however, were pertinent to both teachers and researchers and thus reflect the integration of the two subgroups' perspectives. The following describes each theme.

Disseminating Research to Schools: Researchers' Perspectives

In general, participating researchers reported that their efforts to share their research with schools were insufficient. This quote from Claire best summed up the cohort's sentiment, "The simple answer to your question is probably not enough." The primary strategy researchers reported using was spreading the word through their student teachers and graduates. Several interviewees discussed embedding research-informed practices into their own teaching within initial teacher education programmes. For example, Megan stated that "The main way I try to [disseminate research] is with my student teachers when I teach them as part of their undergraduate, or postgraduate years." In line with this, Tom, a researcher with over fifteen years' experience, explained:

> So, you know, a fairly typical thing would be that I hear something at a conference, or I read a paper about something and chat to colleagues here. And we can, you know, get together and say, oh, you know, what wouldn't it be really useful if our teacher education students were exposed to that. And so, over the course of the next academic year, we identify how to embed that into the programme.

Some researchers also mentioned how they kept in touch with graduates, particularly those from their master's programmes, as a means of disseminating their research. For example, Ruth articulated how graduates are their "pipeline" in terms of sharing research in schools:

> Traditionally, anybody who does a master's in education with us, we will tend to stay in touch with. And that's our pipeline. They are all fully qualified teachers, so they are our link with schools. When you talk about dissemination, we would always go to them and say try this methodology out, try this pilot out.

Finally, several researchers mentioned how they disseminate through their own social networks, social media, and professional organisations. This may involve chatting with former colleagues who are still teaching or engaging with contacts that they may have in principal networks or in teacher unions. Social media (e.g., Twitter/ X) was also helpful in this regard, as was the use of subject associations. For example, Claire and Norma both mentioned that the Irish

Mathematics Teachers' Association (IMTA) has a biannual newsletter and annual conference in which current research can be shared with teachers.

Accessing Research in Schools: Teachers' Perspectives

From the data, the common consensus amongst the teachers interviewed was that they did not regularly access academic research to inform their practice. For example, Barry explained that research is not something he would make a special effort to access, stating, "I would have to say no, it's [research] not something that I would go seeking out." This view was reiterated by Cathal, an early-career secondary teacher, who stated, "I suppose I wouldn't go out of my way to access research."

However, the teachers interviewed were aware of several ways in which they or their colleagues could access research. The most commonly mentioned approach was through the use of social media. There were a number of platforms mentioned by teachers such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and LinkedIn. For example, Julie noted:

> So, you know, for me, I would follow a lot of academics on Twitter. I find social media is a great place to kind of keep up to date with what's going on and maybe to a lesser extent, LinkedIn. There'd be quite a number of academics tweeting and I just find that really interesting and a really good way to find out what's going on.

A few teachers also mentioned how research could be accessed through enrolment on post-graduate programmes in higher education. John articulated the importance of further study in helping him to become more research informed, noting, "Before I started the Masters, I wasn't even aware of the notion of journal articles - I was quite unaware of anything as regards apart from the curriculum and what was being done by other teachers in the school."

However, teachers' methods for accessing research beyond social media and post-graduate study tended to be varied and lacked a consistent strategy or plan. A number were aware of the Teaching Council's online library (T-REX platform). John explained that, "As teachers, we all

have access to the Teaching Council, and they have a wide variety of journals and different things that you can go to access there as well."

Barry mentioned how the Department of Education would issue circulars to schools about new practices or developments. A circular is a written statement that provides information and guidelines on laws and procedures (see https://www.gov.ie/en/circulars/). While circulars generally tend to be policy related, Barry explained that they "might sometimes detail new research out there and if teachers were interested, they could go and check it out." Teacher support services such as Oide, and subject associations such as the IMTA or the Irish Science Teachers Association (ISTA) were also cited as useful in making teachers aware of and helping them to access research. Similarly, teacher union magazines and conferences were also noted, such as the Irish National Teachers Organisation's (INTO) InTouch journal.

Assessing the Quality of Research: Teachers' Perspectives

Some of the interviewees noted how assessing the quality of research is often a difficult task for teachers. This is particularly the case for teachers who may have limited research experience as part of their educational qualifications. Emma noted that "assessing research is not something you're really trained on, and it wouldn't be something that you would know." This point was supported by John, who articulated that prior to his postgraduate studies, he didn't really have a critical eye in terms of research. He said: "I never really had a critical hat on as regards whether the methods were robust or the findings rigorous enough."

Despite such difficulties, there were some noteworthy responses from the teachers interviewed, and four main subthemes were generated from the data (see Figure 1): (a) trusted source; (b) link to the Irish context; (c) application to practice; and (d) reliable methods.

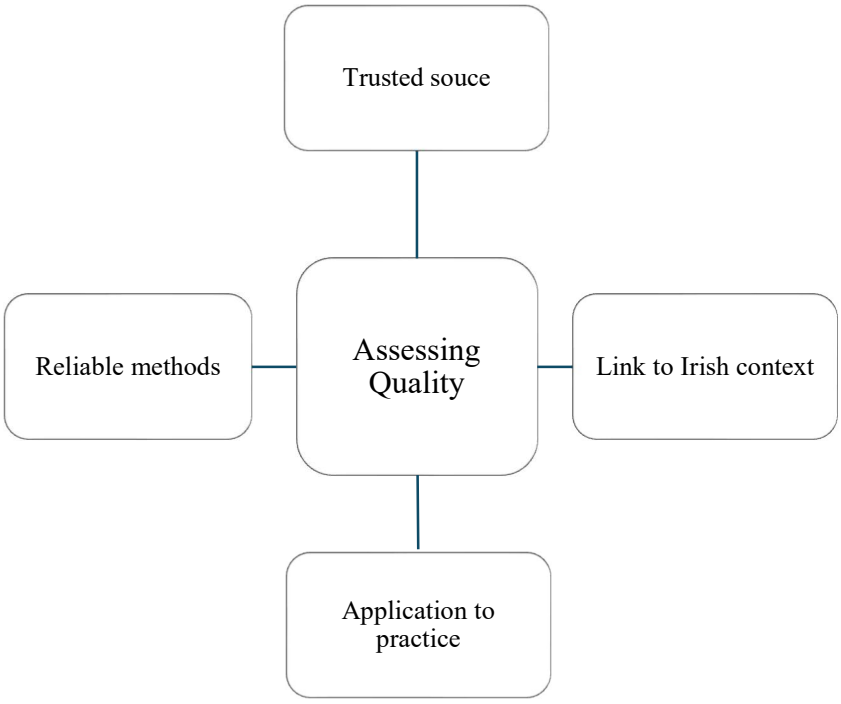


Figure 1. Assessing the Quality of Research

The first subtheme, *trusted source*, was the most common theme generated from the teacher data. Ruth articulated how this generally entailed "looking at reputable journals which are peer reviewed and also looking for the 'tried and tested' authors." This was seconded by Cathal, who stated:

> I suppose I would just assume that if it's a written paper from a reputable source, a reputable university, or if it's somebody who has written many papers on the subject… I suppose that would be an indicator that it's probably good stuff.

For the second subtheme, teachers noted that the extent to which the research had an explicit *link to the Irish context* was an important indicator of quality. While teachers acknowledged the value of an international perspective, they felt that some research from other countries did not always apply to the Irish education system. This view was best summed up by Ruth, who noted:

> I like reading the work of Irish academics simply because the context is relevant to me. That's not to say that people from other jurisdictions and other countries don't have a lot to say. Of course they do. And we can learn a lot from them. But I sometimes I'm looking out for a little bit of familiarity, a little bit of what I'm interested in, and the Irish kind of angle.

Regarding the third subtheme, *application to practice* was critical for research to be deemed high-quality. Some respondents spoke of the potential disconnect between theory and practice, and how research that is good or desirable in theory, may not always be feasible in practice. Barry felt that this is why it was important to ask, "Does it make sense? Does it stand up?" when looking at a piece of research. In line with this, John explained how he always "assessed the quality [of research] by its application to practice."

In the fourth and final subtheme, teachers noted that the research needed to employ *reliable methods*, including the use of valid and reliable instruments or measures, and the sample size. Edel determined that it was important for teachers to "read past the headline and see what methods have been used." This point was supported by Cormac, who said:

> I think reading the methodology within the piece of research is a big one to see the quality of it, you know you can go and you can look at the findings and you can look at introduction or the abstract and a lot of the juicier information is there… but to really see if it's reliable or valid, I think you have to get into the weeds and look at the methodology.

Research Utilisation in Irish Schools

The majority of participants (both researchers and teachers) described the conceptual use of research evidence, with some examples of instrumental and symbolic use as well (described later). Many of the conceptual uses of research evidence were described at the national- or school-level, while instrumental use was more commonly described at the classroom- or individual teacher-level. Specifically, participants described how large bodies of research had informed the field's understanding of educational challenges, thereby indirectly facilitating changes to school schedules (e.g., allocating more time for numeracy instruction and

professional learning [Croke Park hours]), school structures (e.g., development of subject departments and collaborative spaces), and the development of new curricula, which align with the conceptual use of research evidence.

Participants also described how research had shifted the priorities of schools. For example, research regarding student well-being following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, disproportionate educational outcomes of diverse or marginalised groups, and the benefits of inclusion, facilitated a cultural shift for schools. For example, Barry, a primary school teaching principal, said:

> We had various research come out in relation to well-being and so a huge emphasis is on well-being now in schools and there's a lot of work being done in that…Research would have been, I suppose, disseminated to schools about different types and different types of exercises that could be used to improve well-being and all that would have included in our own SPHE [Social, Personal, and Health Education] policy and school well-being policy.

Some participants also noted the instrumental use of research evidence, where research was referenced to make specific decisions or answer predetermined questions. This type of research utilisation most often occurred at the individual administrator- or teacher-level. For example, Michael, a secondary teacher, said:

> I was thinking about changing what I've been doing and…instead of me just doing something…I might say 'Okay, right. Is there anything out there about that?' So…I might look up some education research about that. And then say, 'What can I read about this?' I might look up an educational paper, we read something in a book, or whatever it might be and then that might inform how I will it instead of me just winging it, and thinking, 'Okay, I'm gonna do this and it might work, it might not work.' I think that would be kind of a waste of my time and a waste of my students' time. But if I can have something that's already been researched and implemented and presented and discussed and critically analysed by a number of different peers, that I think might better inform what was implemented in my own practice.

Further, some participants noted how the instrumental use of research evidence often occurred in the context of professional learning, graduate education, or close collaboration with

researchers. For example, Michael described a specific situation in which his school was unsure of the best way to support students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The school then offered a professional learning session to address this gap in their knowledge and Michael noted that he and his colleagues adapted their teaching as a direct result of the research presented during the professional learning session. Similarly, Joan, a teaching primacy principal, indicated that she directed teachers to specific professional learning sessions or seminars to help them understand the research on specific topics, which would then guide local decision-making. However, Megan, a researcher, noted that these professional learning sessions were not always based on the most up-to-date research. Rather, Megan noted that close collaboration with researchers was beneficial for teachers to incorporate subject based research into their instruction:

> I have my PhD student specifically working with teachers to incorporate structured problem-solving in their mathematics classrooms… And also, I know of some of the schools that we're working with right now, are doing their research lessons and lesson study. And it's really exciting, because you know, they're emailing me going, 'We're doing it on Tuesday.' And so that's really rewarding for me, because I can really see where I'm working with schools or my research students are working with schools, and I can see tangible impact where stuff is happening.

Finally, participants noted how the research *process* informed their practice, in addition to incorporating or translating research *results* into policy or practice. In Ireland, this phenomenon is termed "teacher-as-researcher" in which teachers collect and interpret data to evaluate the effects of their instruction and make adaptations to improve instruction based on those data. This process is comparable to case study, single-subject, programme evaluation, or continuous improvement methodologies. In this vein, participants described the benefits of using research in their daily practice, such as facilitating openness to change, innovation, or trying new approaches, as well as self-reflection. For example, Norma noted how the Teaching Council

allocated funds for teachers to conduct their own applied research studies in school to achieve these benefits.

Drawbacks and Challenges of Using Research in Irish Schools

In addition to the aforementioned examples in which research was used to inform practice, two areas were identified as potential drawbacks or challenges of using research to inform policy or practice from participants' perspectives. First, participants described the symbolic use of research evidence, specifically in the context of justifying the status quo. Several participants noted how results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, in which Ireland has consistently scored among the highest performing countries in the world in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2023), were frequently referenced by policymakers to prevent additional resources being allocated to education or by teachers to not change their practices. In this context, participants noted that mass media headlines about research, including the PISA results, was often surface-level, misleading, and there was insufficient attention paid to which academic skills were being assessed and how. Second, participants noted that policies, even when informed by research, could have unintended consequences, although they were unsure if this was due to the actual policy or the poor implementation of said policy. For example, Claire, a researcher, noted that there may be "mistaken inferences drawn from research, but hopefully the next piece of research will counteract them, unless something is endorsed too much too soon, although maybe that has more to do with the implementation than dissemination."

Discussion

The current study advanced scientific understanding of how research is used to inform practice and policy in Irish schools. Importantly, participants noted that research conducted in the

Irish context, specifically, is a critical part of assessing the quality of educational research. Several important implications for research and practice emerged from our study, which we discuss next.

First, both researchers and practitioners noted there was insufficient dissemination, access, and utilisation of research in schools. Both researchers and teachers highlighted the importance of social networks for the dissemination and access of research, particularly in the context of graduate education. This type of collaboration seemed particularly useful for the instrumental use of research evidence, in which researchers could help practitioners directly translate research into practice. While these partnerships may seem useful, they may also be difficult to scale, especially since there are barriers to accessing graduate education in Ireland (e.g., costs, time; Barrett and Prendergast, 2024). Further, both researchers and teachers noted social media and communication through professional organisations (e.g., circulars, subject associations) as key channels to disseminate and access research. While these channels may offer greater potential to bring research to scale, they may lack "quality control," as one participant noted. As such, participants sometimes disagreed on the extent to which the content disseminated through these channels was in fact based on research. Thus, the Irish education system may benefit from allocating resources to dissemination channels in which quality can be monitored and there is the potential to reach a broad audience.

Second, findings suggested that the use of research evidence in Ireland focused on the dissemination of the research *process* rather than the dissemination of research *findings*, perhaps more so than in other countries. Developing "teachers-as-researchers" is a primary goal of teacher education and professional development and funding sources are specifically allocated to supporting this conceptualisation of research dissemination. This conceptualisation may be

particularly pertinent in Ireland, as some Irish scholars have highlighted the challenges operationalising and measuring the quality of educational services provided or the types of outcomes education is intended to elicit (e.g., long-term enjoyment of learning), thereby questioning the utility of EBPs in schools (e.g., Malone and Hogan, 2020). Perhaps relatedly, participants seemed to disagree on the extent to which research had informed specific national-level educational reforms (e.g., subject based curricula). However, almost all participants noted the importance of using the research *process* in Irish schools.

Finally, all participants noted that the use of research evidence in Irish schools was nuanced and complex. There was diversity or variability in participants' responses based on their professional roles, training and work experiences, setting, and goals that influenced how they responded to the questions about disseminating, accessing, and utilising research. Almost all participants alluded to the idea that using research to inform practice lay at the intersection of implementer characteristics (e.g., knowledge, skills), research characteristics (e.g., methodology, subject area), and context (e.g., national policies in Ireland). Participants also referred to a variety of types of research, ranging from traditional forms of academic research disseminated through peer-reviewed academic journals to more informal research conducted by teachers as part of school self-evaluation processes to help them make decisions about what works best in their classrooms. However, no participants described how assumptions about the nature of reality and ways of knowing (i.e., epistemology and ontology; Lather, 2006) influenced how they defined "research" or what constituted "data." Teachers and researchers may wish to think through these assumptions critically, as it impacts whether they believe certain programmes, practices, or policies are supported by "rigorous" research evidence. Thus, our qualitative study was useful for identifying a variety of factors that might be considered when conducting future

studies on the use of research in Irish schools, as well as potential pitfalls when using research to inform policymaking.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the merits of this study, there were limitations that need to be acknowledged for accurate interpretation of findings. First, there was a limited sample. Although we used a purposive sampling procedure to increase representation from a wide range of geographic regions, professional experiences, and roles, future research might consider including an even broader range of participants. Although our study was the first to include perspectives from both researchers and teachers, future research may wish to include the perspectives of policymakers, intermediaries (e.g., representatives from professional organisations), or students. Second, there may have been selection bias, as all participants had a pre-existing professional relationship with at least one of the authors and participants may have been more likely to participate because they were interested in using research. It is possible that a random sample of researchers and teachers may have been less inclined to disseminate research or access research, thus overestimating the use of research evidence in this study. Future research may wish to employ other recruitment strategies, which may yield results that are more representative of the broader population.

Conclusion

This study was among the first to explore how research evidence is used specifically in the Irish educational context. Findings highlighted the different ways in which research is used, including conceptual, instrumental, and symbolic uses of research evidence, and the unique intersection between teachers' knowledge and skills, the nature of the research evidence, and the local context. All participants agreed that increased collaboration and communication between researchers and practitioners would benefit both communities and improve the bidirectional

relationship between research and practice. Our findings serve as a starting point for catalysing future research to understand the relationship between research and practice in Irish schools as well as to improve the dissemination and implementation process.

Our study has significant implications for school psychology research and practice. School psychologists, worldwide, are committed to promoting the use of research to improve the lives of children and adolescents. Further, school psychologists are required to implement culturally responsive practices, which consider both global and local contexts (International School Psychology Association, 2024). Thus, this study sheds light on how school psychologists can take the unique characteristics of the Irish educational landscape into account to increase the likelihood that high quality research is adopted and implemented to improve academic, behavioural, and social-emotional outcomes among Irish students.

Funding. This research was supported in part by a Fulbright Scholar Award.

Data Availability. The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared, so supporting data are not available.

Ethics Approval. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards described in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and determined to be exempt by the [university masked for peer review] Human Research Protection Program, Office of Regulatory Affairs.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Consent to Participate. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

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