Schooling the Democratic Way: understanding Student Experiences in Irish Democratic schools from the Perspective of Staff members

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Abstract

Background: At present, only four established democratic schools exist in Ireland. With four more schools opening in the coming years. There is limited reserach addressing Irish democratic schools and student experiences. Democratic schools hold two principles: democratic governance and self-directed learning. These principles along with their lack of following the national curriculum, no lessons and emphasis for freedom, makes these schools radically different to the current Irish education system for primary and secondary school.

Aims: To explore the perspectives of staff members to indirectly gain the experiences of students.

Methods & Procedures: 11 particpants were included in this study (M=3, F=8). This study employed semi structured interviews for their flexibility and adaptability. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic inductive analysis was employed to identify patterns that emerge from the dataset without a predetermined theorectical framework. Particpants were given informed consent and a brief about their confidentiality, and anonymity of data.

Outcome & Results: A collection of five overarching themes and six subthemes emerged, these include school characteristics, student experience, deschooling, problems with traditional schooling and barriers to democratic schooling. Each theme was recognised as signficant and distinct. Staff members revealed students greatly enjoy the school and gain a wide range of crucial life skills, a holistic experience and knowledge.

Conclusion & Implications: Staff members perceived that democratic schools positively impact child development and create individuals who are highly motivated, decisive, emotionally intelligent, and highly confident. This alternative education is advantageous for students when compared to current primary and secondary students in the academic-centric environment. However, there is limited access to this alternative due to government neglect

and social barriers. Supporting and funding these schools is essential to ensure that all families have the opportunity to enrol their child/children.

Keywords: Irish democratic schools, self-directed learning, staff members, deschooling, community

Introduction

"All this scientific research points in the same direction: Childhood is designed to be a period

of variability and possibility, exploration and innovation, learning and imagination…"

(Gopnik, 2016, p. 58)

Democratic schools and Sudbury schools provide an alternative education system

grounded in the principles of democratic governance, equality between students and staff

members and self-directed learning, where students take initiative and responsibility for their

education (Gray, 2017; Gray & Chanoff, 1986). These schools cater for children aged 5 to 18

years, do not teach the national curriculum, and do not have traditional teachers; instead, they

have facilitators or staff members who support student's learning journeys through self-

directed learning. Staff members enable students to actively participate in decision making

process within the school community, have autonomy over their learning, and pursue their

academic interests while exploring their curiosities (*EUDEC – European Democratic

Education Community*, n.d.).

In practice, staff members provide students with the opportunity to take initiative and

responsibility for their own learning from creating a supportive educational environment that

is centred around autonomy, personal responsibility, creativity, and critical thinking

(Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023; *The Sudbury Model*, n.d.). This type of environment

enables self-directed learning within an environment with no set curriculum or given

instruction (Gray, 2017). Democratic governance is employed through daily or weekly

assemblies for the whole school to collaborate and reach a consensus on matters such as

school activites, rules, admission of new students and the general running of the school

(*EUDEC – European Democratic Education Community*, n.d.).

While Sudbury schools, a type of democratic schools, embody similar values and

principles, their name differentiates them as they are named after the Sudbury model. The

Sudbury model stems from Sudbury Valley School (SVS) opened in 1968 Massachusetts in the United States (Greenberg, 1973). SVS designed a learning environment with the governance of students in mind and the prioritisation of the collaboration between students, staff and parents to establish a secure and functional learning environment from primary through secondary level education (Gray, 2017; Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Hence, this study will include data from Sudbury and democratic schools in Ireland.

Ultimately, these schools operate as holistic communities that have a great focus on the student's agency and vote (Gray, 2017). These communites empower students to become self-reliant, confident, and responsible individuals who are ready to navigate the complexities of the world from the nurturing of their creativity and autonomy (Gray, 2013). Students gain significant communication skills, critical thinking and self-directedness (Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

Key Characteristics

Democratic schools hold the core values of responsibility, truth, respect, and choice (*The Sudbury Model*, n.d.). These values play a significant role in supporting students and staff to create not only an academic environment but a space to grow and gain personal developmental skills (*Wicklow Democratic School*, n.d.). These core values enable the key characteristics that make a democratic school alternative to the mainstream education system. These key characteristics involve:

1. Active collaboration

2. Freedom to make decisions

3. Self-directed learning

4. Personal responsibility

5. Mixed aged interactions

In democratic schools, active collaboration refers to the process where students and staff members work together in a cooperative and participatory manner to achieve common educational goals, problem solve and create a safe and supportive environment that promotes active self-directed learning (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). Active collaboration can be seen through holding meetings, students organising groups to complete projects as a team, open discussions, encouraging involvement for school matters from the outer community and the functioning of the Judicial Committee (JC) (Gray et al., 2021; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023). JC is a governed student body that includes an age mixed set of five or six students and one staff member for the purpose of deciding appropriate consequence for students or staff members who have broken school agreements/rules (Gray et al., 2021; Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023).

Regarding, learning in a democratic school. It is self-directed, students are encouraged to choose what, when where and how they will spend their day at school (Traxler, 2015). Students come across various opportunities and challenges such as learning activities, topics, conflicts and mixed aged interactions and which aid the development of autonomy, responsibility and encourages the pursuit of their own curiosity (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Morris, 2019; *The Sudbury Model*, n.d.; Traxler, 2015). Whereby Stone's (2016) paper gives an example of this. A child chooses to play with magnets and begins to learn about the concept of magnetism. By doing this, the child begins to develop a sense of autonomy, responsibility, and curiosity through the process of interacting with the magnets physically and questioning their unknown abilites mentally. More importantly, the child has chosen an activity that creates a happy experience, in turn aiding their development of emotional connections and experiences (Stone, 2016).

Moreover, democratic schools focus on personal responsibility which extends beyond the academic framework, where students and staff members are encouraged to take ownership of

their actions and contribute to the overall functioning and well-being of the school community (Alderson, 2004) . Personal responsibility plays a crucial role in fostering self-directed learning, decision-making, and conflict resolution within a school community (Alderson, 2004). At the same time, it contributes to the functioning of the community. For instance, personal responsibility often translates into opportunities for unstructured play and meaningful interactions among students of different ages (Stone, 2016).

Reserach suggests that play and mixed aged interactions in a learning environment is a crucial part of a child's emotional, cogntive and academic development (Parrott & Cohen, 2020). Through unstructured play children learn, make friendships, improve their mood and attention for academics from creating an enjoyable experience (Parrott & Cohen, 2020). Children learn to interact with others, work cooperatively and manage social conflict, aiding their emotional, cognitive and social development (Parrott & Cohen, 2020). Play's novelty, variation and opportunity for a child's choice enables them to hold an active role in the environment and make learning more memorable because of the happy experience it has (Fyffe et al., 2024; Toub et al., 2016).

Relating to mixed aged interactions, Gray (2011) provides detailed research stemming from his own work and other studies noting there are benefits for both younger and older children who participate in mixed age play. Younger children often are challenged when put into a group of older children, finding the activites too complex and sometimes too difficult to do alone (Gray, 2011). Which Gray (2011) acknowledges Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, finding that having this challenge benefits the younger child's development of new physical and cognitive skills, understanding of cooperating with others and learning to play at a more difficult level (Podolskij, 2012). Whereby the younger children may adopt numerical and literacy skills from the older children (Gray, 2011). As for older children, age mixing allows them to gain a sense of maturity, practice nurturance and leadership, since they

can expand their knowledge through teaching and learning (Gray, 2011). Recent research supports the idea that mixed age play is reported to be highly beneficial for the development of learning and behaviour (Wang, 2023).

Ultimately, it can be noted that the key characteristics of democratic schools are interconnected. When combined these characteristics create and foster an environment that enables self-determined activity, facilitating learning that occurs autonomously rather than through coercion (Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023). This holistic learner centred approach to education supports critical thinking, creativity, and personal responsibility, preparing students to thrive in a dynamic and ever-evolving world (Gray, 2013; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Sardoc, 2018).

A Brief History

In 1921, Summerhill school was formed in Hellerau near Dresden in Germany by A.S Neil (*A.S. Neill Summerhill School*, n.d.). Summerhill school was the first school to employ democratic governance, freedom, and autonomy in an educational institution that was alternative to mainstream education. This school is well-known and remains operating today. Later on, Sudbury Valley School (SVS) opened in Framingham, Massachusetts in 1968, founded by a group of educators Mimsy Sadofsky, Hanna Greenberg and Daniel Greenberg (Ari, 2022; Greenberg, 1973). These alternative educational institutions aimed to create schools with children's best interests and wellbeing in mind, focusing on implementing freedom, self-governance, and self-directed learning to aid social and emotional development (*A.S. Neill Summerhill School*, n.d.; Greenberg, 1973). In comparison to Summerhill school, SVS created a school that did not follow the English national curriculum and standard teaching methods such as providing lessons (Ari, 2022; Greenberg, 1973). SVS emphasised self-directed learning, open decision making, creativity and an environment that includes all ages and equality (*Sudbury Valley School*, n.d.). Moreover, SVS emphasises the democratic

governance model to such an extent that students are given the opportunity to vote on matters such as expelling disruptive students, budget allocations, school policies and employing and firing staff (Ari, 2022).

A.S Neil's school's alternative way of teaching influenced the free school movement which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s (Gray, 2017). The free school movement involved a period of radically different schools opening being called free schools and further influencing the idea of unschooling, a child centred educational approach involving self-directed learning through homeschooling or alternative schools following no set curriculum (Gray, 2017).

Followed by this, the success of SVS inspired and further influenced the development of democratic schools across the world following the sudbury model closely with some more or less radical alternations (Ari, 2022; Gray, 2017). Notably in Ireland as of 2024, there are four operational democratic schools in Ireland. In 2016, Wicklow Democratic School was the first school to open. The school was founded by a group of parents with a concern for their children's well-being and education that they felt was being constrained in a traditional school (*FAQ | Wicklow Democratic School*, n. d.). Wicklow democratic school was founded on the basis of recognising the importance and benefits of self-directed learning, unstructured and mixed- age play in children (Gray & Chanoff, 1986) Following the success of Wicklow democratic school, three other schools opened shortly after in counties west Cork, Sligo and Dublin. West Cork Sudbury school (WCSS) opened in 2020 with only 21 students and continued to grow. WCSS's parents reported their children are interested in variety of activites, enjoy school and learn through exploration and problem solving (*West Cork Sudbury School*, n.d.). Like Sligo Sudbury school, they continuously welcome new throughout the school year and maintain an active newsletter, announcing student achievements, creations and events (*News – Sligo Sudbury School*, n.d.). In Co. Dublin, True

Nature Sudbury school (TNSS) recently opened in 2023 transforming a previous national primary school to a sudbury school. Furthermore, the success and opening of these schools in Ireland has influenced the opening of four more schools, these are in the midlands, near counties Leitrim, north Dublin, and North Clare. These schools are aiming to open democratic/sudbury schools in the coming years.

Democratic Education: the Outcomes

Gray and Chanoff (1986) conducted a follow-up study on 69 graduates of SVS, finding that democratic education served as a highly beneficial schooling system to their emotional, social and scholastic development. More than half of the graduates reported that they encountered no notable obstacles when applying for and transitioning into traditional higher education (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). These graduates expressed their desire to pursue a particular career path or interest while also seeking opportunites to increase personal growth and expand (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). As for graduates who did not want to pursue further education, they reported because of SVS they became responsible, learned to take initiative, able to explore their curiosity and owned the ability to communicate well with people regardless of status (Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

More recently, Morrison's (2022) survey of 18 alumni from Albany Free School (AFS) revealed that graduates not only gained higher education access but also excelled academically once there. Some graduates pursued employment, noting that the skills and experience they achieved at AFS adequately prepared them. They found fulfilling work that aligned with their personal preferences while effectively managing other life commitments (Morrison, 2022). Additionally, graduates across different academic studies in higher education expressed that they felt they had an enjoyable and memorable childhood that gave them freedom (Circle School, 2015; Gray et al., 2021).

The positive environment of the school that led to these outcomes, as noted in Gray et al.'s (2021) survey on former student's experiences, was largely attributed to the staff and other students. Students viewed staff as facilitators of learning rather than authoritative teachers, which fostered a sense of mutual respect and enabled them to take on responsibility and make choices (Gray et al., 2021). The survey reported a significant overall satisfaction rate of 85% with their experience at the school, highlighting the positive impact the school achieved. By which graduates responses expressed that they were encouraged to express themselves, expand their horizons, acquire essential skills, and share their knowledge with others. Hence, highlighting the need for the sudbury model in education (Traxler, 2015).

However, Darling (1992) examined Summerhill 70 years later, questioning the reality of the positive outcomes from the alternative educational approach. Darling (1992) reported that Summerhill school produced pupils that ranged from being uneducated to willing and motivated individuals, which is controversial on the debate of the benefits democratic schools hold. However, this may be attributed to the fact that Neil challenges the conventional norm that education is not the priority skill children should gain in a school, instead skills such as self- assurance, self-governance and responsibility is the key to a child's development (*A.S. Neill Summerhill School*, n.d.). Hence, Neil's perspective raises the rationale behind traditional mainstream schooling. Therefore, why should we force children to conform to learning and obey orders from authority figures when students that have gained knowledge and experience from an environment that is not coercive and encourages self-directed learning (Darling, 1992; Traxler, 2015). This claim is supported by recent research reporting great positive impact on child development of social, emotional, behavioural from giving the opportunity to have a voice, self-responsibility and freedom to choose in an educational environment (Bridgeman & Lind, 2016; Harel Ben-Shahar, 2016; Li et al., 2023; Sardoc, 2018). Ultimately, it matters how we treat and see children, therefore including them in

debates, discussions and important meetings giving children a voice, a sense of responsibility and choice (*A.S. Neill Summerhill School*, n.d.). As Neil advocates, we should create a space to fit the individual rather than make them conform (*A.S. Neill Summerhill School*, n.d.)

Democratic schooling: Parental Views and Concerns

Parents and families who opt out of placing their child into traditional schooling refer to alternative education due to various reasons. Recent research indicates that parents decide to enrol their child in alternative schooling due to positive and negative motivations. Starnawski and Gawlicz's (2021) qualitative study highlights negative motivations for choosing alternative education. Positive motivations arise from motivation to foster their child's development and the holistic approach towards education. Whereas negative motivations were reported to stem from negative experiences in traditional schooling, disagreement with the elitist sense of community in private schools and viewing mainstream schools as unfair and insufficient. Moreover, parents opted for alternative education due to concerns about their children's passivity, boredom, slow intellectual development and declining creativity over time within traditional school settings (Starnawski & Gawlicz, 2021). Positive motivations included voicing their concern for mainstream education in parenting groups and actively engaged with democratic schools to represent their determination for alternative education and create an impact on education (Starnawski & Gawlicz, 2021). Gray and Chanoff (1986) further express that students come from middle-class backgrounds and have previously experienced problems in the mainstream education.

Consequently, due to the distinctiveness and novelty of the educational approach, parents report fears, anxieties and concerns regarding their child's education. Gawlicz (2023) suggests that parents may feel anxiety towards their child's learning in a democratic school because they do not learn at the same pace they would at a traditional school. For instance, a parent may fear that their 7-year-old child has yet not learned to read and write. Parents fear

that their child will struggle in the educational approach, finding self-directed learning as a difficult process (Morris, 2019). Parents hold concerns that their children will idle and be bored at the school, only engage in play all day, or face challenges in pursuing higher education and inability to sit the Leaving Certificate state exam (*FAQ | West Cork Sudbury School*, n.d.; *FAQ | Wicklow Democratic School*, n. d.) Another concern that parents may have is related to tuition fees. Democratic schools and sudbury schools in Ireland are not funded by the government and therefore must hold fees unlike the mainstream education which is free (*FAQ | Wicklow Democratic School*, n. d.). In addition, parents may feel a negative social pressure from other parents and family members that do not accept this alternative schooling approach. Trunk (2013) argues that democratic schools are means of tyranny, place too great of an emphasis on self-interest and believes that alternative schools are not better than mainstream schools. This idea may be shared by others and negatively impact one's self concept and behaviour (Dejonckheere & Bastian, 2021).

Furthermore, this fears, anxieties and concerns parents and children may go through can be attributed to the process of deschooling, the mental and physical process of transitioning from traditional schooling to alternative educational approaches (Routray, 2012). Deschooling involves adjusting one's mindset, expectations, and habits to align with the principles and practices of the chosen alternative educational approach (Routray, 2012).. Deschooling often includes letting go of preconceived notions about education, authority, and learning outcomes, and embracing concepts such as student autonomy, self-directed learning, and collaborative decision-making within the educational community (Zaldívar, 2016). Deschooling is a unique process for each individual, effecting each individual's behaviour differently and the time for overcoming worries and anxieties can vary significantly (Buehler, 2017). However, it is proposed that this adjustment is not only necessary but also beneficial,

as it enables parents and children to adapt more seamlessly to a new educational environment and philosophy (Rahman et al., 2024).

Present study

The current study examines the past research on student's and parental experiences of democratic governance and self-directed learning in democratic schools. Yet, there is a noticeable gap in research concerning student's experiences in Irish democratic schools. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the firsthand experiences of students through the lens of staff members in Irish democratic schools. This study seeks to deepen the understanding and increase the research surrounding democratic schools in Ireland through taking an open perspective on all views and experiences of students perceived by staff members. Through semi structed interviewing with semi structed interviews with staff members to indirectly gain the experiences from current and past students at the school. Given the daily interactions with students, knowledge about current and former students, and valuable insights into the school's operation that staff members possess, they are considered more suitable candidates for interviews compared to students. Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

1. What factors influence parent's decisions to enrol their children in a democratic school?

2. How do staff members support and encourage students to take on personal responsibility for their learning within the democratic school?

3. How do staff members perceive the impact of democratic school practices on students' sense of autonomy and personal development?

4. What are the barriers that hinder the broader adoption of democratic education in Ireland?

Methods

Study Design

This study is based on cross-sectional qualitative research. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic inductive analysis method. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing exploration of diverse perspectives. Unlike open-ended surveys or structured interviews, their unstructured nature and flexibility allow for use of various question types to probe into specific aspects as they arise. Similarly to thematic analysis, semi-structured interviews facilitate deep understanding of the individual's experience, perspective, and attitudes. In comparison to discourse, content and narrative analysis, thematic analysis is more suitable for this research topic as it aims to identify and analyse patterns within qualitative data. Therefore, semi-structured interviews analysed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework is a more suitable option.

Participants

A total of 11 participants was included in this study (M=3, F=8). This study included participants that are currently working at a democratic school in Ireland and interact with students daily, see Table 1 for participant demographics.

This study is based on a self-selection sample whereby individuals chose to participate in this research voluntarily. Particpants were recruited via emailing staff members from the four established democratic schools in Ireland: West Cork Sudbury school, Sligo Sudbury school, True Nature Sudbury school and Wicklow Democratic school. The email included a formal greeting, a brief outline of this study, the research aims and two attached files; the information sheet and consent forms for participants to read beforehand. Inline with the democratic principles, each school brought the request for particpants to one of the weekly school meetings for collective discussion and consensus. However, only two schools

were able to participate in this study due to unavailability to give interviews at the time, being

actively occupied with school business and no response. This study included staff members

from True Nature Sudbury school, opened since 2018 and Sligo Sudbury school, opened

2023.

Table 1

Demographic of Staff members

Participant	Gender	Years working	Parent	Background
1	M	4	Yes	Forest schoolteacher Degree in Art education Carpenter Music Art
2	F	1	No	Personal trainer Passion for self-directed learning Baking and Cooking Outdoor activites
3	F	1	Yes	Interest in alternative education Homeschooling
4	M	5	No	Metal Work Outdoor activites Working with children Dislike of current education system
5	F	3	No	Keen interest for DS Lack of DS in Ireland
6	F	1	Yes	Passionate for unschooling Homeschooling group Inspired from reading Holt, Gray, Hall Irish Art
7	F	6	Yes	Experience working with children Sudbury school camp leader Woodland school Master's degree Sociology Gardening
8	F	2	Yes	Social care worker Degree Early years education

Table 1 (continued).

9	M	3	No	Degree Engineering Guitar teacher Keen interest for alternative education Gardening
10	F	1	No	Primary school teacher Interest in developmental psychology Master's Degree Inquiry based learning
11	F	8	No	Primary school teacher Dislike of current education system

Material

This study utilised a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule was created based on the research questions and a brief literature scope, see Appendix A. Questions were added and deleted from the feedback of my supervisor and revision of literature to ensure a concise and comprehensive collection of questions. The interview schedule was then piloted with the first participant and resulted with no change. Each participant was asked for feedback for improving the interview schedule and suiting each interview more closely. at the end of the interview particpants were asked "Do you think there are any questions that I should have asked but haven't" and the following quesiton "Is there anything you would like to add or clarify". Additionally, due to the flexibility of semi-structure interviews questions were not constrained and adapted to follow the flow during the interview and collect insightful information.

Procedure

This study aims to gain the insight of student's experiences in Irish democratic school through the perspective of staff members. This study was conducted through three stages, these include participant recruitment, interviewing and data analysis.

Particpants were recruited via email through Google's Gmail service. An email was sent the administrators of each democratic school with a clear information sheet and consent form, see Appendix B and C. Following this, the school held a meeting with students and staff members to discuss and come to an agreement to participate in this study. Administrators of the schools replied with contact emails from each staff member and signed consent forms. Each consent form gave the option for participants to provide their email address to be contacted about the study's conclusive results. Each voluntary participant with a signed consent form was then contacted through email to schedule a date and time to hold the online interview through Microsoft Teams. Online interviews were held for the convenience of time and travel cost.

Prior to the interview, participants were sent an email reminder and the information sheet. The information sheet contains the purpose of the study, information for the participant regarding anonymity, use and storage of their data and the impact of their involvement of their participation in this research area. At the beginning of the interview, particpants were a brief to reminder that the interview will be recorded, any information given will be anonymous, confidential and they have the right to withdraw at any moment. During the online interview, the participant was asked a collection of open and closed ended questions from a printed copy of the interview schedule. The interview was recorded through UCC's handheld recording device and was downloaded onto UCC's OneDrive database for safety and security. The recorded interview was then transcribed via Microsoft Word's transcribing tool, which was replayed and reviewed three times to ensure text quality and correct grammar. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure complete confidentiality of their personal data. Lastly, the transcribed data was then analysed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis framework, see Appendix D for a sample of thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying meaning of the whole dataset. Utilising the inductive approach, this study analysed each transcript without a predetermined theoretical framework to allow for an open-minded and semantic perspective of themes that directly emerged from the dataset.

Thematic analysis is a six-stage framework. Beginning with developing a great familiarisation with the data, each transcript is read and re-read to gain a thorough understanding of the presenting information. Once this stage has been reached, coding may begin. Coding involves identifying distinct patterns within the text and creating concise and meaningful labels that are then grouped into codes. Initial codes are created and reviewed alongside the text to group into finalised codes. This stage is followed by identifying thematic patterns in the data. Once finalised codes are created, they are reviewed and sorted into broader categories called themes. Codes are listed and reviewed multiple times to ensure correct fit into the specific theme. The fifth stage involves reviewing established themes against the data set to compare and ensure themes encompass the meaning of the transcribed data, view Appendix C for an example of finalised codes, themes, and subthemes. Once the transcripts have been analysed, the reseracher reports the analysis, presenting themes and codes in a comprehensive and organised manner.

Ethical Considerations

An ethics application was sent to the School of Applied Psychology's ethics committee for approval foremost the execution of the study, see Appendix E for approval confirmation. In line with the *Psychological Society of Ireland's Code of Professional Ethics* (2024), principle of respect for the rights and dignity of the person was given through informed consent and voluntary participation. Informed consent included giving an

information sheet including the study's purpose, benefits, and a consent form with the opportunity to provide an email address for contact regarding the study's conclusion, see Appendix E. Participants were reminded for voluntary participant by being given a brief prior to the interview. The brief remined the participant they can leave or stop the interview/study at any moment in time, any data collected will be anonymised via a participant code and data will only be securely shared amongst the researcher, the supervisor, and external examiners. This study presumes no physical, social, psychological and all other types of harm will occur.

Results

Inductive thematic analysis on staff members perspective of student's experiences in Irish democratic schools (DS) resulted with the following collection, see Table 2 below:

Table 2

Collection of thematic patterns, subthemes, and sample of codes

No.	Theme	Subtheme	Sample of Codes
1.	School characteristics	Terminology	Facilitator
			Learning environment
			Community
			Support
2.	Student experience	School processes	Morning Circle
		Opportunites	Freedom
		Challenges	Just Chat
		Outcomes	Autonomy
3.	Deschooling	Support	Ongoing discussions
			Informal book club
			Regular check ins
			Staff reflection
4.	Problems with Traditional Schooling (TS)		Limit expression
			Lack of play
			Limit social connections
5.	Barriers to Democratic Schooling (DS)		Tuition fee
			Rural location
			Negative peer pressure
			Lack of alternative education

School Characteristics

Participants highlighted that DS facilitate an environment where children can independently direct their learning through freedom and personal responsibility. They emphasised the significance of learning authenticity within a community setting, without an imposed curriculum and the hidden behavioural conditioning commonly found in mainstream education in Ireland. Staff members emphasised the need for parent's full commitment for trusting the process and support for student's freedom for a positive learning journey. As participant 5 said:

Students have the power to, you know have such a say in the community like they have the power to make the rules. They have the power to try change a rule or to come up with an idea for an event or a function. There's just so much more involvement, and with that is more responsibility and more independence, they need to be able to come into the environment to select their own education and they need the support around them.

Regarding parents, staff members reported there are three types of parents that enrol their child in a DS. Type 1 includes parents who have had a negative experience in traditional schooling (TS) in their childhood or are disappointed with the current schooling system. Type 1 parents do not want the same negative schooling experience for their child, therefore seek and choose alternative education. Type 2 parents have a child/children enrolled in TS, yet the child was having a poor experience and wanted a different type of education. These student's negative TS experience includes being unable to deal with peer groups, going through crises and having special educational needs that did not match with TS. As participant 5 said *"mainstream does not fit everybody. It doesn't suit everyone, and it can perhaps even do some damage at times if it's not suited to the person."* Type 3 parents specifically seek out alternative education as they have researched the philosophy, have gained knowledge from

developmental psychology, and hold a great interest for self-directed learning. Type 3 parents exhibit such passion and commitment for the model that some families even relocate from different countries and counties just to be closer to the school. As participant 7, 8 and 10 reported they have students coming from Germany, Croatia, France, Netherlands, the UK, and Dubai.

Terminology

The term 'school' was reported as a word with negative connotation. Staff members perceived that both parents and students who first arrived held the same TS expectations because of the organisation being called a "school". They expected that the school would look like a traditional school with classrooms of with chairs and tables, structured days with break times, lessons, and figures of authority. As participant 10 said:

In an ideal situation, we wouldn't call it a school. We would just call it a like an educational environment or a learning environment because school makes a light bulb go off in people's head of like, this is what school is and the preconceived notions of that, and so I do find that it actually disrupts things for us. It is just a word. But of course, **it's a word with power** *and that word is sometimes negative power rather than positive power.*

School is a word with power given by general society, as another staff member noted alternative education changes the idea of education therefore alternating the meaning of the word school.

Following this the term 'teachers' is noted as a forbidden term disliked and unused by staff members. Staff members preferred to be called "facilitators", or "staff members", or referred to by their own name. This is because staff members refer to their role as being focused on giving support to students, facilitating education, and acting as a positive role model rather than focusing on authority and teaching. As participant 4 said *"it is about being*

able to help and support children with their interests." The staff role is not only limited to being a centre for support, participants note roles vary and differ every day since every day is drastically different to the next. Staff roles range from administrative work, collaborating with students on project work, providing lessons in specific subjects students ask for to providing support for parents with their concerns and fears.

Additionally, the term "practice/probationary period/trial" was changed to settling in period. Participants noted using the word 'trial' made new parents and students feel that they are not part of the community but rather outsiders and a sense that they are trying out rather than a period that helps a new student fit into a new community. The term "Judicial committee" was updated to "Just Chat" to better reflect the restorative and mindful nature of the process rather than a court like debate with consequence and punishment.

Student Experiences

Participants express there is no typical school day, each day is different, students start and end school at different times and have the freedom to choose how to spend their day. Staff members report that students greatly enjoy and deeply love being at school. 10 out of 11 Participants report that students dislike school holidays and would like to spend all their time at school. Participant 5 gave the example of one student's voice:

> *When a new student loved it here so much that even when Mum said "Ohh, but you know it's costs money to go to that school, you know". And he goes, "I'll pay. I'll sacrifice my communion money and I'll pay the first months". So, I think when students are saying things like that. It is huge. It's a good sign.*

Participant 2 discussed that many parents say, *"their kid is happiest they have ever been".* Followed by this, participant 5 said *"I feel like a lot of parents come here because they just simply want their child to be happy."* Several participants report that this type of learning environment positively impacts child development. Participant 10 explained:

I would say better definitely. You know there isn't this like just prevailing anxiety that I

have seen in other neurodivergent children because they're expected to do so much

and they feel stressed out by the implications of school. Whereas here or in our

educational setting, there just aren't those expectations, the only expectations they

have are to follow our agreements and even then, they can seek support with those,

and they are also empowered to change them if they feel that it's necessary to do so.

School Processes

Generally, participants describe that students go through various school processes that are centred around student autonomy, support, and school function. This includes the enrolment process, school meetings, community agreements and mentoring.

Each DS holds a similar enrolment process, beginning with first contact from the parents/caregivers. The school responds with an informative email about their ethos, the model and research about self-directed learning. Parents are invited to a presentation and informative open evening. The enrolment process is quite strict and heavily dependent on communication between the school and family, as participant 5 said "*to make sure it's like the right learning environment for them that we think that they will be able to self-direct their own learning.*" To ensure new students "*fit*' into the community the school has continous communication between staff and family and the settling in period that ranges from one day, two weeks and four weeks depending on the school. As participant 11 said *"it is important to have our expectations, you know, matching from the beginning."* As participant 10 said about the enrolment process:

We take every child kind of on a case-by-case basis and every child, whatever their

individual needs are, will be supported as best as we can within the context of the

model and within. The context of what we can do.

Staff members report that everyone within the school community do not treat a student with a diagnosis any differently. Participant 1 expressed the student's perspective *"you know, it just everyone's brain works differently, and the label doesn't really matter."* Followed by participant 4 who said, *"that people who come into the school with some diagnosis it's not an issue in the school because they can regulate themselves a lot more freely."*

Within the community, school meetings are also held either weekly or monthly for discussion of matters related to school function. Each student and staff member are invited to voice their concerns, ideas and vote to change or create school rules/laws known as community agreements. As participant 8 said:

> *If you're not happy with something in your life in the school. You can be an agent for change, you don't have to just accept when things are going the way, you don't want them to go.*

School meetings are not mandatory to participate in. However, Morning Circle, Helping Hands, and Just Chat (JC) are mandatory to attend since they are community agreements. Morning Circle occurs every morning, it is a school assembly where daily announcements, scheduled activites and events are discussed. Students and staff gather in a circle to encourage free movement, open dialogue, and a sense of equality. In contrast to TS meetings are held in classrooms with elevated platforms for teachers which gives a sense of authority and power. Similarly to Morning Circle, Helping Hands occurs every day at a certain time. Typically, a bell rings to notify the entire school to dedicate 15 minutes to cleaning a section of the school. Everyone is responsible for Helping Hands, for instance school members would hoover, clean dishes, and put away things. Whereas JC previously called Justice/Judicial Committee is a restorative process that enables conflict resolution and

problem solving in a respectful and safe meeting. Any student or staff that disagrees with another, can request the individual for JC.

Mentoring is a student support and guidance process. Each student chooses a staff member that becomes their mentor. Mentors are responsible for supporting the student with self-directed learning and regularly checking in with them. Each student has the power to change mentors. Mentoring involves sessions where students can set goals, have informal discussions, and receive support that aids their well-being and community satisfaction.

Student Opportunities

From the perspective of staff members, students greatly enjoy the opportunity of freedom for autonomy, movement, responsibility, and mutual respect. As participant 7 said:

> *We can leave them to go out into the world and you know they'll figure it out because they have the time and the freedom to try out different things and to realise what they want, what they don't like or even to give them the opportunity to fail.*

Following this, staff members express students have the freedom to choose their own educational paths based on their interests, passions and learning styles. This self-directed learning not only enables them with education by the opportunity to pursue their curiosities. As participant 11 said students greatly enjoy this opportunity which aids their personal development:

> *Giving them plenty of time and space to figure things out about themselves, figure out things about their relationships with other people and having enough time to play. Like the work of childhood is play and if we continue to limit children's time to play, we limit their development and their processing of experiences They're processing everything through play processing all their experiences.*

Staff members perceive that students like the flexibility of school times where they can come in any time between 8.00 to 10.30am and leave any time between 2.30pm and

4.30pm. In addition, they like the freedom to use technology, make concrete friendships. Staff members report that students greatly enjoy the mixed aged interactions, participant 5 said:

So, they're all learning from each other. So, the younger ones are attracted to learning from the older ones. And then the older ones are enjoying that responsibility. And it's really good for them to step up and role model. That's like they say that's a special ingredient in a super school.

Student voice and autonomy is highly encouraged in DS. Participant 8 gives the example of student's ability for change, critical thinking, and consideration of everyone in school.

We have a sensory room and it's really just a place to go if you're feeling overwhelmed. But it was really being used so little that we actually thought as a community we might change it into a Lego room and the students voted. The students realised that and it wasn't how often you used it, it was the fact that it was there for when you needed it. And even if that was like once a year. Yeah, the fact that space is always held as a special space was important, so we decided to keep it as a sensory room.

Student Challenges

Staff members perceive that while freedom is a great opportunity for students, it also poses as a significant challenge. Students struggle with finding the right balance between freedom for self-directed learning and the need for structure and guidance. Additionally, staff members report students find it challenging to navigate the responsibilities with mixed aged interactions. For instance, students encounter difficulties in taking responsibility for each other and sharing the space with others. Moreover, the limited availability of space within the school for self-directed activities exacerbates these challenges, alongside managing conflicts that may arise. As participant 11 said:

The challenges, you know as well that that there's a lot, it's not, it's not utopian. You it can come across as a little bit you know for people, oh, "they play all day and it's all happy go lucky" and you know there's obviously a lot of you know, interpersonal clashes, there's a lot of disagreements between children they argue. And it's in those arguments and those conflicts and those problems that they're kind of figuring out and solving all the time, day-to-day with their peers, that there is masses and masses, amounts of learning and development that occurs.

Several particpants also noted that many students dislike mandatory community agreements such as JC, helping hands and morning circle since the mandatory participation can be time-consuming, interfering with their schedule for the day and time for self-directed learning.

Outcomes

Staff members perceive that students will gain a wide range of skills, a holistic perspective and an immense amount of insightful experiences. As participant 9 expressed:

They'll gain everything. I mean the whole, the life skills that they're going to learn here it's just amazing. Its amazing. The communication that they have with each other at this stage like so young, you know conflict resolution and the whole skills for life experience. It's just we're just priming them for life experience, really, you know.

Participants perceive that students will gain skills such as self-awareness, confidence, active listening, goal setting, intrinsic motivation, clear thinking, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, empathy, social awareness, communication, self-responsibility, and reflection. Participant 6 explained that:

You can already see it in a year, they really gain self-confidence in who they are. They really find their voice and they're able to express themselves, I think they learn how to navigate many different types of people as well, different ages.

Ultimately, as participant 10 said students are graduate as *"highly educated individuals who have had lots of life experience who can just look at the world in a very reflective and like non ego obsessed way."*

Deschooling

From the perspective of staff members, deschooling is frequently observed, primarily among parents, as opposed to students struggling to change their ideas and beliefs surrounding schooling. As noted by participant 2 *"we've realised the only people we've had that haven't fit in has been the parents. Not the students."* Staff members recognise this disparity between students and parents, noting that parents may struggle to *"fit in"* less since it is more difficult to accept the model and adjust their idea of schooling for children when they do not see the same progress in their child/children as they would in TS.

Participants reported that parents are most worried about their child's learning. Parents fear their child will not self-direct by themselves and will not learn maths, parents struggle to rearrange their mindset of what education for children should be, participant 1 noted *"there's always this comparison that education is about academic pursuits. But no, it's not only that, it's a small element of it."* Participant 7 stated parents are most concerned about progression into third level education:

> *People still like thinking and valuing the academic side of learning, like saying what about English, maths and Irish or whatever and then not realising that there are so many different ways that you can access third level education. Yet, the parent takes their children out in order to go to the secondary school. Yeah, just so that they can access third level education.*

As participant 1 said parents are quite optimistic and hopeful for their child, "*some of the parents just think this is a great idea from the beginning because there is so much freedom for the child.*" However, as parents go through the year, staff members find sometimes

parent's deschooling is difficult to overcome and results in dropout, as participant 2 said *"we realise some parents can talk the talk, but it's too hard them to walk the walk."* Staff members perceive this difficulty is negatively contributed to by factors such as general society's expectation that a child's schooling should be about rigorous study and structure, peer and family attitudes, pressure, and comparison of students in TS versus DS education milestones.

In particular, staff members noted that several parents expressed concerns for unlimited and mindless technology use whereby participant 5 said "*one of the big philosophies of this school is that children have access to tools of the culture and technology is a tool of the culture."* This challenge is addressed since the school allows parents to decide whether their child can have technological devices. Participant 8 further expressed that even long-term parents struggle sometimes:

> *I think you know that some days parents will feel very confident in their choices, and they can see how happy their child is or they've done something that really. You know, excites them, And then there's other days. I suppose where you where you. Do worry anything. What if? They don't do anything this week or, you know, comparing. To maybe relatives, you know their cousins or their neighbours and stuff. So yeah, I'm sure it. It hits at different times.*

However, staff members report that new students do struggle with the model, especially with the responsibility to self-directed one's own learning. Participant 11 gave the perspective of a new student struggling with the idea of school and structure:

> *Going into mainstream setting they know exactly what's going to happen. They're going to go in the in the room, there's going to be teacher there, they are going to hang up their coats. There's going to be and all that structure of knowing exactly what's happening next. This can be very supportive for some children, so in this type of school there is a lack of knowing exactly what's going to happen which this can be*

a real challenge for some children. So, we do things to put things in place and support

with that.

Deschooling Support

The school acts as community, supporting each student, staff member and parent with their challenges. Deschooling is a challenging and diffcult process to go through, however it is tackled like a team, like participant 1 said:

The environment in the school is like being in a big house like a family, and you just

deal with all the dynamics. You know, so, that's everyone just teaches you more of a

realistic view of normal life than just being in the school and being taught or being

told what you're supposed to do or think.

For students, individualised support occurs through mentoring, resolving issues restoratively through JC and school meetings. Students are supported with their freedom to pursue their unlimited interest even if staff members are unable to facilitate this, the school would reach out to the community for support asking parents and external members that may specialise in the specific area. As for parents, staff members support parents by creating informal book clubs or holding twice yearly check-ins to discuss their child's learning journey and worries parents may hold. Staff members also note that supporting one another with discussions and continous self-reflection of themselves highly benefits them. As participant 8 also a parent with a child enrolled in the school said, she found it quite beneficial to turn to literature in times of challenge:

I turn to you know Peter Grey or Fisher, or I watch a video on Sudbury Valley School

and then I'll feel inspired again and I'll feel like, no, it's OK. It will work out. I can

trust the process, you know. Definitely information and knowledge helps.

Following this, participant 8 also expressed that:

It's about trusting the process. You know, in theory they might understand that it's great to give children freedom, but then realise what freedom might look like is a challenge, you know. As our society has expectations, your child should be able to read when they they're at least by the time they're seven, you know. And if they don't meet those milestones that society has put on the child, that can cause a lot of worry, I suppose, with parents even if they do believe within the educational approach, it is about sitting with that uncomfortableness and knowing, you know, and that they'll get there eventually, you know.

Problems with Traditional Schooling

Many staff members expressed their concerns with TS based on their personal experience of either going to TS as a child, working in TS and or being a parent with a child in TS. Staff members hold a similar attitude that TS is not made for everyone, participant 1 said *"you can't have just one-size-fits-all, you know"* and participant 2 referred to the system as outdated, *"we are in a time where change is necessary in the education system."* Several staff members hold an anti- TS attitude, as participant 4 said *"you know, knowing that there is a problem with mainstream school, I think it is actually something that does qualify you to work with the school."*

Staff members report that TS is quite problematic, negatively impacting a child's development and even in some cases leaving children terrified of the idea of school. Participant 11 spoke about her attitude towards TS based on experience:

I think it can lead to a lot of suffocation of children's own personal desires and needs, and it doesn't really support them to grow up and learn who they are as a person and develop that really important element of self-knowledge which we all have to figure out at some point. And I think the preschool, the preschool sector can be quite supportive of children's own learning and supportive of children's play and that and

then adult education is very focused as well on the individual and supporting

creativity and just this big chunk in the middle with primary and secondary school has

been obviously designed for a different purpose, but we're still using it.

Several participants believe TS limits play in childhood since TS generally hold only two breaks in the day to allow children to play, make friends, eat, and have time without lessons. Furthermore, participants state that TS limits child creativity and individuality, as participant 7 said *"compared to like traditional schools or mainstream schools there. I don't think they're doing enough to allow students to express themselves."*

Barriers to Democratic schooling

It can be inferred from the data that there are several barriers to this type of education. DS are not government funded, therefore there are tuition, administrative and school fees that are in place and are continuously increasing due to the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland. For instance, some school place a fee for expressing interest which may discourage some people. The barrier of tuition fees can also be a contributing factor to the low occupancy rates. There is also a great lack of DS in Ireland, with only four established and three more opening in the coming years. These schools are spread across the country which makes going to a DS in Ireland a huge decision for families to either commute the length or relocate. For instance, Sligo Sudbury school is a lengthy commute, as one staff member noted that a student had left the school due to their parents being unable to continuously drive to school. However, these barriers are mitigated by the schools for families that may be unable to afford the tuition rate are offered a reduced rate and every school has flexible opening times allowing students to go to school before 10.30am and leave after 2.30pm.

Participants also highlight that new parents and students experience societal and peer pressure to conform to societal schooling norms. Participant 11 observed that during the deschooling phase, students   express feelings of guilt for lacking structure and experiencing

unlimited freedom when comparing themselves to their friends and peers in TS. Participants

report that parents fear that their child may not have the access progress to third level

education because DS do not follow state curriculum for state exam preparation and are not

recognised by the department of education. However, this is attributed to societal

expectations of schooling and lack of awareness about alternative pathways to further

education, outside of state exams.

Discussion

As highlighted earlier, the objective of this study was to explore the experiences of students through the lens of staff members in Irish democratic schools (DS). This research was prompted by the lack of studies and discussion focusing on student's experience within this alternative educational approach. Utilising semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, these flexible and comprehensive approaches enabled for insightful and rich data collection and analysis from 11 staff members of Sligo Sudbury school, operating since 2018 and True Nature School in Co. Dublin, open since 2023. Staff members hold varied backgrounds, ranging from forest school camps, homeschooling to holding degrees in engineering, sociology, and early years education. Their varied backgrounds and experience with students enabled for valuable indirect insight into the student experience. The following four questions were investigated:

Research Questions and Theoretical Implications

Q1. What factors influence parent's decisions to enrol their child/children in a democratic school?

Factors contributing to a parent's decision-making process include practicing conscious or mindful parenting, being well-informed about the research surrounding DS, self-directed learning, and unschooling, holding a strong passion for alternative education, the parent having had a negative TS experience themselves, and the child experiencing dissatisfaction with their current schooling situation in TS.

Parents are more likely to enrol their child in a DS if they have previously researched the evidence for this type of education and have already undergone the process of deschooling. Staff members identify these factors as defining three different types of parents that enrol their child/children into DS. These parental types can predict whether the new

student will remain in the school or leave, as well as the level of deschooling the parents and new student will face.

As Starnawski and Gawlicz (2021) noted parents may hold either negative or positive motivations for enrolling their child/children into DS. They observed that negative motivations arise from the child's negative experiences in TS, discontent with private schools and mainstream education. This study further identifies another negative motivation: parents who have had a negative TS experience may opt for DS to prevent their child/children from encountering the similar negative experience. Consistent with Gray and Chanoff (1986)'s finding, this study also noted that some students choose alternative education due to general unhappiness and poor experience with their current TS. Whereas positive motivations were observed to arise from a passion for a holistic approach to learning and a strong interest in education that does not solely prioritise academic performance as the primary measure of success. This study supported this observation, further noting that positive motivations can also stem from conscious or mindful parenting styles and researching the benefits for child development in a DS environment.

Q2. How do staff members support and encourage students to take on personal responsibility for their learning within the democratic school?

Staff members provide support for student's struggling with self-directed learning daily through the process of mentoring. For instance, mentors can help students create timetables to structure their week, give gentle reminders and facilitate learning through resource providing. Mentoring greatly aids student's personal responsibility to self-direct their own learning.

Whereas encouragement for personal responsibility to self-direct is facilitated by staff members "giving students plenty of time and space to figure things out about themselves, figure out things about their relationships with other people and having enough time to

play…" as said by Participant 11. The DS environment further encourages self-directed learning through the spontaneity and variety of each day's activites and social interactions, encouraging students to experiment and learn different material each day. The daily Morning Circle, where scheduled activities for the day are discussed offers students the chance to purse their curiosity and try new interests and the mixed aged environment allows for learning through wisdom sharing, information exchange, challenges and problem solving.

These findings are line with previous research stating that DS is tailored for effective self-directed learning and fostering of child development (Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023; *The Sudbury Model*, n.d.).

Q3. How do staff members perceive the impact of democratic school practices on students' sense of autonomy and personal development?

Staff members emphasise that this type of learning environment positively influences child development and creates individuals that possess autonomy. The freedom for decision-making, movement, and expression of individuality allows students to develop autonomy within a safe and holistic learning environment. Consequently, students gain a range of skills that enable them to become self-aware, responsible, intrinsically motivated, internally driven, decisive, and outspoken individuals.

Consistent with previous literature, this study underscores that DS positively impacts child development without any negative consequence (Morris, 2019; Stone, 2016). This study adds the aspect of staff members' perception on the impact of DS environment on student autonomy. This is found to positively align with the DS principles and graduate outcomes based on the literature on DS graduate's characteristics, whereby staff members report that students develop the same characteristics. These traits include self-awareness, autonomy, high motivation and responsibility (Circle School, 2015; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Morrison, 2022).

Q4. What are the barriers that hinder the broader adoption of democratic education in Ireland?

There are financial, social, psychological, physical, and political constraints that hinder the acceptance and placement of DS across Ireland. New families considering this alternative education must pay a fee for the expression of interest form to show commitment. Families must pay tuition each year, unlike TS which is free to attend because it is government funded. This financial barrier may deter some families, limiting enrolment rates and consequently hindering the broader adoption of these school. Furthermore, families considering enrolment and current families may face negative social pressure and dissatisfaction from their peers, family, and external social circle. This social constraint stems from the societal norm and expectation that schooling for children is about academic pressure, academic success, and rigorous education. In turn, this social constraint may influence the families' mental health negatively. Parents may never consider this alternative education because of society's expectation and for parents that have child/children enrolled they may leave due to the negativity they feel. Parents may even compare their child's educational milestones to other children in TS, this may make them feel negatively about their decision. Hence, social constraints become a psychological barrier. Furthermore, there is a physical barrier of accessibility and limited availability of DS. The four established DS in Ireland are located rurally with some schools having a lengthy travel distance. Some staff members have noted that some students have left the school due to the commute.

Moreover, each of these barriers is further exacerbated by the government's lack of acknowledgment, funding, planning permission, and recognition in the department of education for alternative education. This leaves alternative schools to operate independently. This is great political constraint can be seen as the root problem that creates other barriers which then futher hinders the wider adoption of democratic education and schools in Ireland.

The finding of financial and political barriers has been previously noted from parental worries and concerns about DS (*FAQ | West Cork Sudbury School*, n.d.; *FAQ | Wicklow Democratic School*, n. d.). Whereas, psychological and social barriers have been previously noted before the establishment of DS in Ireland (Trunk, 2013). Hence, this study provides additional support for the existence of various barriers to the adoption of democratic education and schooling in Ireland in this limited research area.

Strengths and Limitations

Only two out of the four established Irish democratic schools participated in this study. However, this did not confine the study' scope, as this study included a good number of participants and employed thematic analysis which enabled findings to encompass insightful data into the different values, experience and perspectives staff members hold about students and their experience in the school. Both schools included held a reasonable number of students, with Sligo Sudbury school 80 students and True Nature Sudbury school having 18 students. While this limitation could have been addressed by conducting in-person interviews rather than online meetings, this was not feasible due to travel and time constraints. Additionally, it can be argued that since True Nature Sudbury school has only been operational for one year, results from this school may not be valid. However, this is not necessarily the case as staff members possess the experience and knowledge from their backgrounds to provide insights into the student experience and issues of instances such as student dropout, graduate plans, and gain.

Suggestions for Future research

While conducting research on student experiences in DS in Ireland, other topics and themes emerged from speaking with staff members and reviewing literature. Staff members spoke about the positive impact of this type of learning environments on child development and students with neurodiversity. Further staff members reported that DS does not treat

students with neurodiversity any differently, since the environment and the freedom allow to move space and self-regulate. Some staff members even noted that students that attend therapy session, have reduced sessions over time. With this in mind, exploring the impact of DS on students with neurodiversity could be an interesting avenue for future research.

From the review of relevant literature, Rahman et al.'s (2024) study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on deschooling, mental health and virus transmission prevents as an interesting opportunity for future research. Subsequent studies could explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the increase for deschooling and enrolment in alternative educations. Since a study on this topic would provide a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact and influence student experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

To briefly summarise, this study contributes to the limited research area of Irish DS by advancing our understanding of current trends and student experiences. It confirms that students in DS are happy, intelligent, and motivated individuals capable of self-directed learning and democratic governance. DS students are not limited and, in some cases, more benefited when compared to TS students, they can progress into third level education, apprenticeships, or the workplace. However, since the government does not acknowledge DS, the progression into third level education is more difficult in comparison to TS. Whereby this study concludes that DS are not as accessible as mainstream schools due to the government's lack of acknowledgement for alternative education. The various barriers from financial to political do hinder the Irish's society's acceptance and support for self-directed learning and democratic governance. I believe, this limited accessibility likely contributes to the low enrolment rates in current schools. This link has been previously identified by O'Brien's (2019) final year report project on democratic education, which noted a sense of elitism among a minority due to the limited accessibility of these schools. Therefore, the persistence

of this link coupled with the further findings of this study, underscores the necessity and

importance of policymaking that aims to support and address alternative education in Ireland.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Note: The questions below are indicative of the general direction of the interview; they may be modified slightly to maintain the flow of the interview. Follow up and clarifying questions may be added when needed.

Demographics

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your role in the school?

3. How do you prefer to be called in the school?

4. How many years have you worked in this school?

5. How did you get the opportunity to work with the school?

6. What background qualifications or experience did you need for your role?

The parents

1. How do parents find out about the school?

2. How does the enrolment process work in this school?

3. Does this school have tuition fees? How much is it?

4. What are the hopes and concerns parents have when considering enrolment for their child/children?

   a. What aspect of the school are parents most attracted to/hopeful about?

   b. What aspects of the school are parents most worried or asked about?

The school experience

5. What do you think are the top three strengths and weaknesses of this school from a student's perspective?

6. What support systems are offered here?

   a. Do you think they have made an impact on student's development?

7. How does the school support children with special educational needs? Are there any limitations to the kinds of needs you are able to support?

8. If students decide to prepare for the Junior or Leaving Certificate, how would the school support this?

9. Do you think children enjoy this school? Why?

10. What do you think students will gain from this school?

Parents taking children out

11. Regarding parent's decision making, why do you think some parents decide to take their enrolled child out of school after a successful trial/probationary period?

12. And what about those students who went through the probationary period and became regular students but are taken out by their parents. What do you think are the reasons for this?

13. Do you enjoy working here? Why?

14. What changes, if any, do you think should be made to improve the experience of students and staff?

15. We are coming to the end of our interview. Do you think there are any questions (about enrolment and retention of students, their experience at the school, etc.) that I should have asked, but haven't?

16. Looking back at our conversation, is there anything you would like to add or clarify?

Prompts/Probes

1. Please explain

2. What do you mean by this?

3. Can you elaborate on this?

4. Can you think of another example of this?

5. Can you explain with more detail please

Appendix B

Information Sheet

Schooling the Democratic Way: understanding Student Experiences in Irish Democratic schools from the perspective of Staff members

Greetings from Tea Falade and Vivien Liston. We are final year students of BA in Applied Psychology undergraduate course at UCC. As a part of our degree programme we are required to complete a research project.

We chose to study the experiences of parents who decide to enroll their child into a democratic school. This document explains what the project is about and what your participation would involve, so that you can make an informed choice whether or not to take part.

What am I expected to do?

If you choose to participate, I will interview you online (using Microsoft Teams). This interview will be audio-recorded and will take approximately 30 minutes.

Why me?

We are interested in two groups of participants:

Tea would like to interview parents whose child first attended an Irish mainstream school for at least a year, and then attended a democratic school for at least a year. Or parents who had their child in a democratic school for a period of time and then decided to take them out of the school.

Vivien would like to interview staff members of Irish democratic schools since they have the experience of recruiting new students and interacting with parents. Therefore, they are informed about parental hopes and concerns regarding democratic schooling.

If you belong to any of those two groups, we would like to talk to you.

What will happen to the information I give?

Once the online interview is completed, we will immediately transfer the recording to an encrypted laptop and wipe it from the recording device. We will then transcribe the recording and remove all identifying information (replace real names with pseudonyms, etc.). Once this is done, the audio-recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain.

We will analyse the anonymised transcripts from all participants and use them to write up our final year project. We may quote some extracts from what you said in our dissertations.

We will also present our work at a research seminar, in front of School of Psychology staff and students.

Following that, the anonymised transcripts will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system (and subsequently on the UCC server) for a minimum of 10 years. The study may be used to produce academic publications or research presentations. They may also be shared with other researchers interested in the topic (subject to permission from our supervisor)

Do I have to take part?

No. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

Can I change my mind?

Yes. You can withdraw your permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

What are the risks?

We do not envisage any risks for you.

What are the benefits?

We hope that our project will spread the word about Irish democratic schools — an educational option many people are not aware of. Secondly, it may help us understand democratic education a little better — its potential as well as its limitations — and ways of making it even more beneficial and accessible.

I want to know more...

We are happy to answer any queries you may have: 121365643@umail.ucc.ie (Vivien) 121305226@umail.ucc.ie (Tea)

Our supervisor, Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski, is also very happy to respond to your queries or concerns: m.szczerbinski@ucc.ie.

Ethics information

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC School of Applied Psychology Ethics Committee. If you have a complaint about how this research was conducted please contact the Committee: ethics.ap@ucc.ie.

Data protection information

The initial Data Controllers for this study are Tea and Vivien. After the project is completed Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski, the project supervisor, will become responsible for overseeing long-term storage and sharing of the data.

If you have any concerns about data protection in this study, you can raise them with Catriona O'Sullivan, UCC Data Protection Officer (4 Carrigside, College Road, Cork, tel. 021 4903949, email gdpr@ucc.ie)— or directly with Data Protection Commission https://www.dataprotection.ie/.

If you are happy to take part in the project, please complete and return the consent form.

Appendix C

Consent Form

Schooling the Democratic Way: understanding Student Experiences in Irish Democratic schools from the perspective of Staff members

Please tick as appropriate – and then sign underneath.

	YES	NO
I agree to participate in this research study.		
I am participating voluntarily.		
I give permission for my interview to be audio-recorded.		
I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.		
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.		
I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.		
I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications or presentations.		

If you are interested...

At the end of our research projects, we can send you a brief summary of the findings via email.

If you would like to receive this information

Please write your email address: ………………………………………………………………

Your signature:

……………………………………………………………………………..

PRINT NAME:

………………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………

Appendix D

Example of Thematic Analysis

Transcript sample	Codes	Theme	Subtheme
INT: OK. So just to ask some questions to get to know a little bit about yourself. So, what is your role in the school?			
P2: I am a facilitator and the type of subjects I suppose you'd say I'm facilitating our clubs. I'm a personal trainer, so I do a lot of outdoor stuff. We do obstacle courses. I do baking, cooking a lot of it is kind of hanging back and waiting for them to come to you to help kind of support the critical thinking and the problem-solving skills. I do two days a week, so I'm here on a Monday and a Friday to kind of book ends the week. I'm also on the admissions team, so myself and one of my colleagues, I mean we all are present. Open days are open evenings, then and myself, one of my colleagues conduct meetings where we meet with prospective parents of students. And then we meet with students. I kind. Of just look after. Or. Vetting is maybe the wrong word. We're just making sure that we feel like prospective new parents and students are right fit for our community and our communities, right? For them that we can support their needs and. That they will fit seamlessly into the community as well.	Facilitator

Personal outdoor trainer
Obstacle courses
Baking
Cooking
Students ask staff for help and support with activity they want to do

Meetings to see if new parents are right fit for community

School ensures new students are right fit for the community | Terminology

School experience | School Processes |
INT: OK, that's brilliant. Thank you. So how many years have you worked in school?	Importance of fitting into the community		
P2: We've only been here for a year. We're actually just coming up our anniversary this year, so.	1 year		
INT: That's great.			
P2: Here this week, yeah.			

INT: Oh, that's great. So how did you get the opportunity to work with skill?

P2: My son is in the school here. He's just turned 7 and as soon as I realised I was going to become a parent I was looking for an alternative school. So I've been searching since before he was born and then. I. Found this school and I became aware of it about four or five months before it opened, so I actually applied just for my son to become a member of the school, and when I met with the founders of the school, they saw that I was very passionate about the educational model and that I really thought that, you know, we're in time where change is necessary in the education system. So. I had mentioned I'd be interested in maybe volunteering. I didn't know what qualifications one might have needed to have to work here, so I chatted to them and realised kind of it might be an option I applied to be interviewed for the role. So we that is how we came about it. I found it for him and then I was able to become a part of it.

INT: Brilliant. So how did you find out about the school?

P2: Amm. I want to say that someone sent me a link to an add on Facebook. I don't do any social media. I'm very old in that sense. And I've been looking and looking and someone sent me a link to an ad and then it showed up, you know, sometimes in your messenger on Facebook. I don't have Facebook and Messenger and it. Showed up on there.

Staff member's son is in school

Parent searching for alternative education

Passionate about the model

Change is necessary

Facebook
Social media

Appendix E

Ethics application approval

From: ethics.ap@ucc.ie <ethics.ap@ucc.ie>
Sent: 28 November 2023 07:25
To: 121365643@umail.ucc.ie <121365643@umail.ucc.ie>; Vivien Liston <1@hermesap.localdomain>; Marcin Szczerbinski <m.szczerbinski@ucc.ie>
Subject: Ethics Decision for Application EA-FYP11162023288

Ethics Application EA-FYP11162023288 review complete.

Hi there, Vivien Liston and Tea Tolani Falade and Dr Marcin Szczerbinski.
Vivien Liston and Tea Tolani Falade's Ethics application titled "*Navigating the Decision-Making Process: Choosing between Democratic Schooling and Traditional schooling in Ireland*" has been reviewed. The summary is below:

Decision

Approved

Reviewer Comments

Two very interesting projects. Ethical issues were raised and plans for dealing with these are presented.

If you have any questions, please forward this email to ethics.ap@ucc.ie.

Regards,

Research Ethics Committee, School of Applied Psychology