INTRODUCTION

The way in which discrete primary geography time is used has an influence on students’ acquisition of knowledge, with Dolan et al. (2014) stating in their research that student teachers’ most influential past memories involved enquiry-based elements. The context of this research is influenced by McCoy et al. (2012) where it was outlined in their study that with a teacher’s increasing level of experience, there was generally a decrease in the use of engaging teaching approaches. My research explores the current practices which are realistically being undertaken in the Irish context, and involves examining how supported practicing and student teachers feel within their engagement with geography education, particularly with EBL. An acknowledgement of these aspects could enable those involved in teacher training capacities an opportunity to examine these real experiences. It also aims to provide potential reasons as to why participants may not use this approach in their teaching.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The mixed methodology research design used semi-structured interviews and surveys to gain views, with thirty participants overall contributing to the findings. Fifteen practicing primary teachers and fifteen student teachers participated, with the latter group in their final year of a four-year initial teacher education programme. This configuration was chosen to make the level of teaching experience the primary variable in the study. A survey was distributed to twenty-six participants, and contained a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions. A further qualitative element was added through the use of semi-structured interviews. Four interviews were conducted, incorporating the views of two members from both groups studied. A reflective diary was also used for the duration of the research. Participants were selected through non-probability sampling, with a mixture of convenience, snowball and quota sampling used to identify equal amounts of potential participants. For qualitative data, ‘thematic analysis’ (Saldana 2009, p.13) was employed when coding.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

92.3% of survey respondents across both participant groups were taught predominantly themselves through a direct teaching approach. The majority of respondents saw their role as a teacher as one which involved facilitation, and survey participants recorded having an interest or high interest in geography (80.8%). There was also no distinct connection between confidence levels of adopting EBL approaches in geography and a teacher’s experience level. Both practicing and student teachers perceived a number of benefits of EBL including enhanced skill development, meaningful learning experiences, increased participation and an acknowledgment of the pupil’s role in learning, aspects also highlighted by Roberts (2010). However, challenges were noted by participants in relation to the classroom behavioural environment, engagement issues, group work concerns, suitability for all learners, a need for increased organisation, resource creation and time concerns, mirroring the conclusions of Roberts (2013). The majority of participants felt that EBL can be used throughout the primary school levels if it is adapted successfully. This finding emerged from two reoccurring views on the suitability of geographical EBL (Figure 1). These were a) EBL is suitable for all class levels and b) EBL is more suitable for older classes – 3rd to 6th class. The majority of survey participants believed that EBL was more effective than a direct approach in ensuring students’ learning. The need for support in relation to implementing EBL across all primary class levels within geography was highlighted, with particular focus on the skills required by students to engage sufficiently with this methodology.

DISCUSSION

Participants did not display a correlation between their experience level and their perceptions of using geographical EBL, with teacher training having an integral impact on student teachers’ feelings of confidence, supporting the findings of Dolan et al. (2016). Personal interest in geography and a teacher’s view of this subject were not found to have a major impact on participants’ perceptions of teaching geography, suggesting that it was not representative that someone who enjoyed teaching geography would always have a keen interest in it. The most important factor that impacted on the suitability of EBL in primary geography related to participants’ views on the skill requirements for children. Some participants felt that pupils needed developed skills to engage with EBL, an aspect highlighted by Roberts (2013). Participants who felt that EBL would not be as suitable in junior classes believed that skills needed to be well-established before engaging with EBL. This impacted on participants’ outlook on the effectiveness of using this approach with infants.

CONCLUSIONS

Participants acknowledged that EBL involved students being central to the learning with teachers undertaking facilitation (Roberts 2010). Practicing and student teachers strongly believed in the potential of using EBL in geography teaching. Respondents also did not perceive a reduced need for EBL in senior classes. Research into using this approach with younger classes is a key recommendation of this research.

KEY REFERENCES


