An Appreciative Inquiry into NEPS Psychologists' and Primary Teachers' Perspectives of Cluster Groups in Supporting the Implementation of the FRIENDS Programmes.

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor in Educational and Child Psychology (DECPsy)

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Abstract

Background

The Department of Education advise that schools seek training in the FRIENDS programmes from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to prevent anxiety and build resilience in children and young people (Barrett et al., 2000; DES, 2017). Since autumn 2023, NEPS psychologists have facilitated cluster group meetings, consisting of school personnel across multiple schools who meet to improve their practice with implementing the programmes. The initiative emerged as a response to implementation in practice, which was identified by teachers and psychologists as an area of required development. Currently, literature indicates that many teachers encounter barriers when implementing the FRIENDS programmes (Green & Atkinson, 2016; Skryabina et al., 2016). To address this challenge, cluster groups aim to support teachers in acquiring the skills to effectively implement and embed FRIENDS in the real-world school setting.

Aims

No empirical research to date has explored cluster groups as a form of implementation support. Thus, the present research aimed to explore teachers' and psychologists' perspectives of cluster groups. Three principal research questions were identified:

1. What is working well about the cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes?
2. What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes look like?
3. What plans and resources could be put in place by NEPS/NEPS psychologists to achieve the ideal cluster group?

Sample

The perspectives of 20 teachers and psychologists were examined. The school personnel included 6 primary teachers across mainstream and special education who attended a cluster group. 14 NEPS psychologists who were certified FRIENDS trainers participated in the research.

The sample included a mix of psychologists who had previously facilitated a cluster group (n=6) and those who had not (n=8).

Method

The research employed a qualitative design to investigate the research questions via an anonymous online questionnaire. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider et al., 2008) was the theoretical framework chosen to explore what aspects of the existing cluster group are working well, what the ideal provision might look like and the plans that could be put in place by NEPS psychologists to achieve best practice.

Results

Responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and descriptive statistics. Peer sharing and programme-related guidance are key strengths associated with the cluster group, as identified by participants. Themes relating to the ideal group, frequency, facilitation, support and content for the cluster are also highlighted (Ding et al., 2021). Future plans and resources that could be put in place by NEPS include continued co-ordination with teachers, making improvements to the existing format and utilising digital and concrete tools.

Conclusions

Implications of the study for implementation science and the use of appreciative inquiry in exploring a systems-based issue are discussed. Educational psychologists (EPs) have an important role in providing quality training and implementation support for those trained in the FRIENDS programmes. Implications of this study for EP practice include the potential for additional cluster group meetings, teacher-led facilitation and targeted content aimed at putting the FRIENDS lessons into practice. The current findings have the potential to guide future NEPS policy regarding considerations for the design and structure of cluster groups. Finally, implications for further research include an evaluation into the impact of cluster groups on implementation practice and a comparison of online and on-demand FRIENDS training against in-person approaches.

Keywords: cluster groups, NEPS, FRIENDS implementation, training, appreciative inquiry, school setting.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification. Where use has been made of the work of other authors, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced. This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

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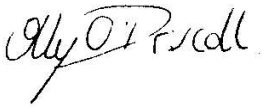
Signature: 

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I also want to sincerely acknowledge my wife, Hazel and all the O' Driscoll family, Mam, Dad, Edel, Colman and John. I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for you supporting me throughout the difficult moments and believing in me. The countless hours, dedication and investment in this thesis was only possible with the support of my family and I want to credit you immensely for this. I am extremely grateful.

Completing the professional doctorate has been both daunting and exciting to say the least and I acknowledge that, at times, it has strained my capacity as a trainee. I am pleased with the persistence and resilience I have shown, especially during moments when I thought I would not reach the finish line. While writing these acknowledgements provides a positive reflection on the research journey, it was not without its challenges. I am sure, however, that experiencing adversity and setbacks along the way has been key to developing my critical thinking skills and balanced approach to research.

Lastly, I am feeling excited about starting my career as an educational psychologist this January. I hope that this research will impact and guide practice in this area and I look forward to collaborating with schools and fellow colleagues in bringing this research to fruition.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

List of Abbreviations

NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
EP's	Educational Psychologists
DES	Department of Education and Skills
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
GAD	Generalized Anxiety Disorder
IS	Implementation Science
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
CG	Cluster Group
CoP	Community of Practice
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
PD	Professional Development
S&D	Support and Development
SET	Special Education Teacher
CT	Classroom Teacher
FF	Fun Friends
FFL	Friends for Life
MFY	My Friends Youth
COS	Continuum of Support
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
MIC	Mary Immaculate College

1 Introduction

This introduction sets out a broad overview of the thesis for the reader. In line with the research guidelines for the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology (2021), the research area, objectives, context and rationale are presented. The researcher's own position and the theoretical perspectives for the study are outlined.

1.1 Research Area

A cluster group encompasses teachers within a single school or across several schools who meet to improve their practice within a field of interest (Ding et al., 2021; Giordano, 2008; Leu, 2004). As one approach to teacher professional development, Mendelsohn and Ward (2001) state that cluster groups typically consist of teachers between 4 to 8 schools within geographical proximity. An exemplar school or offsite location typically operates as the cluster center. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has adopted cluster groups as a recent initiative to support previously trained teachers with implementing the FRIENDS programmes in their school or class setting (NEPS, personal communication, 2024).

FRIENDS is an anxiety prevention and resilience building curriculum designed to promote the emotional wellbeing of children and young people (Barrett, 2000). As part of the NEPS service (figure 8), cluster groups are facilitated by psychologists to support primary and post-primary teachers in mainstream and special education settings. Examples of activities may include offering advice on best practice, sharing updates on the programme and providing opportunities to collaborate and exchange ideas.

1.2 Research Aims

The first aim of the research is to identify what is currently working well about the cluster group support, as perceived by teachers and NEPS psychologists. Secondly, the research imagines what aspects of the existing group could be improved and what the ideal cluster group for FRIENDS implementation might look like. Lastly, the study seeks to gather evidence about the plans that could be put in place by NEPS to achieve the ideal cluster group. By adhering to these objectives, the study endeavors to provide actionable recommendations that will inform the delivery of FRIENDS cluster groups in the future.

1.3 Context and Rationale

1.3.1 An Overview of the FRIENDS curriculum

FRIENDS is a multi-tiered early intervention and prevention programme for childhood anxiety. The programmes are split into three age-appropriate versions: 'Fun FRIENDS' (ages 4-7), 'FRIENDS for Life' (ages 8-11), 'My FRIENDS Youth' (ages 12-16). FRIENDS is endorsed by the World Health Organisation as an evidence-based cognitive-behavioural treatment for anxiety, which can be implemented at a universal whole-school and class level, targeted support for children at risk and an individualised level for those with the greatest need (WHO, 2004; NICE, 2014).

The three programmes overlap in content but differ in the way skills are delivered such as play-based techniques for younger cohorts and group discussions and role-plays for older students (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014). The programmes are developed and licensed by Pathways Australia and teach students important emotional resilience skills to cope with and manage challenging situations that create anxiety (Barrett, 2004; Cooper & Jacobs, 2011).

The FRIENDS school-based programmes are based on the CBT interactionist theoretical model of thoughts, feelings and behaviour (see figure 5). This model, adopted by Barrett (2021) addresses the emotional, physiological, cognitive and learning components which are seen to interact in the development, experience and maintenance of anxiety. For example, students learn about how to understand feelings in themselves and others (emotional aspect), develop an awareness of body clues and unique anxiety responses (physiological aspect), use positive self-talk (cognitive aspect), and develop problem-solving and coping step plans (learning/behaviour aspect).

1.3.2 Format

The FRIENDS programmes are manualised; therefore, teachers must adhere to the sequence and structure of the FRIENDS programme framework. There is, however, flexibility for teachers to tailor the mode of delivery (e.g., daily, weekly, holiday) and personalise activities based on the specific needs of their class group. The overall intervention framework consists of 10 one-hour weekly sessions, two follow-up booster sessions after one month and three months respectively and two structured parent information sessions that explain the benefits and content of the programme (Barrett, 2004). All sessions are intended to be fun, engaging and experiential, whereby children learn best when they are actively engaged in practising skills and afforded opportunities to discuss their own personal experiences with peers. Parents are encouraged to model and practise the FRIENDS skills with their children at home.

The FRIENDS programmes complement the SPHE curriculum and, as stated, can be implemented at universal, targeted and individualised levels, in accordance with the Continuum of Support (NEPS, 2010). The skills required to cope with, problem-solve and manage all forms of emotional distress such as anxiety, worry and low mood are taught to students. These

objectives are achieved through a focus on learning, cognitive and physiological principles of CBT. The word FRIENDS is an acronym for the skills taught throughout the programme and recognises that skills are built upon and developed sequentially in each session.

Figure 1

The FRIENDS Skills

- **F**eelings.
- **R**emember to Relax. Have quiet time.
- **I** can do it! I can try my best (Inner helpful thoughts)
- **E**xplore Solutions and Coping Step Plans.
- **N**ow reward yourself! You've done your best!
- **D**on't forget to practice. Do it daily.
- **S**mile! Stay calm, Stay Strong and talk to your support networks!

Each lesson (e.g. awareness of feelings) follows the same structure where teachers or group leaders explain the concept and incorporate group activities, storybooks, videos and outdoor games. Beyond the core content of the programme, the next sections will consider how the FRIENDS programmes and cluster groups align with and are informed by broader educational policies, practice and research. Examining how these approaches are underpinned by policy, practice and research provides a rationale for the current work. These three areas are discussed in the following sections.

1.3.3 Policy

There has been a noticeable expansion in the implementation of large-scale social and emotional learning interventions over the past decade to address student anxiety and promote wellbeing (DES, 2019a; Murphy et al., 2017; Byrne et al., 2020). Durlak (1998) defines implementation as putting an educational programme into practice. The DES (2017) propose that NEPS is well placed to support and advise school staff with implementing evidence-based programmes. Documents published by the DES indicate the central role of NEPS in expanding the FRIENDS programmes by providing in-service training to teachers (DEIS Plan, 2017; NEPS Regional and Business Plan 2023-24; Annual Statement of Priorities, 2024; Annual Report, 2021). As one of the primary supports offered by NEPS, training focuses on teacher planning, preparation and instructional delivery of the programme.

1.3.4 Practice

Currently, cluster groups are facilitated by NEPS psychologists to provide targeted learning opportunities for school personnel, with a focus on promoting the effective implementation of the programme (NEPS, 2024). The envisaged purpose of establishing cluster groups is for teachers to share practice and improve their skills with implementing FRIENDS. At a practice-based level, the roll out of cluster groups is at an early stage of development, therefore, the present research provides a timely investigation into how cluster groups can best equip teachers with implementation (NEPS, personal communication, 2024). This is of particular importance as implementation has been identified by NEPS trainers and teachers as an area of required development.

Within educational settings, the FRIENDS programme can be implemented at ‘all’, ‘some’ and ‘a few’ tiers with children and young people, in accordance with the Continuum of Support

(CoS, Figure 6). As FRIENDS was originally designed to be implemented at a universal level, the programme is commonly delivered at tier 1 for all children and young people. The nature of supports provided to school staff by NEPS psychologists is also connected to the CoS and the present research. While initial FRIENDS training is available to all teachers, cluster groups are best understood to operate at tier 2, whereby targeted support is provided to some FRIENDS teachers. The level of NEPS involvement at each level of the continuum is explained further in section 2.3.1.

The current study is also underpinned by the NEPS support and development service (S&D), within which Friends training and cluster group provision are key priorities (DES, 2017; 2021). S&D is an applied psychological service for teachers and school communities aimed at building capacity to respond to the needs of all students (NEPS, 2024), including students with emotional and behavioural needs. The provision of cluster groups for teachers is one of the ways in which NEPS builds the capacity of school personnel to implement the FRIENDS programmes.

1.3.5 Theory and Research

A wealth of research has evaluated the effectiveness of the FRIENDS programmes (Ruttledge et al., 2016), however, less is known about implementation as this area has received less focus. To date, no research has investigated how cluster groups contribute to teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. It thus represents an unexplored area within the research literature.

In terms of the research that is available, studies have shown that teachers encounter barriers when implementing FRIENDS. Green and Atkinson (2016) argue that further research is required to establish the types of supports needed to ensure the effective implementation of the programme. Equally, Dowling and Barry (2021) suggest that schools require ongoing

implementation support to ensure optimal delivery and sustainability. Blase et al. (2012) suggests that activities that are participatory and centered on promoting intervention fidelity can positively influence teachers' competence with implementation. Ding et al. (2021), however, claim that evidence on how best to design, deliver and sustain cluster groups is limited. Due to a scarcity of empirical studies that have provided a research foundation and best practice guidelines (Ding et al., 2021), cluster groups for FRIENDS implementation represents an under researched area.

Despite a lack of research, schools continue to require support in embedding the programmes (NEPS, personal communication, 2024). To address this gap, the present study improves understanding of how cluster groups can best support teachers to implement the FRIENDS programme in their school or class setting. The work seeks to make a distinctive contribution to knowledge in this field, by exploring a real-life issue in the professional practice context of NEPS cluster groups, which has been unexplored to date.

As the present study explores the role of cluster groups for FRIENDS implementation, this needs to be understood in the context of previous research on teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. A systematic literature review was conducted into teachers' experiences of implementing 'Fun FRIENDS', 'FRIENDS for Life' and 'My FRIENDS Youth'. The review highlighted that a range of barriers impact teachers' implementation of the programmes, including the time commitment (Skryabina et al., 2016; Ruttledge et al., 2016), level of training (Green & Atkinson, 2016), leadership support (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013) and curricular overload (Maclean & Law, 2022). Green and Atkinson (2016) found that many teachers believed it challenging to implement the FRIENDS for Life programme and argued that further research is required to establish the types of additional supports needed to benefit delivery such as on-going

involvement from school psychological services. Findings from this review are explored in greater detail in the Literature Review chapter.

1.4 Researcher Positionality

In undertaking this work, the researcher acknowledges his previous role as a primary school teacher. Teaching experiences can inform the application and interpretation of research findings. This is illustrated by studies on expectancy effects, showing that a teacher's expectation can come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal, 2010; Weinstein, 2018). It is recognised, therefore, that previous experiences as a class teacher have the potential to shape and influence the present research and permeate all aspects of the study from the initial idea to the reflexive thematic analysis.

The researcher first developed a personal interest in the application of early intervention programmes as a mainstream and special education teacher, and consequently may have certain expectations about what teachers wish to gain from attending a cluster group. The researcher also acknowledges his role as trainee educational psychologist on professional placements with NEPS. While working in this setting, the researcher trained as a certified facilitator of the FRIENDS for Life programme. Liaising with psychologists regarding potential research gaps in NEPS led to a literature review into teachers' experiences of implementing Friends and ultimately the development of the current topic. The researcher also implemented the programme in a clinical setting for adolescents with social anxiety in a subsequent placement with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. It is accepted, therefore, that these experiences influence and shape the researcher's appraisal of the thesis topic and his personal interest in the research.

The researcher also recognises his own personal lens and how this may influence the interpretation of data. The researcher endeavors to maintain reflexivity and critically examine biases to enhance the objectivity and rigor of findings (Johnson et al., 2020). This commitment on the researcher's behalf involved remaining open to novel insights, questioning biases and self-reflecting as part of ongoing competency development as a researcher and professional practitioner.

1.5 Paradigm

In this study, a pragmatic paradigm was utilised. A paradigm can be defined as a researcher's worldview or set of beliefs about what should be studied (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is important for the reader to know my epistemic viewpoint as a researcher as this underlies all parts of the investigation from assumptions and selection of research questions to data collection and analysis. In view of the study's focus on the role of cluster groups in facilitating the practical implementation of the FRIENDS programmes, it aligns with the principles of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophical position that contends that the practical consequences of an idea or action are essential to its meaning and truth. Kelly and Cordeiro (2020) purport that pragmatism considers ideas or actions as valid if they work well in practice.

A pragmatic view considers the current research as producing knowledge that practically contributes to and informs progress in the field of cluster groups. Goldkuhl (2012) argues that a central tenet of pragmatism is to create practical knowledge that can be applied to make a meaningful difference in practice. Research into cluster groups is worthwhile should it produce positive practical outcomes for teachers and NEPS psychologists (Shusterman, 2010).

In the pragmatic philosophical paradigm, it is posited that the scientific method is most suitable for inquiry. It is argued that researchers best understand phenomena of study by using methods that are not confined by the tenets of positivist or constructivist paradigms. Therefore, the current research neither subscribes to the objective truth of reality espoused by positivism or the subjective nature of reality conceived by interpretivism and constructivism. Instead, pragmatic researchers focus on the problem of investigation by using a rich spectrum of methods to understand it and clear theoretical foundations. The theoretical frameworks for the study are described in greater detail in Section 1.6.

While pragmatism has its merits, there are also potential downsides associated with using this approach. Some critics have claimed that a focus on practical consequences may overlook foundational scientific principles and neglect deeper theoretical concerns (Rueter, 2023). As pragmatism may sacrifice theoretical concerns for practical aspects of knowledge, the researcher anchors this practice-based piece of research within theory that supports a strengths-based approach. Thus, a balance between considerations for theory and practice is sought throughout.

A pragmatic paradigm was deemed optimal in the quest to generate actionable insights about cluster groups for the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. Pragmatism emphasises a practical understanding of the research questions. In this sense, the research can be seen to pursue knowledge for practical outcomes and solutions in real-world settings rather than abstract or theoretical ideas. Taking a pragmatic stance provides an opportunity for the researcher and NEPS to consider recommendations for practice from the study and may help inform the prospective delivery of cluster groups.

1.6 Theoretical Frameworks

The pragmatic paradigm considers the practical consequences of research. Given the above-mentioned critiques of pragmatism, the current study adheres to two theories. Implementation Science is the broad theoretical framework used to understand what works in practice while Appreciative Inquiry is used to explore if cluster groups enhance the real-world implementation of FRIENDS in schools. Section 2.5.7 provides a discussion on implementation science as the broader theoretical framework for this research.

In view of theories that emphasise strengths over traditional deficit-based approaches, the study also draws on the theoretical principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to underpin and ground its concepts (Cooperrider et al., 2008; figure 13). AI is a systems change approach to organisational development that attends to positive experiences. As a collaborative and strengths-based approach, AI seeks to reflect the high-point moments and best experiences of attending a cluster group. Such an approach aligns with the premise that *'change is most effective when we inquire into the true, the good, the better and the possible'* (Cooperrider et al., 2008). AI places emphasis on positive inquiry, empowerment and creating and sustaining wider change within an organisation (Lewis et al., 2016). As AI focuses on discovering strengths and successes to achieve positive change, it was determined a sufficient methodological tool to explore participants' experiences of cluster groups and perspectives on best practice (Schutt, 2018).

The rationale for choosing AI over alternative approaches lies in its flexibility to explore the strengths of the cluster group, what the ideal cluster group might look like, and the plans needed to achieve this goal. In this way, the study uses an AI framework to take informed action on the problem of concern. Evidence collected about cluster groups contributes to research knowledge in this area and bridges the gap with NEPS practice (Fitzgerald et al., 2001).

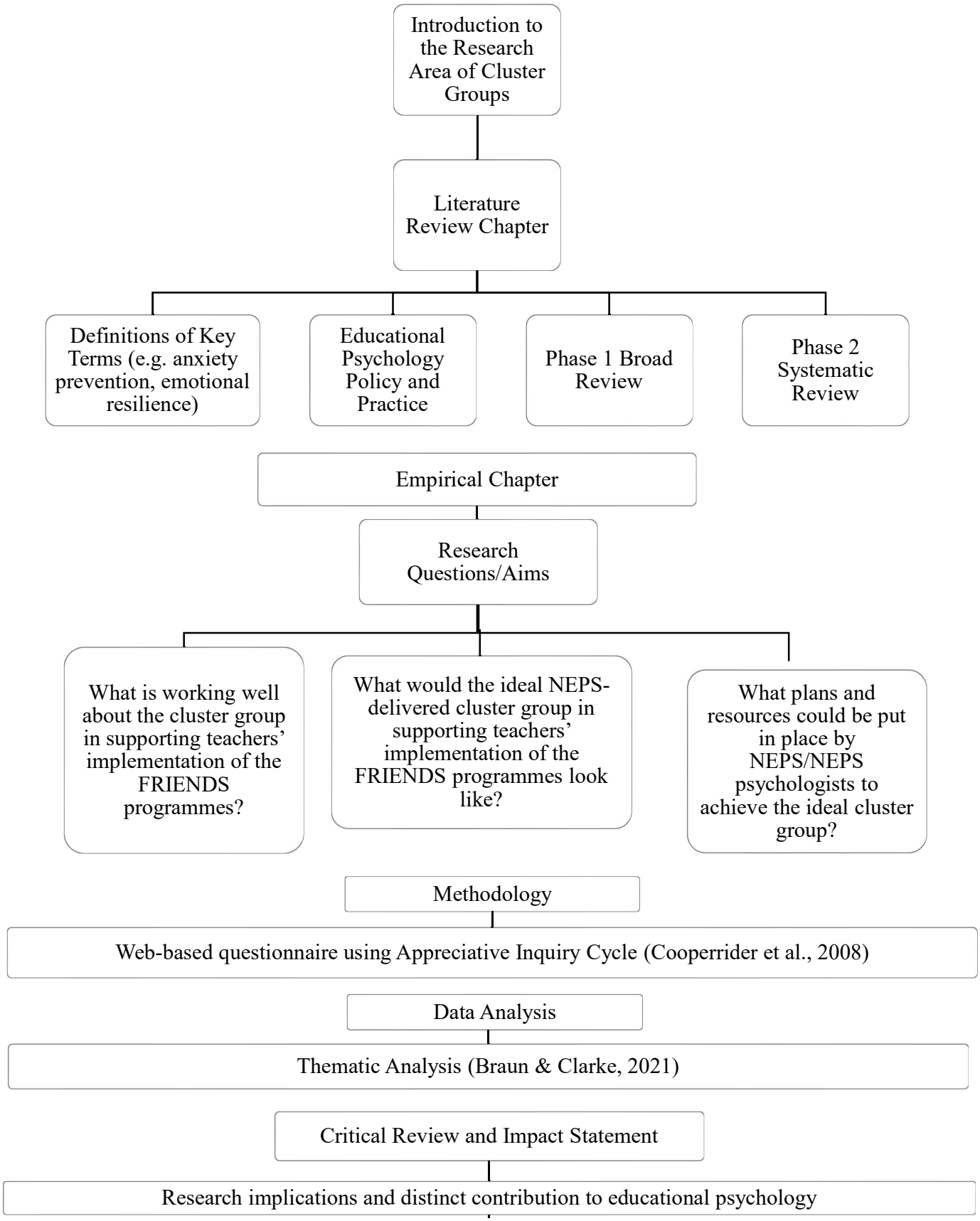
1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is composed of three main sections. Firstly, a comprehensive two-stage literature review relevant to the research area is provided. A broad overview of teachers' implementation of anxiety prevention, mental health and wellbeing programmes will aim to tease out some of the key findings from the literature in this domain. A systematic review is then incorporated, which focusses specifically on published research on teachers' experiences of implementing the school-based FRIENDS programmes (Barrett et al., 2000).

Secondly, the empirical paper reports on the study carried out, which is guided by the research questions emerging from the literature reviews. The chapter is concerned with the chosen design, methodology, data analysis and discussion of the research findings. The final paper presents a critical overview and personal reflection of the research. It includes an appraisal of the strengths and limitations of all aspects of the research process and the significance of the current study for policy, practice and future research in educational psychology. In conclusion, an impact statement is provided outlining the distinct implications of the research for NEPS psychologists, FRIENDS teachers and school communities. A visual map of the overall thesis layout is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Visual Overview of the Thesis



2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview

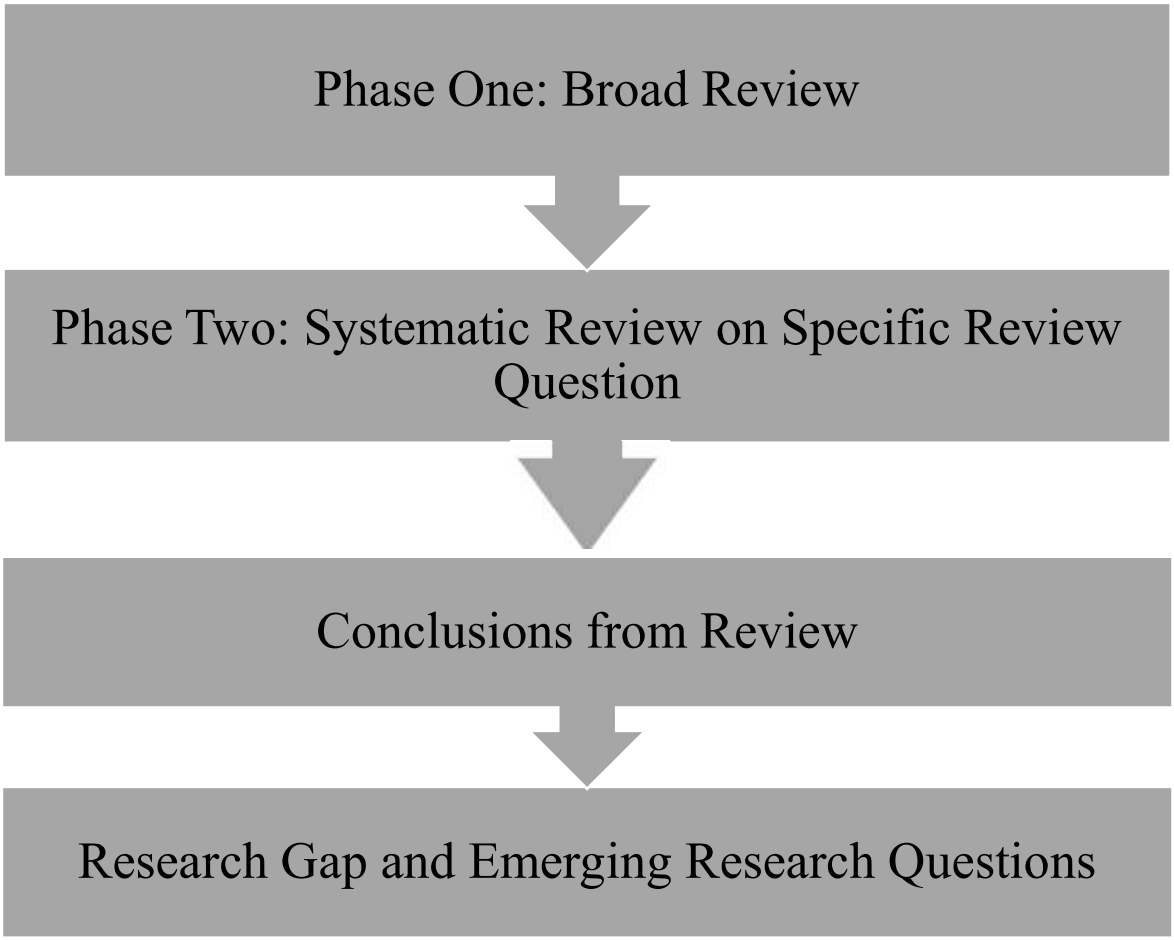
This paper begins by introducing the main psychological constructs used throughout the study. Definitions of the terms 'childhood anxiety' and 'emotional resilience' will be provided, as these are considered key constructs associated with the literature and theoretical basis of the FRIENDS programmes (Barrett et al., 2000). As anxiety prevention and resilience building are the central aims, different constructs such as self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem are not discussed as they are considered secondary to the main concepts above. Descriptions of the main terms are discussed with reference to the Irish context on wellbeing promotion and anxiety prevention in schools. An understanding of how schools navigate this area helps to situate the study within its wider contextual landscape. To aid clarity, a description of NEPS cluster groups and conceptual overlaps between this term, communities of practice and teacher professional development are also discussed.

Following a definition of key terms, an overview is presented of educational psychology policy and practice, including the impact of NEPS support and development policy on the training of teachers in robustly supported programmes in Ireland. Documents including the Continuum of Support guidelines (NEPS, 2007; 2010), the Problem-Solving Framework (NEPS, 2010), the DEIS Action plan (2017) and the Wellbeing Policy Statement (2019) are outlined, among other key documents.

An account of key terms and NEPS policy is followed by 4 stages. A visual overview of this review structure is shown in Figure 3 below. The literature review phases, conclusions and emerging research questions are presented.

Figure 3

Visual Overview of the Literature Review



A review of research into teachers' experiences of the barriers and facilitators to implementing anxiety prevention, mental health and wellbeing programmes in primary and post-primary schools is conducted to synthesise what is broadly known about the topic. A holistic review of the literature is critiqued, and relevant themes, issues, trends and arguments are summarised.

The next section presents a systematic review of the literature pertaining to the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. The review question attempts to uncover what

research says about teachers' experiences of the barriers and facilitators to implementing the FRIENDS programmes. The literature search, critical review and synthesis of findings are included.

The final section will highlight conclusions and practice-based implications for future research supported by relevant evidence from the literature reviews. The research questions emerging from the reviews will form the basis and rationale for the current empirical work.

2.2 Key Terms

2.2.1 Childhood Anxiety.

Anxiety can affect many of us profoundly when faced with difficult situations at various points in our lives. Anxiety is a nebulous concept to define, however, it is widely accepted as the mind and body's natural reaction to threat or danger (LeDoux, 2015). Although uncomfortable, anxiety is a common human emotion that helps us prepare for and cope with life's challenges. Many children and young people experience anxiety that is developmentally appropriate such as fear of the dark, natural disasters, school, sports demands and peer rejection.

While feeling anxious is considered a normal part of early development, it can evoke physiological, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms and if severe or persistent, greatly interfere with daily functioning. In relation to cognitive effects, Freeman and Freeman (2012) argue that anxiety not only occurs when there is an overestimation of threat, but also an underestimation of coping resources. Individuals who experience anxiety, therefore, are likely to perceive situations as more threatening than they actually are, and also doubt their ability to cope with them effectively. This interpretation is similar to that of Jefferies and Ungar (2020), who hold the view that anxiety is often disproportionate to the threat posed.

In contrast to anxiety which can be seen as developmentally appropriate or part of the spectrum of emotions, a clinical level of anxiety can become problematic when it greatly interferes with normal activities. According to Hill et al. (2016), anxiety disorders are characterised by excessive worries, fears, negative beliefs, avoidance, and physical symptoms. Multiple factors have been implicated in the development and maintenance of childhood anxiety disorders including heritability, temperament and environmental factors.

The 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition' (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) identifies anxiety disorders, which include generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), separation anxiety, social anxiety, specific phobia, panic disorder and agoraphobia. According to this manual, clinical levels of anxiety have a significant impact when an individual's threat response disproportionately interferes with their personal, social or academic functioning and lasts for prolonged periods of time of six months or more.

The prevalence of childhood anxiety disorders in children has been estimated to range from 4% to 25% (Carr, 2015; Barnardos, 2008) and are the most common form of psychological distress experienced by school-aged children and adolescents (Cartwright-Hatton, McNicol, & Doubleday, 2006). The level of distress experienced by children and young people increased markedly during the global pandemic and recent studies (McMahon et al., 2024; O' Sullivan et al., 2021) have found COVID-19 to be a significant predictor of adolescents' psychological distress.

Intermittent and more pervasive feelings of anxiety, therefore, are rooted across multiple individual and ecological factors and often have adverse consequences on children's interpersonal relationships, educational attainment and emotional development (Woodward & Fergusson, 2001; National Behaviour Support Service [NBSS], 2013). The link between physical body clues and emotional and behavioural responses can also be seen to connect to an individual's thoughts. To break this cycle and alleviate anxiety, young people need assistance to effectively cope with challenging situations and develop emotional resilience.

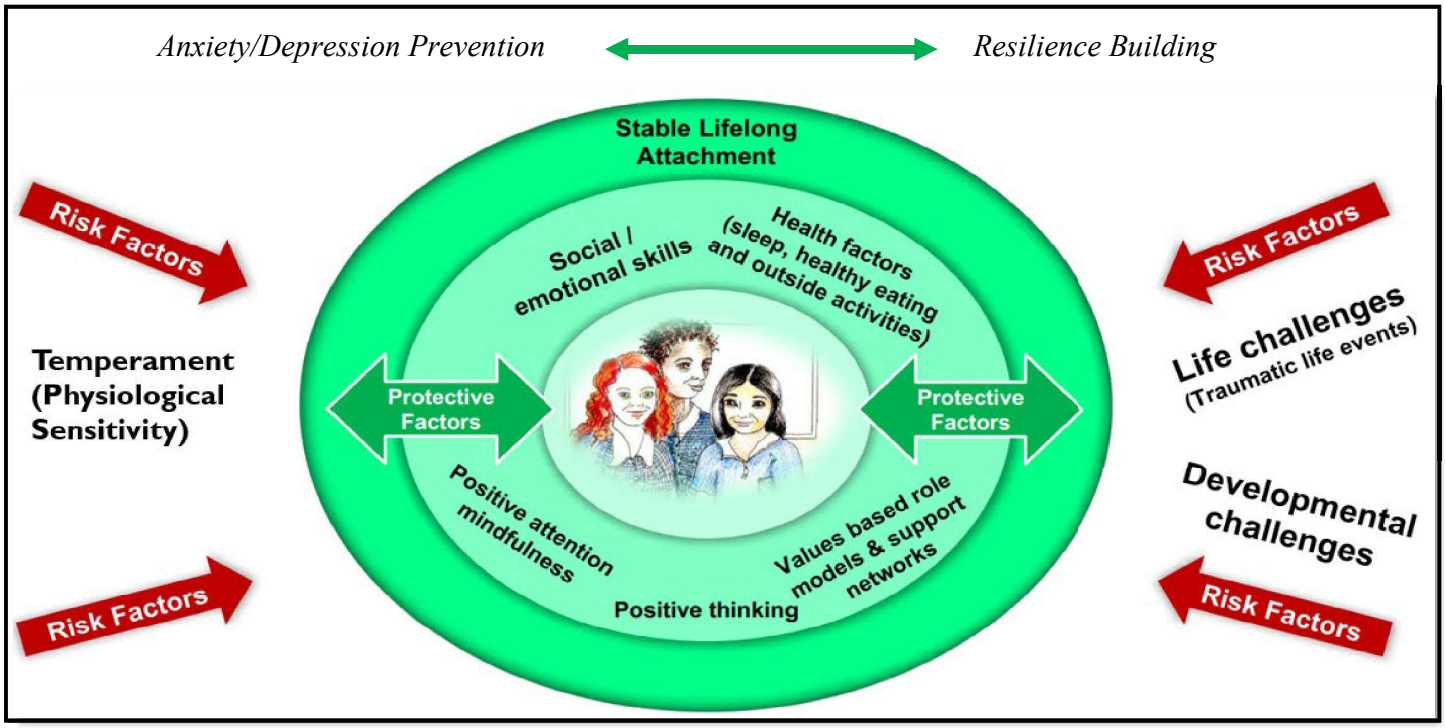
2.2.2 Emotional Resilience.

Emotional resilience can be defined as the capacity of a person to prevent, minimize, or overcome the damaging effects of adversity (Grotberg, 1997). It is strongly associated with

effective control of negative feelings, including anxiety (Eisenberg et al., 2004) and the ability to deal with challenging circumstances. Research has shown that resilience can be cultivated and strengthened (Rutter, 2012). Students with high resilience have positive relationships within their family and school; can problem-solve around their challenges, have effective coping mechanisms; a sense of optimism about their future and a belief in the purpose of what they do. Resilience, therefore, can be thought of as an ability to spring back or rebound in the face of adversity and is a fundamental life skill that can be nurtured in the school environment. The theoretical model presented within the FRIENDS programme attests to both anxiety and emotional resilience, as shown in the following diagram. This theoretical model of anxiety has a well-founded and firm evidence-base, which addresses attachment (emotions), physiological (body), cognitive (mind), and learning (behaviour) processes. It highlights that each individual presents with unique risk and resilience factors that impact their experience of anxiety at all levels.

Figure 4

FRIENDS Theoretical Model of Anxiety and Resilience (Barrett, 2021)



Note. Adapted from: *Theoretical Model* by Paula Barrett, 2021 FRIENDS Resilience, (friendsresilience.org)

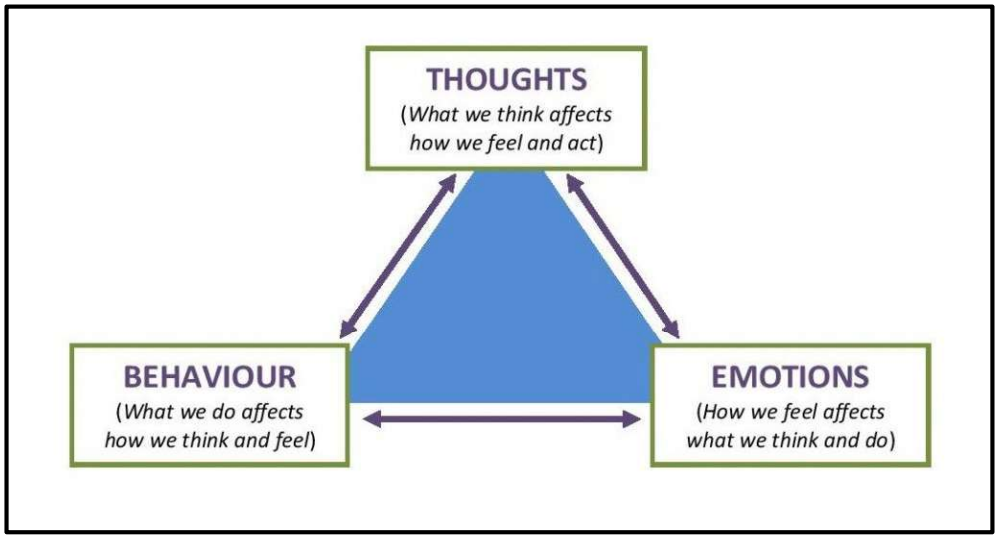
2.2.3 A Cognitive-Behavioural Model (CBM)

Many anxiety-prevention programmes including FRIENDS have been devised and drawn on the principles and evidence-based approaches from cognitive behavioural models. Cognitive behavioural therapy is supported by research as a first line efficacious approach to the prevention of anxiety in children and adolescents (NICE, 2016). It has a strong evidence-base (Kendall & Peterman, 2015; David et al., 2018) and has been shown to reduce other co-occurring symptoms such as social difficulties (Kreuze et al, 2018). CBT involves students learning about the interaction between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviour (Beck, 1979), with a view to learning positive relaxation techniques and problem-solving strategies to cope with anxiety. The

main theoretical premise of cognitive behaviour therapy is that anxiety develops as a consequence of ways of thinking and behaving and that learning new ways of thinking and behaving will have a more helpful impact on emotions and wellbeing (Barrett et al., 2021).

Figure 5

Three Component CBT Model (adapted from Beck, 1979)



Research has shown the benefits of teacher-delivered CBT programmes in schools (Werner-Seidler et al., 2021; Dray et al., 2017). Effective implementation remains a key ingredient to the success of school-based programmes and Dowling and Barry (2021) suggest that schools require ongoing implementation support to ensure optimal delivery and sustainability of programmes.

The next sections will discuss the role and perceptions of school communities in nurturing resilience and supporting students with anxiety, through the lens of wellbeing promotion and early intervention programmes.

2.2.4 Wellbeing Promotion.

According to the World Health Organisation (2001), wellbeing is not considered to be the absence of negative emotions such as anxiety (DES, 2019), but is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. Within the Irish context, wellbeing promotion is a whole-school approach that can lessen factors leading to anxiety and embed standards of best practice in the prevention and management of emotional distress (Barry et al., 2013). Wellbeing promotion in schools recognises that if support for all students is in place, then fewer children and young people will require targeted or individual support (DES, 2019). Two frameworks employed by schools in supporting this provision include the Continuum of Support (NEPS, 2010, Figure 6) and the multicomponent approach which sets out the areas of Culture, Curriculum, Relationship and Policy and Planning that are central to wellbeing promotion (DES, 2019, Figure 9). These policies and frameworks are discussed in further detail in Section 2.3.

While anxiety prevention and wellbeing promotion are considered everyone's responsibility on a whole-school level (Government of Ireland, 2019; Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021); both universal and targeted approaches are recommended to deliver optimal positive outcomes (Mackenzie & Williams, 2018). Given the growing recognition of the important contribution that schools can make to anxiety prevention and emotional wellbeing, it is important to consider the types of programmes that are available and their corresponding evidence-base. The following section will discuss the range of intervention programmes commonly adopted in the Irish setting and the role of the teacher.

2.2.5 Anxiety Prevention and Mental Health in Schools.

FRIENDS (Barrett et al., 2000) and *Cool Kids* (Scaini et al., 2022) are two CBT-based programmes facilitated in schools. Targeted and individualized approaches that are not CBT-based are also frequently implemented to address and combat anxiety and other emotional-based difficulties. Within the Irish education context, a range of specific programmes such as the *MindOut programme* (Dowling & Barry, 2020), *Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton, 2000), *Walk Tall* (Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST], 2016) and *Weaving Wellbeing* (Forman & Rock, 2017) have been promoted for use in Irish schools as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. Indeed, there has been a noticeable expansion in the development of social-emotional learning programmes to address student wellbeing in Irish primary and post-primary schools over the past decade (Byrne et al., 2020).

As research has shown that interventions to decrease anxiety can improve students' emotional and social functioning (Wood, 2006), teachers play a crucial role in preventing, minimizing and helping students to overcome the damaging effects of anxiety and emotional distress (Carr, 2015). Often, teachers are described as active agents in responding to students' psychological needs (Dooley et al., 2019). Barrett and Turner (2001) and Durlak et al. (2011) assert that teachers have a unique understanding of their school that allows them to be equally if not more effective at providing mental health interventions in education than outside professionals, including psychologists. Stallard et al. (2007) also attest to the successful delivery of anxiety prevention and emotional resilience programmes in schools, however, in later research contended that programmes may not be as effective when delivered by school staff compared to health professionals (Stallard et al., 2014). This contrasts with Barrett and Turner's study (2001),

which found no differential effect in outcomes when the programme was implemented by teachers or psychologists.

Reinke et al. (2011) express that 89% of teachers agree that schools should be involved in addressing mental health, however, only 34% feel they have the skills. While there is evidence that school-based mental health and wellbeing programmes are effective, less is known about teachers' own views and experiences of implementing such programmes. This unresolved aspect between research studies points to the need for the current research to explore how cluster groups might support teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes.

2.2.6 NEPS-delivered Custer Groups

As a response to implementation issues in practice, cluster groups have been adopted as a recent form of support within the NEPS service. Also known as implementation cluster groups, the sessions allow teachers who have delivered the FRIENDS programme previously to refresh their pedagogical knowledge of the programme and receive support with implementing the programme in their school setting (NEPS, personal communication, 2024). Many teachers have requested a follow-up session to see the programme updates, developments on book revisions, resources and costs. The cluster group training specially focuses on these aspects and seeks to improve teachers programme delivery skills. The groups are typically held for class teachers and special education teachers currently implementing, intending to implement or who have implemented FRIENDS in the past, although school leaders can also benefit from attending training, particularly if they have a role in overseeing and supporting the implementation of FRIENDS within their schools.

In line with implementation science, cluster groups have been adopted as a strategy to support implementation challenges, such as programme fidelity and quality of delivery.

However, despite implementation challenges, research is yet to explore how this initiative contributes to teachers' implementation of FRIENDS.

The practice of clustering teachers within and across schools has been piloted in other support work offered by NEPS, including group consultation. This is distinct from the cluster group approach to FRIENDS implementation, however, indicates the emergence of this provision as part of the NEPS service. In group consultation, teachers from different schools jointly support each other to find solutions to school-based problems (Nugent et al., 2014). The cluster-based delivery offers a meaningful service to small schools on practical strategies and the development of clear action plans. Teachers were overwhelmingly positive of the cluster group experience, as indicated by their evaluations of meeting with others and sharing expertise. Educational psychologists can also respond to the needs of clusters of schools, which is more efficient in terms of time management. A direction for further research offered by Nugent et al. (2014) is to consider new ways of using the clustering approach as a viable way of delivering educational psychology services.

While cluster-based approaches have previously been integrated into the NEPS service, there are conceptual overlaps with communities of practice (CoP's) and teacher professional development. The distinctions between these terms are not always clear, therefore, a critical overview of similarities and distinctions between terms is discussed.

2.2.7 Cluster Groups, Communities of Practice and Teacher Professional Development: Conceptual Overlaps

In evaluating the benefits perceived by teachers of a successful cluster group experience, Jita and Mokhele (2014) argue that cluster groups enhance teachers' knowledge of pedagogy and promote critical inquiry and collaboration. Recommendations for the effective design of cluster

groups have been devised by the World Bank Group, a global partnership that promotes educational prosperity worldwide. Their research highlights that a cluster group should closely align to teachers' needs, include a clear vision and specific guidelines (Ding et al., 2021). The framework also provides guidance on how to design and structure a cluster group, including the best way to group members, the ideal facilitator and how they can be supported, the frequency of meetings and session content. The authors discuss these principles as key decision points to consider when designing a cluster group. These principles are discussed later in the empirical analysis relative to research question 2 and included in Figure 19.

Communities of Practice are characterised by teachers who share a common concern or interest and are committed to improving their practice by interacting and participating regularly (Lave & Wenger, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The word 'community' is an umbrella term that describes teachers coming together to mutually reflect on instructional practices and collaborate in reflective dialogue, all with a focus on student learning (Lomos et al. 2011). Pyrko et al. (2016) state that the aim of a CoP is to create and share knowledge by participating in a community. According to Wenger (2007), a CoP requires three components: a domain, a community, and a practice, whereby members of a group explore a shared interest through social activities and experiences.

Unlike CoP's which are more informal and larger in scale, cluster groups are tailored to the needs of teachers and focus on putting new learning and skills into immediate practice within the classroom (MacNeil, 2004). While communities of practice may be seen to connect educators at a larger scale and extend beyond geographical boundaries, cluster groups have a more formal structure that focus on specific educational issues such as implementation fidelity. There does not appear to be a definitive body of literature that indicates the frequency of cluster group

meetings as the needs and objectives of group members may vary (Wenger, 1998; Leu, 2004). However, a literature review by Yoon et al. (2007) found that 14 or more hours of professional development positively influenced student outcomes (Yoon et al., 2007).

There is also a close association between cluster groups and teacher professional development (TPD), as a cluster group may be considered a professional development session. TPD refers to ongoing learning experiences that help educators enhance their knowledge and skills. Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) have researched indicators of effective professional development. They hold the view that professional development is most effective when it is tailored, ongoing, practical, and focussed. Research suggests that meaningful professional learning must be sustained to have a lasting impact on teacher practice in the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009). As cluster groups are typically a standalone session, the brevity of support may be a shortcoming, as noted within the wider professional development literature.

Questionnaire research carried out by McElearney, Murphy & Radcliffe (2019) in Northern Ireland into teachers' preferred learning style in relation to professional development found that the majority of teachers, irrespective of years' teaching experience, identified cluster groups within and between schools (67%) as one of their preferred approaches to learning, behind groupwork and interactive sessions with opportunities to discuss, share and engage (e.g. seminars). The authors note, however that in-school and between-school clusters are not readily available in schools.

The next sections of this review will focus on models of service in educational psychology provided to schools in supporting children and young people with anxiety. A review

of the literature will then focus on key issues and discourse surrounding teachers' implementation of anxiety prevention and wellbeing programmes.

2.3 Educational Psychology Policy and Practice

2.3.1 The Continuum of Support.

The provision of anxiety-prevention programmes such as FRIENDS has a significant impact on educational psychologists working for the NEPS service. Under a broad continuum of support model, NEPS psychologists build the capacity of schools to meet the needs of students with anxiety. Collaborative problem-solving and consultation are seen as central to this practice (Adams & Tovey, 2012). NEPS encourages schools to use a continuum-based intervention process whereby each school takes responsibility for the initial assessment, intervention planning and review of pupils with emotional, behavioural or social difficulties (NEPS, 2024). The Continuum of Support (COS) guides schools in the identification and monitoring of students with various levels of need (DES, 2007). The model attests that the needs of pupils with anxiety can best be considered in terms of a continuum from mild/transient to more complex and therefore support can also be provided on this basis.

2.3.1.1 Support for All. The COS elucidates that many students with anxiety may be supported at a Classroom Support Level by the class teacher, who will observe the child, gather information, create an action plan, and monitor its effectiveness. Preventative and proactive approaches are encouraged by NEPS (2024), who have a role in developing schools' capacity to meet pupils' needs at the *Support for All* level (see figure 6). At this level, psychologists may assist teachers with programme implementation, monitoring and review. NEPS have developed an extensive list of resources with guidance for teachers on best practice in promoting resilience and social and emotional competence for children and young people. These include Behavioural,

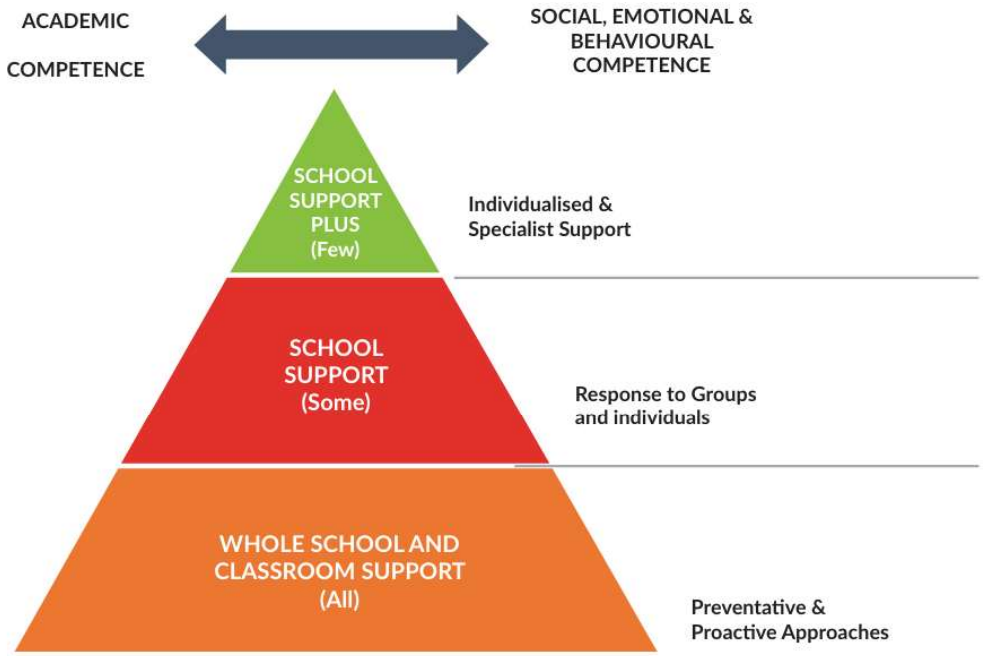
Emotional and Social Difficulties, a Continuum of Support guidelines and resource packs for primary and post-primary teachers (NEPS, 2010).

The whole school environment for all students is considered by NEPS as part of their advisory and consultative role. NEPS psychologists may signpost schools to resource documents, basic needs checklists, assessment documents and screening tests as useful information sources about a child or young person's underlying anxiety. They may also support the school in identifying relevant supports that are available to students at each tier of the continuum.

2.3.1.2 Support for Some and a Few. In consultation, teachers may also seek greater support and involvement from their NEPS psychologist in the event of failure for the child to make reasonable progress and despite the school's best efforts to intervene. While most pupils' initial needs can be met through the whole-school and classroom support level, a small number of pupils may present with more significant difficulties and in such cases a School Support or School Support Plus plan is developed by the Special Education Teacher in collaboration with the classroom teacher. This may involve joint work with the NEPS psychologist, to engage in problem solving, assessment work and intervention for the child in question (NEPS, 2007b).

Figure 6

Three-Tiered Continuum of Support Framework (NEPS, 2010)



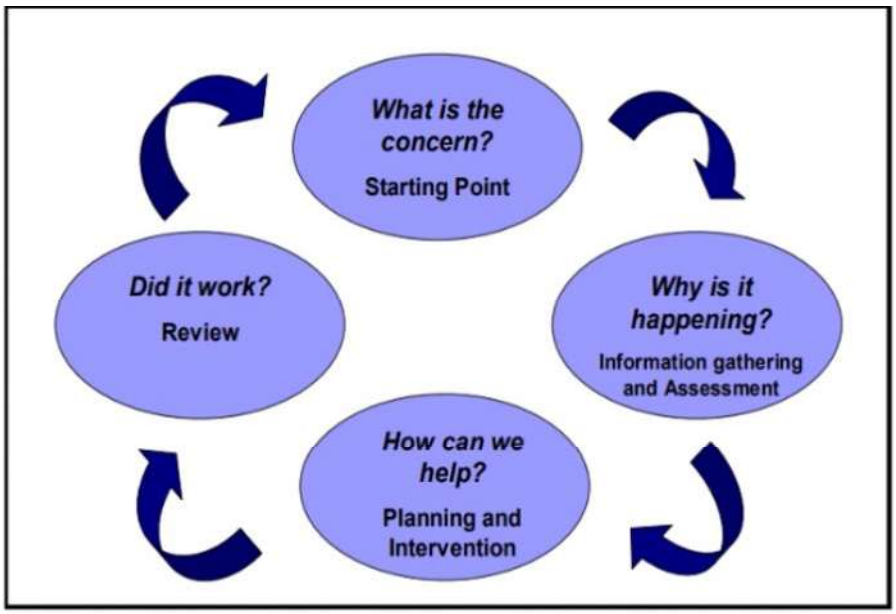
The multi-tiered support system presented above indicates that schools can support students' emotional needs through whole school and classroom supports, response to groups and individualized supports.

2.3.2 NEPS Framework for Practice: The Problem-Solving Model

In addition to developing schools' capacity to meet the needs of pupils with anxiety at a universal level, NEPS psychologists may also adopt a problem-solving process to support teachers and parents in addressing the individual needs of pupils with anxiety. The problem-solving model, illustrated below is one of assessment, intervention and review (DES, 2017; NEPS, 2007). The model emphasises the need for various actions at each of the four stages, which are guided by four thematic questions.

Figure 7

NEPS Problem-Solving Framework for Practice (DES, 2017)



A problem-solving approach for a child presenting with anxiety may involve a clarification of the problem and background information, an assessment of affective and personal factors, the selection and implementation of an intervention and the recording of progress and targets. All stages of the process model are underpinned by consultation and evidence-informed decision making, as core components of the framework for practice.

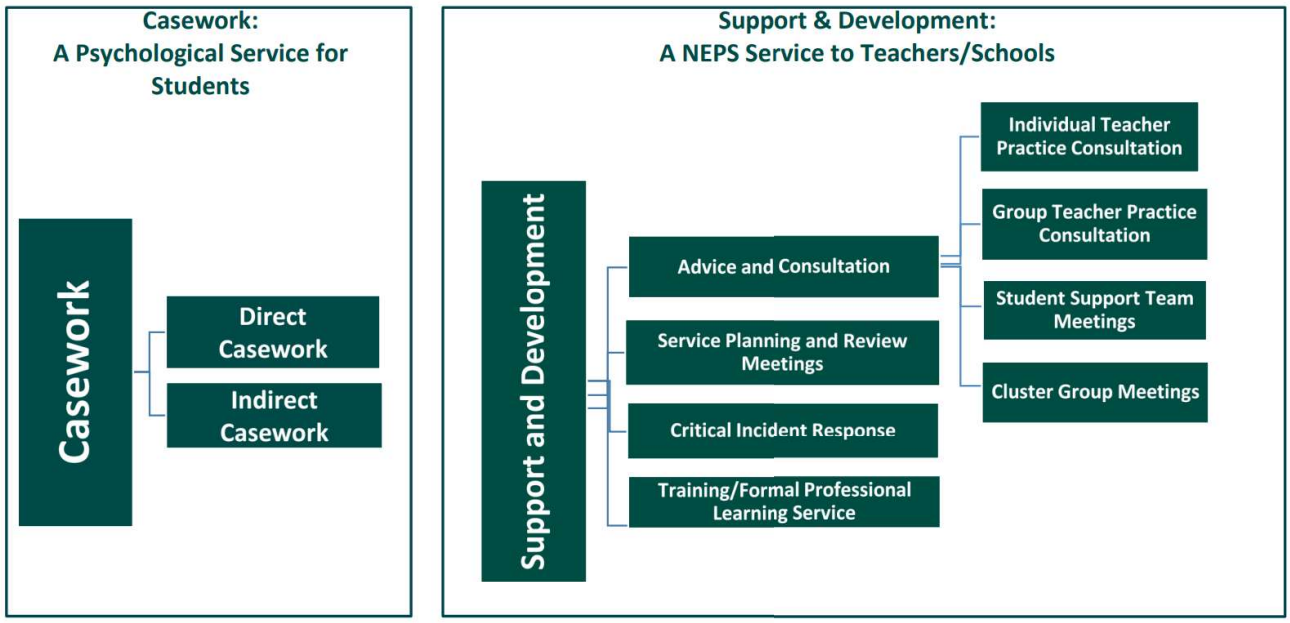
2.3.3 The NEPS Approach to Support and Development

In addition to NEPS psychologists providing direct casework support to children in their school environment, they also have primary responsibility for training teachers in anxiety prevention programmes such as FRIENDS and supporting them in planning for and establishing the programme in their school. The overall purpose of S&D is to build the capacity of teachers to effectively deliver the programme in response to student need. The training/formal professional

learning service, as shown in Figure 8, is identified by NEPS as one of their national and regional priorities (Martyn & McDonnell, 2024).

Figure 8

NEPS Support and Development Work Alongside the Casework Service



Note: Martyn, C. & McDonnell, G. (2024, February 2) "Psychology in Action – Working as an Educational Psychologist in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)" [PowerPoint slides]. Educational Psychology (maynoothuniversity.ie)

The training/formal professional learning service is a core element of the NEPS support and development work, which aims to support improved outcomes and reach more children than would be possible with individual casework. NEPS psychologists currently provide professional training in FRIENDS in the form of group webinars, conducted over 3 sessions and that last approximately two and half hours each. In addition to facilitating FRIENDS training, NEPS also offers ongoing advice and consultation to teachers and schools.

Given the broad scope and remit of NEPS, Ruttledge et al. (2016) contend that psychologists have the requisite skills to support teachers with implementing the FRIENDS programmes. As highlighted above, cluster group meetings are recognised within NEPS as an important aspect of this support and development work.

2.3.4 The DEIS Action Plan

The DEIS Plan 2017 adopts wellbeing as a key priority for primary and post-primary schools in the DEIS School Support programme. As part of this plan, NEPS continues to roll-out the FRIENDS programmes to primary and post-primary teachers, specifically targeting DEIS schools. The publication recommends an increase in the allocation of NEPS resources and training to teachers in DEIS schools to assist with the FRIENDS anxiety prevention and resilience building initiative. The Department of Education and Skills (2019a; 2019b) claim that NEPS has a key role in actively embedding evidence-based resilience programmes and student wellbeing into the curriculum.

2.3.5 Wellbeing Policy

Wellbeing is integrally connected to anxiety prevention approaches adopted by NEPS including the Continuum of Support and Problem-Solving models. Wellbeing promotion is central to cotemporary policy and curriculum initiatives and the mission of the Department of Education. Until recently, post-primary schools are required to provide additional wellbeing hours as part of the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (NCCA 2017), with wellbeing recognised as one of the eight underpinning principles of the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015). Whole-school planning and development of coherent wellbeing programmes such as My FRIENDS Youth is promoted to assist with wellbeing as a focus for inquiry in schools. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019) sets out guidelines for schools to prioritize

wellbeing. The multicomponent approach referenced in this document and presented below assists schools in developing, implementing, and reviewing wellbeing promotion in schools.

Figure 9

Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion (DES, 2019)

The model recognises that all areas and aspects of school life must be considered when thinking about wellbeing and anxiety prevention. As shown in Figure 9, wellbeing can be fostered at the level of culture and environment, teaching and learning, policy and planning and relationships. A catalogue of wellbeing resources has been devised for use in schools alongside a directory of continuous professional development, which includes information for teachers about how to access support and CPD opportunities provided by the department. The promotion of

social and emotional wellbeing, therefore, is considered a key aspect for school leaders to engage with in the school setting.

As indicated, the policy and practice context for anxiety prevention and wellbeing promotion in schools is well established. The focus will now turn to teachers' perspectives of this guidance and in particular, the factors that impact their implementation of anxiety prevention and wellbeing programmes.

2.4 Rationale for Review

The cluster group support for the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes needs to be understood in the context of previous research on teachers' experiences of implementing FRIENDS. To foreground the study, the first aim of the review is to synthesise existing literature on teachers' experiences of implementing anxiety prevention, mental health and wellbeing programmes (review question 1). A review into the barriers and facilitators of general programme implementation was deemed necessary as a first step, so the researcher could broadly understand what works and what doesn't work in practice. This review provides a background context and offers a broad foundation by addressing teachers' general experiences of programme implementation. By exploring this area, it may also illuminate potential factors that teachers encounter when implementing the FRIENDS programmes.

Building on this initial stage, research into teachers' perspectives of implementing the FRIENDS programmes is reviewed (see review question 2). This narrows the focus of the inquiry and directly ties to gaps in the existing FRIENDS literature addressed in the empirical study.

2.5 Phase One: Broad Review Question

What are Teachers' Experiences of the Barriers and Facilitators to Implementing Anxiety-prevention, Mental health, and Wellbeing Programmes in Primary and Post-Primary Schools?

2.5.1 Search Strategy

In line with the review question above, an electronic search of five databases was conducted on the 21st of October 2023 to determine the scale of empirical studies and reviews published within this area. Academic search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES were searched for peer-reviewed journal articles that investigated teachers' experiences of the barriers and facilitators to programme implementation. Terms inputted into the search engine were defined using the PEO framework, which included population (teachers, school), exposure (implementation of anxiety prevention, mental health or wellbeing programme/intervention) and outcomes (teachers' views, perspectives or experiences). Table 1 presents the search strings and Boolean operators that were inputted into the databases.

Table 1.

Database search terms (Review Question 1)

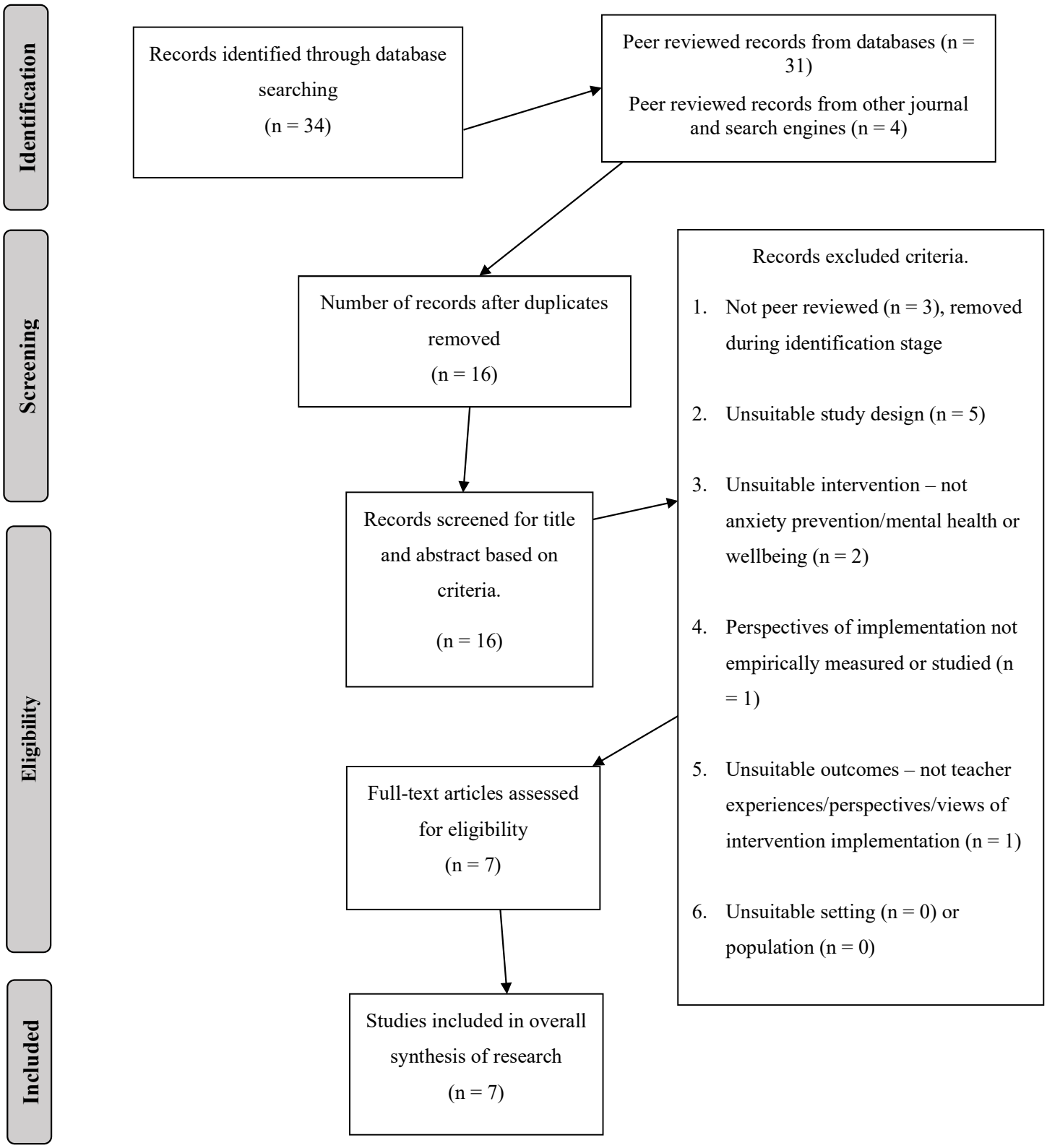
Database	Search Terms
Education Source (EBSCO) Academic Search Complete ERIC PsycINFO PsycARTICLES	(Teacher Experiences OR Views OR Perspectives) AND (Implementation OR Delivery OR Barrier OR Facilitator) AND (Anxiety OR Emotion* OR Mental health OR Wellbeing) AND (Program* OR Intervention)

Studies of a qualitative design were eligible for inclusion provided they focused on teachers' perspectives of implementing anxiety prevention, mental health or wellbeing interventions in schools. Literature reviews were also included to provide the researcher with an integrated understanding of the review question. The exclusion protocol was applied if: (1) the study was not peer-reviewed, (2) the study design was different than the inclusion design, (3) the intervention is not an anxiety-prevention, mental health or wellbeing programme implemented by teachers, (4) measures and outcomes are unrelated to teacher perspectives of implementation and (5) the setting or population are incompatible with the selected review question. These parameters, as well as the stages of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion are presented in Figure 10.

2.5.1.1 The Identification, Screening and Eligibility of Research Studies

Figure 10

PRISMA Diagram on the Identification, Screening and Eligibility of Research Studies (adapted from McKenzie et al., 2021)



Studies were excluded at each stage of the search strategy process in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 2. A justification for each criterion is presented. The list of excluded studies along with the reasons for their exclusion are presented in Appendix A. The seven included studies are presented in Appendix B.

Table 2.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (Broad Review Question)

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1. Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed research article	Not peer-reviewed research	Scientific rigour and quality of study.
2. Type of Design	Qualitative design that focuses on teachers' perspectives of implementing school-based anxiety-prevention, mental health or wellbeing programmes	Different design than inclusion criteria.	Relevance to the review question.
3. Type of Intervention/ Programme	Anxiety prevention/mental health or wellbeing intervention	Not an anxiety/mental health or wellbeing intervention by teachers	Relevance of the type of intervention/programme to the review question.
4. Measures	Perspectives of programme implementation empirically measured or studied	Perspectives of programme implementation not empirically measured or studied	Review question examines programme implementation.
5. Outcomes	Teachers' experiences/perspectives/views of implementation	Not teacher experiences/perspectives/views of implementation	The review must consider teacher experience as an outcome measure.
6. Setting or Population	Primary or post-primary level teachers	Third-level teachers or participants	Review is focussed on programme implementation at primary and post-primary level.

The purpose of the literature search was not to systematically evaluate the methodological or conceptual quality of the research studies but to provide a synthesis of similar themes and conclusions emerging within the literature. With this goal in mind, findings from each of the included studies were extracted and compared. While a recent systematic review was conducted on teachers' general experiences of mental health and wellbeing programmes (Goodwin, Behan & O' Brien, 2023), the current review was justified as it focussed explicitly on teachers' views of programme implementation, as highlighted by the current search strategy. The following themes appeared consistently across studies and illustrated some of the barriers and facilitators perceived by teachers when implementing anxiety prevention, mental health and wellbeing programmes in educational settings.

2.5.2 Availability and Quality of Training

Training was identified as a determinant of implementation success across six of seven studies (Han & Weiss, 2005; Goodwin, Behan & O' Brien, 2023; Maclean & Law, 2022; March et al., 2022; Askell-Williams, Slee & Van Deur 2013; Brann et al., 2021). Systematic reviews by March et al. (2022) and Goodwin et al. (2023) evaluated a total of 17 studies on teachers' views of the barriers and facilitators to mental health and wellbeing interventions. March et al. (2022) identified training as a barrier to staff engagement in the long-term implementation of interventions, with staff turnover and a lack of availability to send new staff on training contributing to this barrier.

Studies reviewed by Goodwin et al. (2023) found that teachers felt they lacked sufficient training to deliver interventions (Punukollu et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Similarly, an online questionnaire of primary school teachers by Maclean and Law (2022) reported that teachers believed they lacked adequate training, knowledge and skills to support students' mental health

needs. The review by Han and Weiss (2005) posited that teachers' own self-efficacy beliefs are a key ingredient to sustaining teacher-implemented classroom programmes. The availability and quality of training (Han & Weiss, 2005), therefore, is paramount to ensuring teachers are supported in undertaking the implementation of evidence-based programmes and develop self-efficacy in doing so.

Askel-Williams et al. (2013) identified teacher training as one of 14 factors that influence the long-term implementation of mental health and wellbeing initiatives. The authors propose that the quality of teachers' engagement during training, and their satisfaction with the content and how it should be delivered is key to sustaining programme implementation.

2.5.3 Competing Demands and Priorities

Competing priorities means that schools may prioritise agendas other than anxiety prevention or wellbeing promotion, such as academic progress (March et al., 2022). This tension between responsibilities is further recognised by Goodwin et al. (2023), who claim that teachers may have conflicting opinions regarding their role in supporting students with anxiety and mental health needs. In particular, the challenge of implementing programmes within a crowded curriculum was cited by many researchers as a significant obstacle (Graham et al., 2011; Skryabina et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2019). While this can be seen as a notable barrier to programme implementation, Maclean and Law (2022) argue that some teachers believe that they are ideally positioned to support the emotional welfare of children and young people and adopt positive beliefs about the paybacks of early intervention programmes (Crane et al., 2021).

2.5.4 Internal and External Support

While competing demands and priorities are a hurdle encountered by some teachers and schools, they also closely relate to external support, which can be a barrier to programme

implementation in some cases and a facilitator in others. March et al. (2022) recognise that support from departments of education, political endorsement and policy agendas can pave the way for early intervention as part of a school's remit and justify the long-term sustainability of programmes as part of a school's ethos. However, support of this nature is not always a top priority at policy level (Goodwin et al., 2023). At a school level, principals who prioritise the intervention through timetabling, offering of practical support, clear communication and decisions can support intervention delivery (March et al., 2022; Han & Weiss, 2005).

A culture of support from the school leadership team and the availability of a professional network of teachers and administrative staff has been referenced by research studies as a way to reinforce programme implementation within schools (Crane et al., 2021; Friend et al., 2014). Regular consultations and check-ins from professionals including psychologists are also identified as factors that support programme implementation following a period of initial training (Han & Weiss, 2005).

2.5.5 Intervention Characteristics

The acceptability of an intervention (Han & Weiss, 2005) and its characteristics were found to have a significant bearing on implementation according to a systematic review of ten studies by March et al. (2022). A programmes practicality, ease of use, quality, organisation of materials and ready-made sessions were all found to facilitate teachers' sustained implementation in these studies in addition to how well the programme was received. Findings in this regard indicate that programme-related factors such as programme fit, simplicity and flexibility are essential ingredients that characterise teachers' continued implementation of school-based interventions.

2.5.6 Other Factors Influencing Implementation

While teacher training, competing demands, external support and intervention characteristics were referenced in studies as factors that can positively and negatively influence programme implementation, this list is not exhaustive. Brann et al. (2021) and Askel-Williams et al. (2013) provide multi-tiered frameworks on the comprehensive nature of barriers and facilitators at systemic, school, individual and programme levels.

Factors that obstruct or enable change at various levels of a school's ecosystem can include norms, laws, broader policies as well as organisational, individual and programme level characteristics. The authors suggest that leadership, climate and organisational structures of a school can have a significant bearing on implementation as well as individual staff characteristics (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, competence etc).

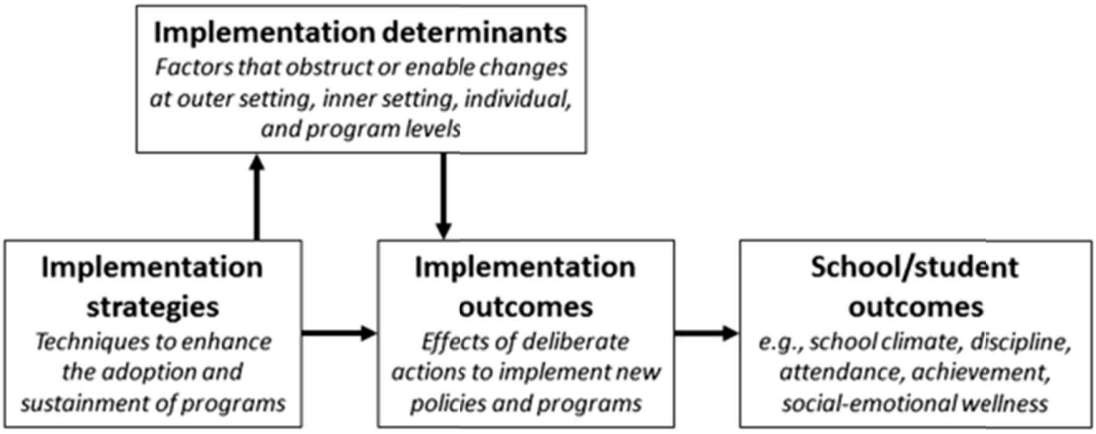
Techniques or strategies to support the implementation of school-based programmes are identified by Brann et al. (2021) to include technical support, ongoing training, monitoring implementation progress and improving buy-in. It is argued that these strategies can be seen as facilitators which help to build the capacity of schools to implement and sustain interventions.

As shown in Figure 11, the acceptability, appropriateness, adoption and fidelity of an intervention (Proctor et al., 2011) are key outcomes that also influence programme implementation. Brann et al. (2021) and Askell-Williams et al. (2013) express that deliberate actions to implement new programmes are intricately influenced by the documented quality of the programme, how much school staff approve of the programme (acceptability), the perceived fit and compatibility for the school setting (appropriateness), the uptake and spread within the school (adoption) and the extent to which staff drift from the implementation protocol (fidelity). Conceivably, more practical considerations include the costs and feasibility within the school's

given resources and structures. As indicated, the model below highlights that implementing school-based interventions in educational settings is influenced by interactive factors (Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Research in relation to implementation science is discussed more closely in the next section of this review.

Figure 11

Causal Model of Implementation Strategies, Determinants and Outcomes (Lyon & Bruns, 2019)



2.5.7 Implementation Science

The findings presented above relate closely to implementation science (IS), which is discussed here as part of the broader theoretical content for this research. IS is concerned with the scientific study of methods and strategies to promote the uptake of evidence-based interventions in school settings (Eccles & Mittman, 2006; Forman et al., 2013). Forman et al. (2013) state that implementation science is essential to the process of translating evidence-based interventions (EBIs) into the unique context of schools and therefore holds relevance to the current study.

Research as part of IS explores what makes interventions work in "real-world" settings and is concerned with bridging the gap between what is known to be effective and what is done (Fixsen et al., 2009b; Kelly & Perkins, 2013). IS has been referenced as valuable in school psychology settings because having theoretically sound programmes does not, in itself, ensure successful implementation and achieve desired outcomes (Moir, 2018). Similarly, implementation factors such as readiness to change, quality of delivery and fidelity have been shown to influence student-level outcomes (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). This attests to the importance of evaluating implementation as part of the effectiveness of all programmes operating in school settings.

Cook et al. (2019) and Powell et al. (2015) state that IS is primarily focused on developing and testing specific implementation strategies that may improve the adoption of evidence-based programmes. A cluster group may be defined as one such strategy, that aims to overcome implementation barriers for teachers and enhance the adoption and sustainment of programmes over time (Centre for Effective Services, 2022). IS, therefore, is considered a framework that can be applied to understanding how cluster groups might enhance teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. Research in this area is warranted as studies have shown that schools can struggle with the adoption and implementation of evidence-based programmes to improve student outcomes (Sanetti & Meek, 2019).

A range of implementation frameworks and tools have been devised for practice within this field (Meyers et al., 2012; Greenberg et al., 2005) to overcome barriers to implementation, improve practice and sustain evidence-based interventions (Porritt et al., 2020). The causal model adopted by Lyon and Bruns (2019) (as shown in figure 11) illustrates multileveled factors that can support and inhibit the effective implementation of school-based interventions. This

model aligns well with the research for the current study, which examines the role of cluster groups in supporting implementation outcomes.

2.5.8 Conclusion

This review has examined some of the factors that support and hinder teachers' implementation of evidence-based anxiety prevention, mental health and wellbeing programmes in schools. A review of seven studies, including two systematic reviews and five primary research studies has indicated that a range of multi-level variables (teacher, school, programme and external) influence programme delivery. These include but are not limited to teacher training, conflicting demands, intervention characteristics, external support and the perceived quality and acceptability of the programme. The above findings are also consistent with the literature on implementation science.

The next section of this review focuses on existing research into teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programmes. A systematic review of the FRIENDS implementation literature is required given the focus of the current research project and the widespread operation of the programmes in Irish primary and post-primary schools. A critical overview of the FRIENDS curriculum as connected to Irish research studies is discussed first.

2.5.9 Irish Research Studies on FRIENDS for Life (FFL)

There is general paucity of empirical evidence examining staff perceptions of FRIENDS programme implementation in Irish school settings (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013; Ruttledge et al., 2016), in comparison to randomised control trials documenting positive psychological outcomes for adolescents (Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2013; Ruttledge et al., 2016).

Ruttledge et al. (2016) conducted a controlled evaluation of the programme in Irish schools and found reductions in self and parent ratings of anxiety for the intervention cohorts. There were also significant improvements in measures of separation anxiety, social phobia and factors associated with resilience including self-concept, coping efficacy and school connectedness, with gains maintained at three-month follow-up (Crosbie et al., 2011). The researchers found that Irish teachers successfully implemented the programme based on teacher fidelity checklists showing high adherence to the programme. However, the authors described the main challenge of continuing to implement the programme with fidelity through ongoing support and coaching. Teachers in the study were also supported by educational psychologists through regular consultation, parental workshops, an information session and programme timetables which suggests that implementation may be a greater challenge in schools that are less resource laden.

Another study within the Irish context explored teachers' experiences of implementing FRIENDS as a secondary outcome measure and reported some challenges to successful implementation. A research project by Henefer and Rodgers (2013) from the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) documented teachers' implementation of the programme by asking them to complete fidelity checklists (Barrett & Turner, 2001) after each FRIENDS lesson and complete brief review documents. Two themes that emerged in improving the implementation of the programme included 'having more time for preparation and delivery' and 'adapting content'. Many teachers felt under pressure to deliver the ten sessions as set forward and believed that starting the programme earlier in the academic year would be one way to improve implementation. Other findings reported on the checklist included the number of activities within

a session and having to supplement lesson content. This underlines the importance of team teaching and having the support of management, staff and parents.

Apart from a review by Henefer and Rodgers (2013) on Irish teachers' experiences of barriers to programme implementation and what, they felt, could be improved, the available evidence is limited to a small sample size of 27 teachers. As some factors were identified to impact Irish teachers' implementation of FRIENDS, a systematic review was conducted to explore this topic in greater detail.

2.6 Phase Two: Systematic Review Question

This section will review literature on factors that influence teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programmes in school settings. As previously discussed, evidence of teacher's perspectives of implementing the FRIENDS programmes in the Irish context is lacking in quantity (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013; Ruttledge et al., 2016). This review fills a gap in the existing literature that may inform future policy making and practice in this area. For example, a greater understanding of the conditions under which teachers may succeed or falter in implementing FRIENDS. The question for the second systematic review phase is presented below.

Review Question 2: What are Teachers' Experiences of the Barriers and Facilitators to Implementing the FRIENDS Anxiety Prevention and Resilience-Building Programmes?

2.6.1 Search Strategy

In view of this review question, an electronic search of four databases was conducted on the 31st of December 2023 to determine the scale of primary research studies published within this area. Education Source, ERIC, PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES were searched for peer-

reviewed journal articles that investigated the FRIENDS programmes applied to education. Terms inputted into the advanced search engine were defined using the PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, Study Design) search strategy model and used to determine study eligibility. Empirical studies of any design were included (study design) provided that they focused on school or teacher implementation of any of the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programs (population and intervention) and examined teachers' experiences or perspectives of the barriers and facilitators to implementation (outcomes). Table 3 presents the search strings and Boolean operators included in each database.

Table 3.

Database search terms (Systematic Review Question)

Database	Search Terms
Education Source (EBSCO) Academic Search Complete ERIC PsycINFO PsycARTICLES	TI & AB (FRIENDS program* OR FRIENDS intervention OR FRIENDS anxiety prevention OR FRIENDS resilience OR "Fun FRIENDS" OR "FRIENDS for Life" OR "My FRIENDS Youth") AND (Teacher Experiences OR Views OR Perspectives) AND (Implementation OR Delivery OR Barrier OR Facilitator)

*TI – Title of Study and AB – Abstract

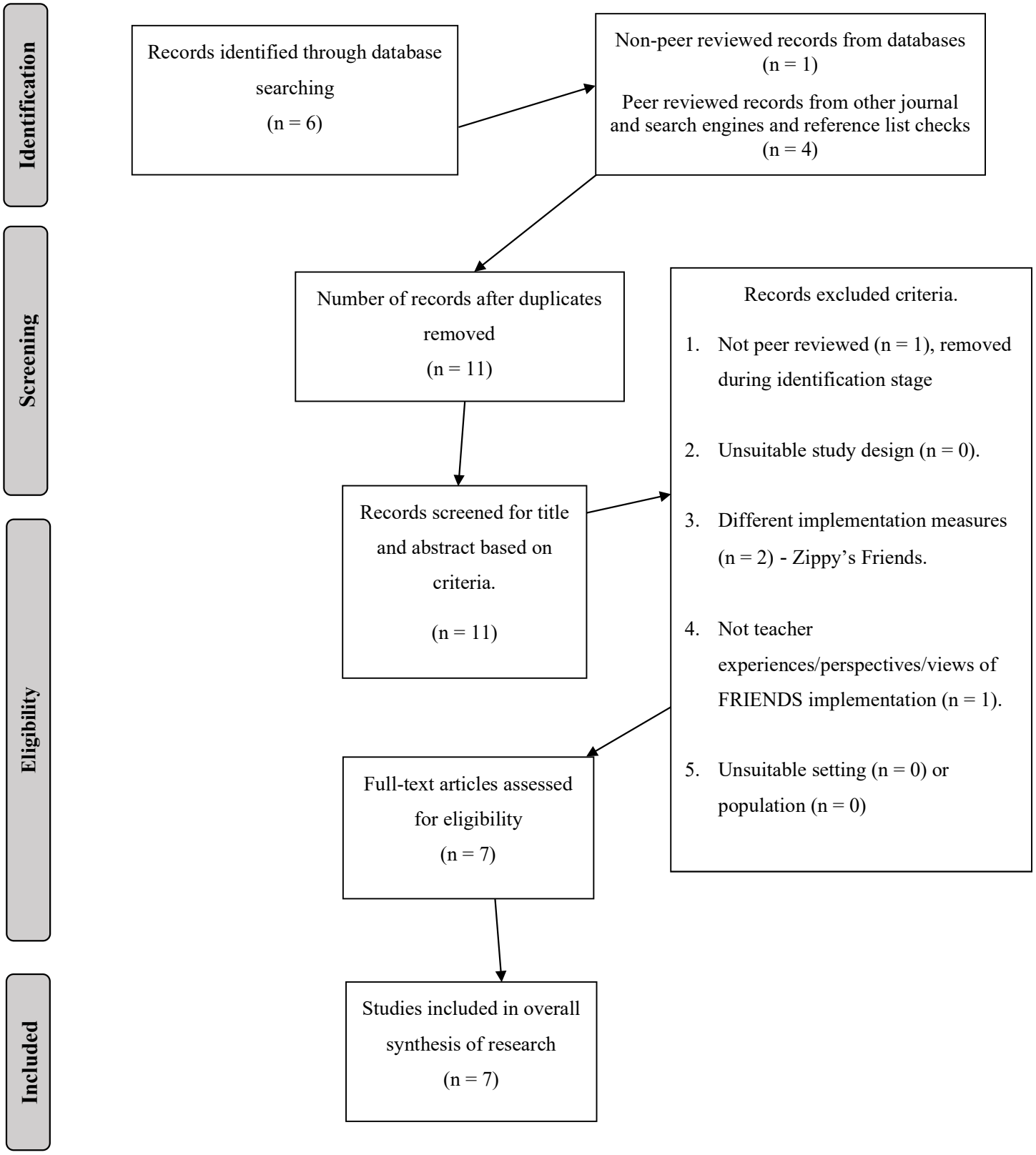
Studies that met the following parameters were included: the study is published in a peer-reviewed journal, empirical study, or primary research design (Study Design), participants are primary or post-primary level teachers (Participants), implementing one of the FRIENDS anxiety

prevention programmes (Intervention) in their school (Setting). A visual representation of the review process, including the stages of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of the literature are presented in the flowchart below.

2.6.1.1 The Identification, Screening and Eligibility of Research Studies

Figure 12.

PRISMA Diagram of Systematic Literature Search



The PRISMA statement (2020) was followed to reflect the methods used to identify, select, appraise, and synthesise studies and enhance the reporting quality of the systematic review. This guideline supported the researcher in determining why the review was done and what was found. Studies were excluded at each stage of the search strategy process in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The parameters for inclusion and exclusion are outlined in Table 4 along with a justification for the criteria. Please see appendix C for the list of included and excluded studies with the rationale for exclusion.

Table 4.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (Review Question 2)

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1. Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed research article	Not peer-reviewed research	Scientific rigour and quality of study.
2. Type of Design	Any design that focusses on the implementation of the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programmes	Any design that does not explicitly focus on the implementation of FRIENDS.	Any design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) is eligible for inclusion as implementation perspectives may be studied in multiple ways. Also, ensuring the search is not narrowed too soon.
3. Measures	Perspectives of programme implementation empirically measured or studied	Perspectives of programme implementation not empirically measured or studied	Review question examines teachers' perspectives and experiences of implementing FRIENDS.
4. Outcomes	Teachers' experiences/perspectives/views of FRIENDS implementation	Not teacher experiences/perspectives/views of FRIENDS implementation	The research must consider teachers' experience of FRIENDS implementation as an outcome measure.
5. Setting or Population	Primary or post-primary level teachers	Third-level teachers or participants	Review is focussed on programme implementation by primary and post-primary teachers.

2.6.2 Appraisal Framework

The final seven studies were evaluated using the Weight of Evidence framework proposed by Gough (2007) and Gough, Oliver & Thomas (2017), identifying the soundness (quality) of methodology (WoE - A), appropriateness of research design (WoE - B) and

relevance of the focus of the study to the review question (WoE - C). A systematic evaluation established the extent to which studies addressed a clearly focussed research question and the validity of methods and results to answer this question. An overall average score is provided for the weighted scores in WoE-D. Table 5 illustrates this process.

Table 5.

Gough's Weight of Evidence Framework (2007)

Weight of Evidence A (WoE-A)	Weight of Evidence B (WoE-B)	Weight of Evidence C (WoE-C)	Weight of Evidence D (WoE-D)
Methodological quality of the study in relation to quality protocols (Methodological Quality).	Appropriateness of the research design for addressing the review question (Methodological Relevance).	Significance of the study's evidence in answering the review question (Topic Relevance).	Rating the overall average score to which the study addresses the review question (overall weight of evidence).

Methodological quality (WoE-A). Methodological quality was determined by coding the studies against a coding protocol. Studies that employed qualitative designs were critically appraised using a critical appraisal checklist developed by the Johanna Briggs Institute (2019). JBI have established guidelines to assist professionals in reviewing the trustworthiness of research evidence and evidence-based recommendations. The checklist for qualitative research, as presented in Appendix D was used to evaluate the methodological quality of one study that examined the views of children, parents and school staff about the universal school-based application of the FRIENDS programme (Skryabina et al., 2016). This checklist has been

developed to assess the validity of studies according to 10 criteria. The scoring protocol reflected one of four responses: yes, no, unclear and not applicable. Studies achieve a high score if they meet at least eight criteria. Studies that achieve between 5 and 7 criteria are given a medium weighting (2) while studies that acquire less than 5 criteria on the checklist score a low weighting (1). Table 6 provides evidence of methodological quality of the study by Skryabina et al. (2016). This qualitative study was conducted as part of a large, randomised control trial. Only the qualitative component of the study was evaluated as this explicitly focused on the experience and perspectives of teachers implementing the FRIENDS programme and therefore aligned to the review question. Further evidence on the coding protocol for this study is presented in Appendix D.

Table 6.

WoE A for Qualitative Studies (JBI, 2019)

Study	# Criteria (/10)	WoE A Rating
Skryabina et al. (2016)	8	High (3)

An adapted version of Gersten et al.'s (2005) coding protocol was used to assess the methodological quality of two studies (Kosters et al., 2017; Ruttledge et al., 2016). This protocol allows for evaluation of experimental and quasi-experimental designs in the field of education. In completing the coding, the studies were given a score between 1 and 3 which was assigned to its methodological weight: Low (1), Medium (2) or High (3). A study was deemed to have a High weight of evidence if at least nine essential criteria and four desirable criteria were met on the experimental protocol (Gersten et al., 2005). A study was rated as Medium if it achieved at least seven essential criteria and at least three desirable criteria while Low if the study met at least nine criteria (Gersten et al., 2005). Table 7 highlights the scores for the WoE for the study by

Kosters et al. (2017) and Ruttledge et al. (2016). The preliminary study by Kosters et al. in 2012 was not included as this outlines the design for the process evaluation in the 2017 study. The protocol by Gersten et al. (2005) is presented in Appendix E along with a coded study.

Table 7.

WoE A for Quantitative Studies with Group Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs (Gersten et al., 2005)

Study	# Essential Criteria	# Desirable Criteria	WoE A Rating
Kösters et al. (2012)/ Kösters et al. (2017)	7	5	Medium (2)
Ruttledge et al. (2016)	9	4	High (3)

Quality assessment for two mixed-methods studies were appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018). Methodological quality scores range from zero to five. Studies scoring zero to one criterion are considered Low quality, two to four as Medium quality and five as High quality. Table 8 highlights the scores for the WoE for both mixed method studies Wigelsworth et al. (2018) and Green and Atkinson (2016). An example scoring protocol for the study by Green and Atkinson is shown in Appendix F.

Table 8.

***WoE A for Mixed Method Studies* (Hong et al., 2018)**

Study	# Criteria Reached	WoE A Rating
Wigelsworth et al. (2018)	3	Medium (2)
Green and Atkinson (2016)	4	Medium (2)
Henefer & Rodgers	5	High (3)

The methodological quality assigned to all studies was based on the criteria and rationale presented in Appendix G.

Methodological Relevance (WoE-B). Weight of evidence B examines the extent to which the type and design of study addresses the review questions. The rankings evaluate the suitability of the study in answering the proposed research review question. To determine Methodological Relevance, the framework proposed by Petticrew and Roberts (2006) was used (see typology of evidence in appendix K). As the review focused on teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programme, this relates to process delivery or how the intervention works. Petticrew and Roberts (2006) claim that systematic reviews followed by qualitative research and questionnaire studies provide the highest form of evidence in answering these types of questions. Systematic reviews did not meet inclusion criteria of primary research studies on the FRIENDS programme and so were not included. Studies were given a score of 2 (medium weighting) if they employed questionnaire, mixed-methods or non-experimental evaluations (e.g. case studies, correlational studies) and a weighting of 3 (high weighting) for qualitative research (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A Low weighting of 1 was ascribed to studies that used quasi-experimental designs. The

methodological relevance of studies is shown in Table 9 and additional information on the scoring criteria is highlighted in Appendix H.

Table 9.

Scores for WoE B

Study	WoE B
Skryabina et al. (2016)	High (3)
Kösters et al. (2012)/ Kösters et al. (2017)	Low (1)
Wigelsworth et al. (2018)	Medium (2)
Green and Atkinson (2016)	High (3)
Ruttledge et al. (2016)	Low (1)
Henefer & Rodgers (2013)	Medium (2)

Relevance of Evidence (WoE-C). The relevance of the focus of the evidence was identified in weight of evidence C. This is a judgement about how well the data helps answer the review questions. Details are listed in Appendix G along with a corresponding rationale for a high, medium or low weight of evidence. The score for WoE-C was determined by evaluating how the measures and evidence of the study reflected the concepts of the review. As presented in Appendix G, a study that included measures of teachers' experiences of barriers and facilitators to FRIENDS implementation were allocated a high rating. Studies were given a medium rating if their data were not full relevant to the focus of the review such as outcome data that related to implementation fidelity only. Similarly, studies were given a score of 1 (low weighting), 2 (medium weighting) and 3 (high weighting), as indicated in Table 10 and Appendix I.

Table 10.

Scores for WoE C

Study	WoE C
Skryabina et al. (2016)	High (3)
Kösters et al. (2012)/ Kösters et al. (2017)	Medium (2)
Wigelsworth et al. (2018)	High (3)
Green and Atkinson (2016)	High (3)
Ruttledge et al. (2016)	Medium (2)
Henefer & Rodgers (2013)	High (3)

Overall (WoE-D). The weight of evidence (WOE-D) of all studies is shown in Table 11. Weight of evidence D examines the overall contribution of each study to the review and was found by averaging the combined scores for WoE A, WoE-B and WoE-C. This score was then used to rate how each study addressed the review question about student mindset in education. WoE-D is separated into 3 scoring ranges: Low (1.6 or below), Medium (1.7 to 2.3) or High (> 2.4). Table 11 presents each of the WoE findings for all the studies in this review.

Table 11.

Weight of Evidence Findings (Systematic Review Question)

Authors	*Weight of Evidence A (WoE A)*	*Weight of Evidence B (WoE-B)*	*Weight of Evidence C (WoE-C)*	*Weight of Evidence D (WoE-D)*
Skryabina et al. (2016)	3	3	3	High (3)
Kösters et al. (2012)/ Kösters et al. (2017)	2	1	2	Low (1.6)
Wigelsworth et al. (2018)	2	2	3	Medium (2.3)
Green and Atkinson (2016)	2	3	3	High (2.6)
Ruttledge et al. (2016)	3	1	2	Medium (2.0)
Henefer & Rodgers (2013)	3	2	3	High (2.6)

WoE-D: ≤ 1.6 (low), 1.7 – 2.3 (medium) and > 2.4 (high)

Considering the overall weight of evidence, three studies (Skryabina et al. 2016; Green & Atkinson, 2016; Henefer & Rodgers, 2013) fall within the High weight of evidence range, two studies (Wigelsworth et al., 2018; Ruttledge et al., 2016) fall within the Moderate range and one study (Kösters et al., 2017) falls within the Low range. Findings from each study are critically appraised based on research design, participants, measures and main findings, giving more weight to the studies of higher quality. It is worth noting that the studies by Ruttledge et al. (2016) and Henefer and Rodgers (2013) have been discussed previously in section 2.5.9. A map of the literature within each respective area, including participants, design, measures and key findings is synthesised in Appendix J.

2.6.3 Synthesis of Findings

2.6.3.1. Research Design

Two of the studies identified were mixed-method studies (Wigelsworth et al., 2018; Green & Atkinson, 2016), one was a qualitative study (Skryabina et al., 2016), and the others were experimental or quasi-experimental designs (Ruttledge et al., 2016; Kosters et al., 2012, 2017). Implementation characteristics of the FRIENDS programme such as fidelity/adaptation, quality, acceptability, engagement and reach were assessed across four of the five studies. Studies that examined implementation characteristics only received a Medium WoE-B as their data were not fully relevant to the review question on teacher's experiences of the barriers and facilitators to implementation (Kosters et al., 2017). The mixed-method studies sought to answer the question of how the programme was implemented but also examined to what extent contextual aspects, including barriers and facilitators, impacted upon teachers' implementation of the programme. As a result, these studies received a higher WoE-C as their evidence was more relevant to the focus of the review question.

2.6.3.2. Participants

As per the inclusion criteria, participants who were teachers in primary or post-primary school settings were chosen, due to the significance of schools in providing early intervention for pupils with additional emotional needs, as delineated within guidance documents (DES, 2007). The implementation of the FRIENDS programme was studied with teachers (Skryabina et al., 2016), learning mentors (Green & Atkinson, 2016) and prevention workers (Kosters et al., 2017) with 3469 students ranging from 9 to 13 years in Amsterdam and the UK. Although many of the key stakeholders were not teachers, they all received training in FRIENDS. The number of participants in the studies ranged from five (Green & Atkinson, 2016) to over 3,000

(Wigelsworth et al., 2018). Parents were involved as participants in one study (Skryabina et al., 2016) while the lack of involvement of parents in another study was perceived as a barrier to pupil participation (Green & Atkinson, 2016).

2.6.3.3 Measures and Analysis

Structured observations of implementation were evaluated across most studies using an observation schedule (Wigelsworth et al., 2018) or records of intervention implementation (Green & Atkinson, 2016). Standard integrity checklists (Barrett et al, 1999) were commonly used to evaluate protocol adherence, quality of delivery and participant responsiveness. Wigelsworth et al. (2018) and Green and Atkinson (2016) used quantitative assessment tools (e.g., 10-point scales, self-reports, practice questionnaires) to evaluate the extent to which the structure and sequence of activities was followed, the proportion of intended tasks implemented, how clearly concepts and activities were explained during lessons and the level of student participation in role-plays. While measures of observation and assessment were used to capture implementation integrity, other measures including semi-structured interviews, and focus groups supplemented quantitative findings with teachers own beliefs about the barriers and facilitators to programme implementation.

Qualitative measures, as emphasised by Skryabina et al. (2016) and Green and Atkinson (2016) promoted a discussion with teachers about aspects of programme implementation such as level of training and experience, time, content and quality of delivery. A collection of both quantitative and qualitative measures was used throughout the studies and analysis of the data included descriptive statistics, thematic analysis (Skryabina et al., 2016) and activity theory (Green & Atkinson, 2016), which explored implementation factors through the lens of a broad social and cultural context.

2.6.3.4 Main Findings

The main findings identified from the studies are categorised into two domains: 1) Implementation fidelity of the FRIENDS programmes and 2) Teachers' experiences of implementation barriers and facilitators.

2.6.3.4.1 Implementation Fidelity

Implementation fidelity considers the degree to which a programme is implemented as designed or intended. It assesses adherence to the intervention protocol and also encompasses the quality and effectiveness of implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The implementation evaluation of FRIENDS in the current research articles revealed a pattern of findings. Adherence to the protocol of the FRIENDS programme was low (Green & Atkinson, 2016), with only 60% of the suggested activities completed. Limited exposure to the full 10 sessions and significant adaptation occurred when delivering the programme. Findings from the studies indicate that many implementers may not adhere completely to the programme. Incomplete implementation has been shown by Green and Atkinson (2016) to lessen the impact of FRIENDS on students' learning of key emotional coping skills and level of anxiety. Evidence from other studies concurs with this finding (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Inadequate levels of implementation, a lack of concordance between session and manual content and inconsistencies in parent and booster sessions provides notable evidence that incomplete programme implementation may not result in hypothesized reductions in anxiety (Green & Atkinson, 2016).

2.6.3.4.2 Teachers' Experiences of Implementation Facilitators and Barriers.

In addition to evaluations of programme integrity, a range of evidence was acquired from teachers about implementing the FRIENDS programme, their positive and negative experiences and their overall views. An evaluation of evidence from three of the studies included in this

review (Skryabina et al., 2016; Wigelsworth et al., 2018; Green & Atkinson, 2016) provided a mixture of findings. Time was consistently cited to be the greatest barrier in ensuring consistent implementation with many teachers reporting that there was not enough time to cover the content. This finding was also referenced in studies evaluated as part of the broad review (Goodwin et al., 2023; March et al., 2022). The review by Green and Atkinson (2016) points towards a contradiction between the time available to teachers and the time required to deliver the programme. Some schools struggled to fit the sessions into their school timetable (Wigelsworth et al., 2018) as it overlapped with other aspects of the curriculum (Skryabina et al., 2016), however, other teachers considered the programme to be a good fit in a busy timetable (Skryabina et al., 2016).

Another challenge included some schools reporting positive involvement from their senior school leaders while other schools expressed that this was unclear, limited or lacked wider school involvement. Mixed opinions were also evident from teachers about the FRIENDS manual, some attributing the manual as their ‘bible’ and rating it positively while others found it ‘restrictive’ (Wigelsworth et al., 2018).

Teachers in Skryabina et al. (2016) communicated that the FRIENDS programme involved too many strategies and passive learning and that many of the sessions were too long. This perspective also appeared to be confined to a few as other teachers in the same study recalled how the children enjoyed the hands-on activities and opportunities for groupwork. In their analysis of aspects related to teachers’ perceptions of the programme, Green and Atkinson (2016) mentioned that teachers were successful in encouraging positive thinking and considered the programme valuable in teaching children emotional resilience and coping skills.

One common theme emerging from the main findings was the concept of programme acceptability which links to the implementation outcomes discussed by Proctor et al. (2011) and Lyon and Bruns (2019). Skryabina et al. (2016) and Wigelsworth et al. (2018) argue that the degree to which the FRIENDS intervention is perceived as socially acceptable, valuable and satisfactory has a significant influence on the initial and long-term implementation of the programme. It is considered therefore, that teachers' perspectives about implementation relate closely to practical determinants such as time, competing demands and leadership support but also to wider beliefs about the acceptability, perceived value and fit of the programme within the school.

2.6.4 Integrating Conclusions from both Review Phases

A body of research evidence has been captured from teachers about the barriers and facilitators to implementing the FRIENDS programmes as well as standards of implementation fidelity. Implementation science is an example of one framework that can be used to help conceptualise implementation processes and strategies to support implementation (Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Research identified from the current review has shown that a complex interplay of various factors contributes to teachers' implementation and sustainability of school-based anxiety-prevention and emotional wellbeing interventions (March et al., 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023), including the FRIENDS suite of programmes (Skryabina et al., 2016; Green & Atkinson, 2016). These factors can operate at individual, school, intervention and wider systemic levels (Lyon & Burns, 2019; Proctor et al., 2011), as indicated below.

Individual level. At the individual level, facilitators may include staff commitment to the programme, perceived competency, and pupil enjoyment while obstacles may include the availability of time and teacher capacity (Green & Atkinson, 2016; Skryabina et al., 2016).

School Level. At a school level, leadership, prioritization, and training may allow an intervention to become part of a school's culture and value-system or could inhibit its progress. Equally, the degree to which the FRIENDS intervention is perceived as socially acceptable, valuable and satisfactory within the school has a significant influence on the implementation of the programme (Proctor et al., 2011; Lyon & Bruns, 2019).

Intervention level. Potential factors at the intervention level may include the practicality of the manual, programme materials and the quality of lessons and activities (Wigelsworth et al., 2018).

Systems level. At the systems level, external support from outside agencies such as school psychological services, departments of education and policy endorsement have been identified as factors that contribute to the implementation of school-based interventions (March et al., 2022). Equally, factors within the real-life context in which an intervention takes place such as the level of parental involvement, socio-economic status and cultural influences can all impact the effectiveness of programme implementation (Clarke, O' Sullivan & Barry, 2010).

The above conclusions illustrate that multiple factors influence implementation success, particularly in complex dynamic systems such as schools. These may relate to practical determinants such as time, competing demands, access to training and leadership support but also the social acceptability of the programme, its perceived fit and feasibility (Proctor et al., 2011; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). While implementation barriers and facilitators exist and have been demonstrated in the literature, less is known about targeted supports that can be deployed to address implementation challenges in this area for teachers beyond initial FRIENDS training.

Research from the current review has documented a broad range of implementation barriers experienced by teachers and calls on new research to examine the implementation supports available to equip teachers to successfully deliver the FRIENDS programmes (Green & Atkinson, 2016). Given the continuum of implementation barriers presented in the literature, there is a need to examine how implementation supports can be streamlined to teachers.

2.6.5 Research Gap

Cluster groups are identified as a priority of the NEPS S&D delivery to school staff trained in the FRIENDS programmes (Martyn & McDonnell, 2024; Department of Education, 2021). As part of this applied model of service, cluster groups are facilitated by psychologists to build the capacity of school staff to effectively intervene with students using well-validated

programmes such as FRIENDS for Life (DES, 2017). A systematic literature review highlighted that a range of facilitators and barriers impact teacher-led implementation. The positive thinking and coping skills taught to students were viewed as valuable aspects (Green & Atkinson, 2016). In contrast, barriers may include the time commitment (Skryabina et al., 2016; Ruttledge et al., 2016), leadership support (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013) and curricular overload (Maclean & Law, 2022). In acknowledging the challenges posed to teachers in implementing FRIENDS, the purpose of NEPS cluster groups is to provide implementation support to teachers following initial training in the programme.

To date, no evaluation of EP's and teachers' perspectives of FRIENDS cluster groups has been conducted and so greater understanding is needed to clarify what is working well about cluster groups and their potential influence on professional practice. There is a paucity of research examining stakeholders' perspectives of the benefits derived from participating in cluster groups and how they support teachers to deliver the FRIENDS programmes.

An evaluation into the impact of cluster groups may exaggerate negative interpretations, discard existing strengths (Ludema et al., 1997) and may be less likely to elicit change than solution-focused approaches (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011). For this reason, the current study adopted a positive-oriented inquiry into the best of cluster groups (Conklin, 2009). It also accounts for an existing gap into the implementation of FRIENDS as little is known about how teachers can be supported to enact the FRIENDS programmes following initial training (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013; Ruttledge et al., 2016). There is a research and practice-based need to understand how cluster groups may leverage teacher-led implementation of FRIENDS. The reflections outlined above led to the emergence of the current research questions, which are documented in the following table.

2.6.6 Emerging Research Questions

Table 12.

Research Questions
Research Question 1: What is working well about the cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes?
Research Question 2: What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes look like?
Research Question 3: What plans and resources could be put in place by NEPS/NEPS psychologists to achieve the ideal cluster group?

3 Empirical Paper

3.1 Introduction

Anxiety can be described as an emotional response to real or perceived danger (LeDoux, 2015). Although anxiety in children is natural, it can become concerning when the threat posed is not real or when the reaction is disproportionate to the threat. In contrast to low-level anxiety, clinical anxiety greatly interferes with young people's daily activities through overt avoidance of specific situations, places, or stimuli (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). International epidemiological studies show that the prevalence for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents is approximately 8.1% (Costello et al., 2005; Merikangas et al., 2009).

FRIENDS is a set of school-based anxiety prevention and resilience building programmes that target the specific developmental challenges associated with each stage of the lifespan (Barrett et al., 2000). The present research aims to explore teachers' and psychologists' experiences and perspectives of cluster groups in supporting the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. In the current context, a cluster group encompasses previously trained teachers across several schools who meet to improve their practice and skills in implementing the FRIENDS programme (Ding et al., 2021; Giordano, 2008; Leu, 2004).

Research evidence has highlighted challenges to the classroom-based implementation of the FRIENDS programme (Stallard et al., 2014). Specific challenges have been noted in terms of the time commitment (Skryabina et al., 2016), level of training, leadership support (Henefer & Rodgers, 2013) and the social validity for the programme (Wigelsworth et al., 2018). As a response to implementation challenges, Green and Atkinson (2016) assert that further research is required to establish the types of support needed for effective school implementation.

Cluster groups have emerged as one means of progressing implementation and as a source of support for schools in embedding the programme. However, no empirical research has explored this area to date. Furthermore, the perspectives of teachers and psychologists in relation to cluster groups have not yet been explored in the literature, justifying the rationale for the present study in examining if NEPS cluster groups support teachers in delivering the programme in schools.

The study utilises a strengths-based approach to explore what works best about cluster groups (Conklin, 2009). To explore perceptions of cluster group support, questions are informed by Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008) and the World Bank Framework (Ding et al., 2021). Questions ask about the existing strengths and what the ideal might look like, including the frequency of meetings, the best way to group members, the profile of the lead facilitator and the content (Ding et al., 2021). Ludema et al. (1997) contend that a deficit-based inquiry may be seen to exaggerate negative evaluations and discard existing strengths. Similarly, Whitney and Cooperrider (2011) claim that this approach would be less likely to elicit change than a solution-focused inquiry. The investigation, therefore, sought to provide an in-depth and holistic understanding of the cluster group initiative as a support to school staff who have previously undertaken FRIENDS training.

The NEPS policy and practice underpins the context for the present study. NEPS psychologists have a specific role in supporting teachers to implement evidence-based anxiety interventions in the school setting and a range of frameworks including the Wellbeing Policy framework (2019), Continuum of Support and Problem-solving models (DES, 2017; NEPS, 2010) enable psychologists to achieve this.

The NEPS Support and Development (S&D) is also a key aspect of service delivery underpinning the study. S&D is an applied psychology service that builds the capability of school communities to provide evidence-informed intervention support to all students (NEPS, 2024). One focus of the NEPS S&D service is a commitment to the provision of new learning opportunities and professional training for teachers. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of young people in disadvantaged communities. The DEIS Action Plan (2021) highlights FRIENDS as a national priority of the NEPS service, within which cluster group training is emerging as a core component. While department policies and action plans have prioritised FRIENDS implementation in school-based settings, the impact of cluster groups in advancing teacher implementation has been unexplored to date.

Practice-based factors also support the need to examine the potential viability of cluster groups. According to a NEPS report (NEPS, personal communication on session guidelines, 2024), psychologists have proposed that cluster groups may be an effective means of progressing implementation. Given that cluster groups are at an early stage of development in NEPS, the current research addresses an emerging gap in the evidence-base for practice. Findings from this research have the potential to inform the roll out of cluster groups as an implementation support for teachers, thus, contributing to the existing knowledge-base of education psychology practice in Ireland.

The study's methodology is underpinned by the collaborative and strengths-based theory of AI (Cooperrider et al., 2008, Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011), which seeks to reflect the high-point moments and best experiences of attending a cluster group. Such an approach aligns with the premise of AI that *'change is most effective when we inquire into the true, the good, the*

better and the possible' (Cooperrider et al., 2008). As AI employs strengths-based questions as a means of exploring a research area, it was determined an appropriate methodological tool to explore teachers' and psychologists' experiences and perspectives of the cluster group (Schutt, 2018). Whitney and Cooperrider (2011) argue that identifying and building on pre-existing strengths and successes rather than highlighting deficits will sustain positive change within an organisation.

Before reporting on the actual methodology, the rationale for the design, methodology and research paradigm are discussed first. This section provides a clear theoretical foundation and ensures the chosen methodology aligns with the underlying framework and research questions.

3.1.1 Justification for the Qualitative Design

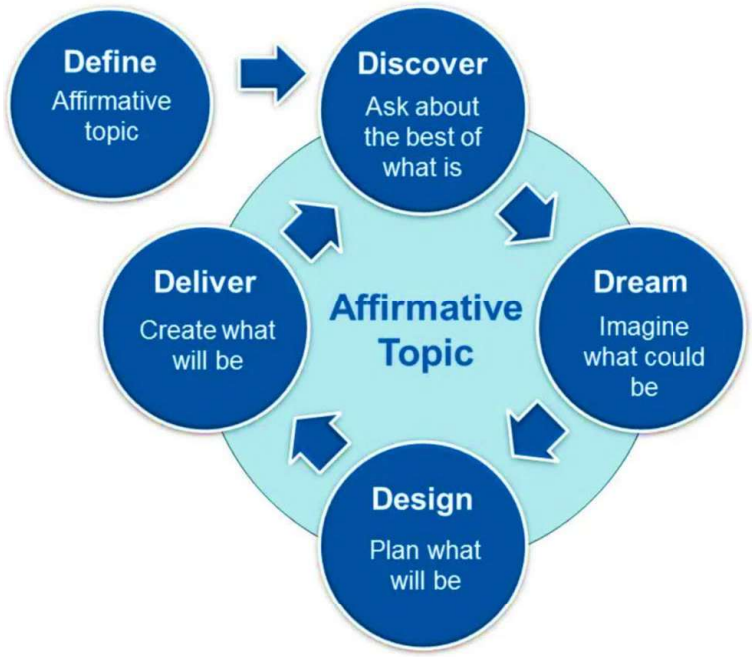
Research information on cluster groups is relatively scarce and at an early stage of development within NEPS, therefore, a small sample of accessible participants were available. A qualitative investigation was considered most suitable, therefore, in exploring cluster groups as a response to implementation issues in practice. A qualitative design informed by AI (Cooperrider et al., 2008) was also chosen for the following reasons.

AI is described as a cyclical process of search and discovery that seeks to identify and build on strengths and successes to achieve positive change for an individual or organisation (Heslop et al., 2018). As the approach focuses on positive change, envisions a desirable future, and prioritises stakeholder engagement, it was determined that AI would be appropriate as a means of exploring teachers' and psychologists' experiences of what is currently working well about cluster groups (RQ1), what the ideal practice might look like (RQ2) and what plans could be put in place to achieve it (RQ3). As AI creates a structure to face a messy problem (Doggett &

Lewis, 2013), it is appropriate for the current research questions as teachers who attend cluster groups are confronted with implementation challenges, curricular overload (Maclean & Law, 2022) and time constraints (Skryabina et al., 2016; Henefer & Rodgers, 2013). A visual overview of the stages of the 5-D AI cycle is shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13

Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Model (adapted from Cooperrider et al., 2008)



The ‘Define’ stage involves an exploration of what the topic is and whether it merits further investigation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The ‘Discovery, Dream and Design’ stages were addressed via the qualitative questionnaire. This helped to ascertain participants perspectives on what is working well about cluster groups, envisioning what the potential for change might look like and the plans required to realise best practice. The final ‘Destiny’ stage

involves delivering on the strengths-based plan. This is addressed via a discussion of the research findings and implications for EP practice (section 4.7.3).

AI is centered upon five core principles; the constructionist principle, the simultaneity principle; the poetic principle; the anticipatory principle and the positive principle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011). Table 13 provides a brief definition of each of these principles.

Table 13

The 5 AI Principles (*Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).*

AI Principles	Meaning
The Constructionist Principle	Posits that the language people use creates their reality and that individuals are continuously involved in the process of making sense of reality.
The Positive Principle	A positive focus can sustain effective change.
The Simultaneity Principle	Change begins when we ask questions. Views the process of this exploration as an intervention in relation to change (Whitney et al., 2011).
The Poetic Principle	Individuals are not static; they are subject to ongoing change and what we choose to focus on determines that change. This principle argues that an organisation's members' stories can inform, express and inspire within an organisation.
The Anticipatory Principle	Positive images of the future create positive change. The level of positive thoughts about the future can have an impact on future hopes, behaviours and actions (Whitney et al., 2011).

Within education, researchers have explored AI as a framework to understand teachers and educational psychologists' views about professional practice (Doggett & Lewis, 2013; Allen

& Innes, 2013). Other literature has documented AI as an effective professional development model to equip teachers in providing social-emotional learning opportunities to students (Davis et al., 2021b). As AI has been employed extensively, this approach was argued to provide a suitable way of addressing the research questions.

Although AI has been criticised in terms of its risk in neglecting less positive areas or existing problems (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Magnussen et al., 2019), the decision to underpin the research within AI was reached on the basis of its flexibility to explore the best of what 'is' but also what 'might be' (Goldkuhl, 2012), which is important to the researcher as a purveyor of the study as a future practitioner.

The justification for choosing a qualitative AI design over alternative approaches lay in its depth and flexibility to explore psychologists' and teachers' perspectives about the existing strengths of the cluster group (Discovery phase), what the ideal cluster group might look like (Dream phase), and the plans and resources that could be put in place by NEPS to achieve it (Design phase). In this way, the methodology for the study is rooted in an implementation science approach and can be clearly seen to bridge the gap between research and a practice-based problem (Fitzgerald et al., 2001). The evidence contributes greater knowledge to the research area and enables stakeholders to take informed action in implementing the FRIENDS programmes. The selection of the qualitative design led to a justification for the questionnaire methodology presented below.

3.1.2 Justification for the Questionnaire Methodology

Research studies employing AI have relied primarily on qualitative methods, tools and procedures commonly used within this research methodology (Shuayb, 2014) such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaires (Shuayb, 2014). A questionnaire was

favoured over semi-structured interviews as it was felt participants would feel more comfortable disclosing information anonymously than being observed by an interviewer (Murdoch et al., 2014). There is also the advantage of a higher level of privacy protection for respondents and less interruption of professional and personal time. Some criticisms of questionnaires include more resources required for data collection, management, and analysis (Halcomb & Andrew, 2009) and the reduced possibility of follow-up data collection and reminders (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While social desirability bias is a potential source of error (Paulhus, 2017), face-to-face interviews may also incur social desirability to a greater degree (Leggett et al., 2003).

The questionnaire provided a flexible way to capture responses from cluster group participants on their experiences of best practice within the cluster group and their ideal vision for the group. Developments in the roll out of cluster groups meant that NEPS psychologists were facilitating cluster groups across multiple regions at the time of this research, therefore, it was considered that a questionnaire methodology would be most suitable in recruiting geographically dispersed participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The qualitative AI design and questionnaire are congruent with the philosophical perspective of the study, as outlined below.

3.1.3 Research Paradigm

Pragmatism aligns with the broad aim of the study, which is to explore perspectives on how NEPS cluster groups can support the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. Pragmatism emphasises a practical understanding of the research questions in real-life settings and aims to create knowledge in the interest of action, change and improvement (Goldkuhl, 212). The adoption of a pragmatic orientation supports the quest to generate practical insights about cluster groups. In this way, there is congruence between the pragmatic stance to the research and the methodology of AI (Johanna Briggs Institute, 2019). As one point of opposition against

pragmatism is the sacrifice of theoretical concerns for practical aspects of knowledge (Rueter, 2023), the researcher endeavors to balance considerations for both theory and practice throughout. With this consideration in mind, the AI framework is driven by a pragmatic focus on the research questions, as presented below.

3.2 Research Questions

Research Questions
Research Question 1: What is working well about the cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes?
Research Question 2: What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes look like?
Research Question 3: What plans and resources could be put in place by NEPS/NEPS psychologists to achieve the ideal cluster group?

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Design

As stated, a qualitative, appreciative inquiry-based approach was adopted for the current study. Open-ended questions were used to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the cluster group via psychologists' and teachers' perspectives of the initiative and any changes that could be made to achieve the ideal outcome (Czaja & Blair, 2005).

3.3.2 Method

A researcher-designed questionnaire approach was adopted in the present study to address how cluster groups contribute to the implementation of FRIENDS, as perceived by teachers and psychologists. The questionnaire aligned with the principles of AI, focusing on strengths, successful practices, and opportunities for positive change (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The world bank framework also informed the structure of the survey based on the key decision points below.

Figure 14

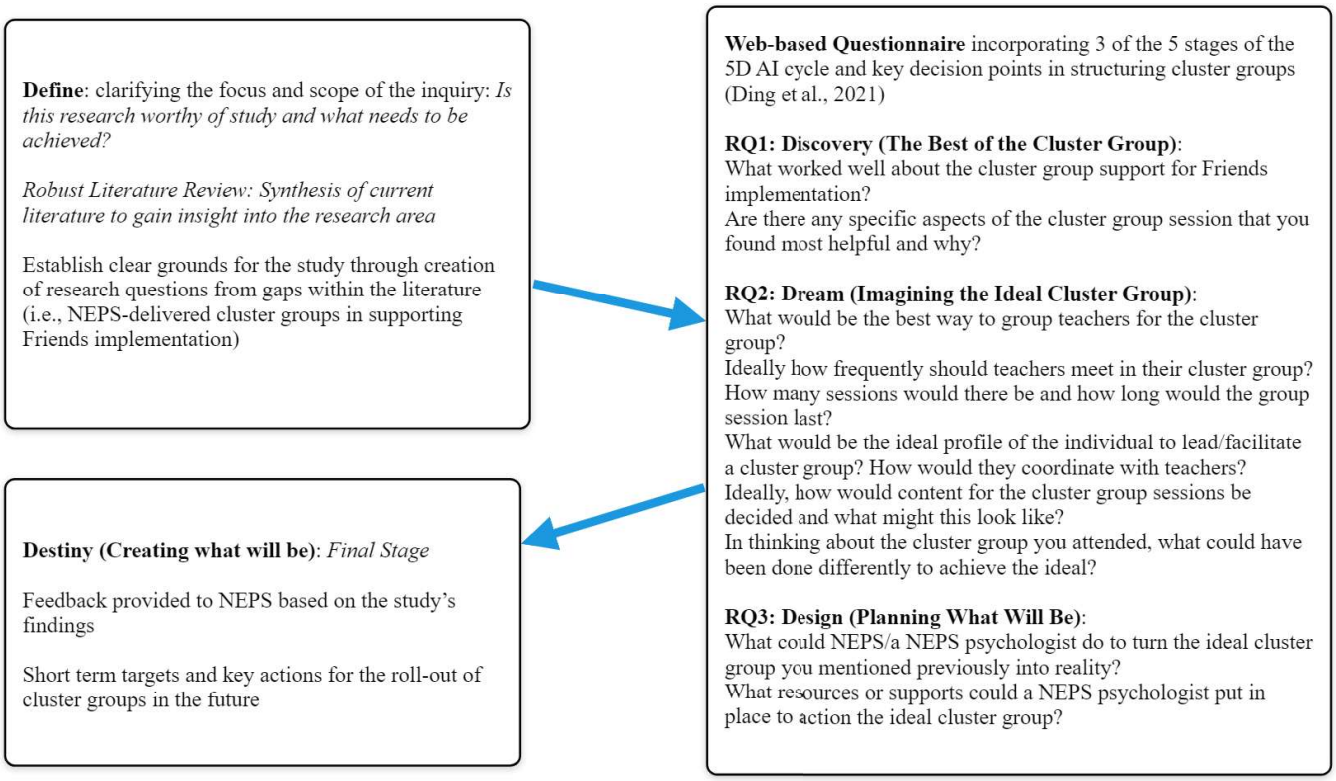
Key Decision Points when Structuring Cluster Groups (Ding et al., 2021).

Following some demographic questions and previous implementation experiences, the questionnaire included the discovery, dream, and design phases of AI to address the research questions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Cooperrider et al., 2008). To contextualise and add structure to the questionnaire, the ‘dream’ stage of AI was mapped onto the cluster group framework proposed by Ding et al. (2021), as shown in Figure 14. The authors of this framework provide guidance on best principles when structuring and supporting cluster-based teacher professional development. The framework accounts for the best way to group teachers, how often the group should meet, who facilitates, how to effectively train and support facilitators in their roles and how to decide content. As this framework discusses key principles and decision points for cluster groups, it provided a supporting structure to the questionnaire approach.

Questions pertaining to each of the AI phases are shown below in Figure 15, which presents an outline of how the conceptual framework of AI is mapped onto the questionnaire methodology. The combination of AI and the cluster group framework is illustrated by research question 2 (imagining the ideal cluster group).

Figure 15

Appreciative Inquiry and Cluster Group Framework Mapped onto the Qualitative Questionnaire



3.3.3 Measures

As demonstrated, a qualitative questionnaire, validated by the strengths-based AI approach (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001), was considered to provide an appreciative perspective on the role of cluster groups. Ponto (2015) claims that

several strategies can be used to reduce error in questionnaires. For example, a questionnaire can reduce the potential for non-response and measurement errors when questions accurately reflect the topic of interest. Before proceeding to the main study, an expert review and pilot test was conducted with a smaller sample of FRIENDS teachers. These preliminary steps were taken to strengthen the integrity of the research process and enhance methodological quality, as advised by Malmqvist et al. (2019).

3.3.3.1 Expert Review and Pilot Testing

An expert review of the acceptability and feasibility of the questionnaire was supported by a psychologist with experience of facilitating teacher training in the Friends for Life programme. This feedback supported the construction of the questionnaire, thus allowing the principal researcher to reduce errors before final approval and dissemination. An expert review of the research plan was also conducted at the beginning of the research project by psychologists in the Friends Working Group. This working group is established to provide national guidance on FRIENDS training and the formation and delivery of cluster groups.

As reported, pilot testing of the questionnaire with a selection of Friends teachers was implemented. The sampling approach chosen for the pilot study was non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Five teachers trained in FRIENDS that were known to the researcher were identified as pilot participants and contacted via email. This sample cohort of participants was based on ease of access and availability.

Lancaster et al. (2004; 2015) explain the importance of conducting a pilot with a small group first to identify potential issues with the clarity or comprehension of questions, make revisions and increase scientific quality. In general, the number of respondents and questions chosen for qualitative questionnaires is not fixed and can vary. Creswell & Creswell (2018)

indicate that the total number of questions may be fewer than 10, thus, qualitative research often prioritises depth of information over quantity. The pilot survey questions were formulated to address the stated research questions and aligned with the principles of AI and the key considerations highlighted by Ding et al. (2021). A copy of the pilot questionnaire is presented in Appendix N.

The decision to conduct a pilot also enabled the researcher to form conclusions about the questionnaire protocol such as its length, accessibility, respondents' understanding and any gaps in questions. Based on the pilot questionnaire, the researcher provided a clearer definition of cluster groups as one participant perceived the definition as a within-school cluster between two teachers. Other amendments made based on the pilot data included modifications to the wording and order of some questions and the addition of new questions specifically in relation to the cluster group (see Appendix M).

For the main study, closed-ended demographic questions about the teacher's role, previous FRIENDS training (online vs. in-person), experience and stage of implementing the programme were asked before the open-ended questions framed by the solution-focused philosophy of AI (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Equally, educational psychologists were asked about their role, responsibilities, and experience of providing FRIENDS training. Appendices O and P include the web-based questionnaires that were distributed to teachers and NEPS psychologists for the main study. As recommendations for authentic AI encourage the exploration of the topic with many different stakeholders (Doggett & Lewis, 2013), school personnel and NEPS psychologists were chosen to ensure that the research process was inclusive of both perspectives (Ludema & Fry, 2008).

3.3.4 Participants and Sampling

As cluster groups are newly developed within the NEPS service and a small number of groups have been held, the researcher was restricted in the number of eligible participants. As representative voices could not be captured in light of the available sample, the research aimed to achieve what Guetterman (2015) refers to as richness of information from a small number of cluster groups.

3.3.4.1 Psychologist Sample

14 NEPS psychologists who were certified FRIENDS trainers participated in the research. This sample included a mix of psychologists who had previously facilitated a cluster group (n=6) and those who had not (n=8). The NEPS psychologists met one or more of the two main eligibility criteria. Six recruited psychologists were certified to train teachers in the Friends programmes (Fun Friends, Friends for Life or My Friends Youth) and had facilitated a cluster group. Eight psychologists who had not facilitated a cluster group were also eligible to participate in light of their varied knowledge and expertise in providing Friends training.

The psychologist role, years of FRIENDS training experience, number of training deliveries and facilitation of the cluster group are presented in Table 14. One psychologist who had not facilitated FRIENDS training to school staff was withdrawn from the study as they did not meet the inclusion criteria as a certified trainer.

Table 14

Characteristics of NEPS Psychologists

Demographic Variables	**Number (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Role		
Educational Psychologist	10	71%
Senior Educational Psychologist	4	28%
Certified Friends trainer		
Yes	13	93%
No	1	7%
Years of Training Experience		
Two years	6	46%
3-6 years	4	31%
>10 years	3	23%
No. of trainings		
2-3 trainings	7	54%
6-10 trainings	4	31%
>10 trainings	2	15%
CG Facilitator		
Yes	6	46%
No	7	54%

CG-Cluster Group

As shown, the six individuals who facilitated a cluster group varied between senior educational psychologists (n=4) and staff grade psychologists (n=2). For the senior psychologist sample, two psychologists were part of the FRIENDS working group and two were not. The two staff grade psychologists who facilitated a cluster were not part of the working group. One staff grade psychologist identified as a member of the working group who helped develop the guidelines for the cluster group but did not facilitate a group.

The experience of the sample varied from psychologists who are newly experienced in delivering FRIENDS training (i.e. 2 years or less) to those who have over 10 years of experience. Equally, there was a range in the number of FRIENS trainings delivered, with between 2 and 3 the most common. Specifically, psychologists who facilitated a cluster group had an average of 7.5 years training experience and had delivered an average of 9 trainings. As expected, this was higher than the average years of training experience and number of trainings delivered for the entire sample. Of note, some of the 46% of the sample who facilitated a cluster group may have been co-facilitators, which does not equate, therefore, to 6 individual cluster groups.

3.3.4.2 Teacher Sample

The school personnel included 6 primary teachers across mainstream (*n*=1) and special education (*n*=5) who had previously attended a cluster group. The population of interest for the study were primary school staff in Ireland who participated in a FRIENDS cluster group. This included all staff who attended the group, including classroom and special education teachers (CT's and SET's). The perspectives of CTs and SETs were prioritised due to their central roles in supporting pupils with additional emotional needs within the three tiers of the Continuum of Support, as delineated within guidance documents (DES, 2007; DES, 2017). A purposive

sampling technique was chosen wherein a cross-sectional sample of teachers who had previously attended a cluster group were invited to take part in the study.

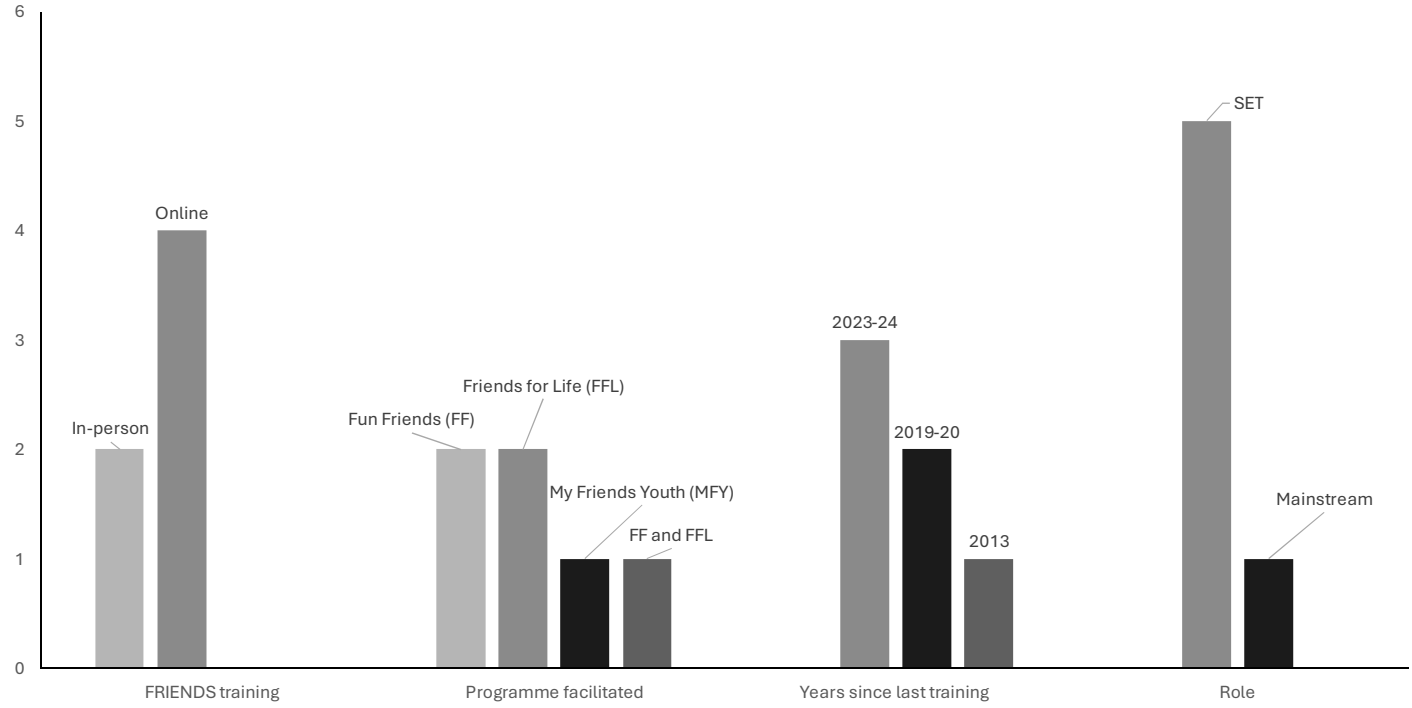
According to Shaw and Holland (2014), sample size calculation depends on the method and decisions are often made based on the nature and purpose of the research, the questions being asked and the resources available (Morris, 2006). In their study, Guest et al. (2006) claimed that a sample size of between 6-12 participants sufficed in reaching data saturation (i.e. the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data). In applying this insight to the present study, a sample size of 6 teachers and over 14psychologists was sufficient in reaching data saturation.

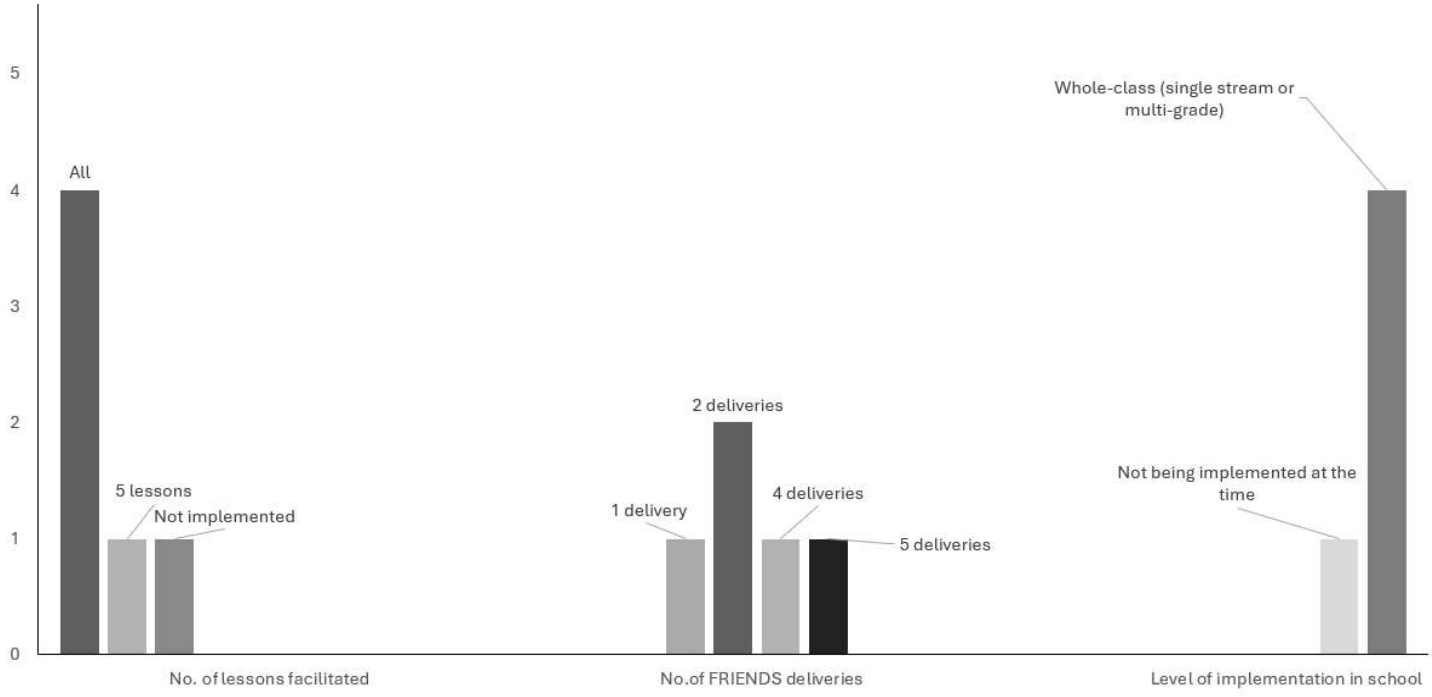
Fusch and Ness (2015) argue that data saturation can vary based on study design. An appropriate study design coupled with the collection of rich (quality) and thick (quantity) data can assist the researcher in attaining data saturation. In the present study, the qualitative approach adopted prioritised depth of information (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). The sample size chosen for both cohorts was also consistent with the theoretical approach, as similar sample sizes were used in previous AI research examining psychologists' and teachers' views about professional practice (He, 2013; Doggett & Lewis, 2013; Shuayb, 2014).

The distinct characteristics collected from the school staff participants are summarised visually in the bar charts below (Figure 16). A discussion of the notable characteristics and additional information of the sample is then provided.

Figure 16

Characteristics of School Staff Sample who attended a Cluster Group





All teachers in the current sample attended in-person cluster groups for one session. The cluster groups were all convened for either the Fun FRIENDS or FRIENDS for Life programmes. The teachers presented with diverse experience of the FRIENDS programmes, with many having implemented the programme either before the cluster session or continued to implement following the cluster group. One participant did not facilitate the programme. In considering the overall demographics of the sample, most teachers were working in special education at the time of their cluster group attendance. Half had trained in the past year or had undertaken the refresher course. Of note, 4 of the 6 teachers had implemented all of the FRIENDS lessons at a whole-class level, indicating a significant level of involvement and practice with the programmes. A description of the recruitment processes and procedures is discussed next.

3.3.5 Recruitment and Data Collection

The NEPS personnel supported access to the school staff sample and psychologists who participated in a cluster. All recruitment materials and information leaflets were sent to prospective participants via the NEPS. Recruitment for the main study took place in consultation with NEPS psychologists from the FRIENDS Working Group.

A representative from the working group invited the researcher to present his study to NEPS psychologists interested in running a cluster group on the 19th of September 2024. The researcher sought initial expressions of interest from NEPS psychologists at this cluster group meeting. Psychologists who were interested in participating were sent a follow-up introductory email with the information letter and anonymous questionnaire link. An email outlining the research being undertaken, the purpose of the research and the questionnaire link was also sent to

all certified FRIENDS trainers within NEPS by the Friends Working Group. This final recruited sample included 14 NEPS psychologists.

During the original meeting, three recruited psychologists also agreed to contact teachers to invite them to participate in the study on behalf of the principal researcher. By facilitating access to the teacher sample, all recruitment materials including the introductory email and information letter for teachers (see appendix M) were sent to teachers via the psychologist who facilitated their cluster group. Approximately 30 teachers across 3 different cluster groups were sent the research invitation. This initial email informed teachers about the research, the principal investigator, and the nature of the request for involvement. The email also contained the study information sheet and questionnaire link. Two teachers responded to the original invitation.

To further maximise responses yielded, a staged approach was adopted, whereby subsequent reminder emails containing questionnaire links and information sheets were sent to school staff at two and four-week intervals (Dillman, 2011). Two psychologists also contacted teachers individually about the study. These were teachers who were known to psychologists from their schools and all of whom had given permission to be contacted for research purposes via email. Following the four-week interval, 4 more teachers responded leaving a final recruited sample of 6 teachers who participated in the research.

3.3.6 Ethical Considerations

As the researcher collated data from an external source (i.e. teachers who previously completed a cluster group provided by NEPS), ethical approval was sought from both Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) and the NEPS Research Ethics Committee (NREC). The current study was approved by both MIREC and NREC, to ensure all

ethical concerns were identified, amendments approved and incorporated into the design of the study (please see appendix L).

Attempts were made to protect participants' right to anonymity and confidentiality. Identifiable personal information such as participants' names were not issued to the researcher, and all questionnaire responses were anonymous. Participants agreed to provide consent by completing the questionnaire. Neither participants' names nor any identifying information was associated with the cluster group workshop. Participants were notified that once they submitted the questionnaire, they could not meaningfully withdraw their data as it was non-identifiable and stored anonymously (Data Protection Commission, 2018). As full anonymity applies, raw data records are held by the researcher indefinitely.

3.3.7 Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The qualitative questionnaire was generated using an approved MIC survey tool of Microsoft Forms. Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative data was exported and analysed using NVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis software package that helps to classify, organise and analyse text-based information. Qualitative data were coded and checked for accuracy (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Information collected about the psychologists' and teachers' role, previous FRIENDS training (online vs. in-person), experience and stage of implementing the programme is visually represented in table 14 and figure 16 in the results section. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages and general patterns) are used to summarise findings pertaining to participant characteristics.

RTA was employed to analyse participant responses to open-ended questions. RTA affords a flexible yet systematic structure to the analysis of qualitative information (Bryman,

2016), therefore aligning with the study's pragmatic paradigm. An RTA approach allows the researcher to identify patterns in the data and generate a thematic framework that meaningfully answers the research questions. RTA was deemed more appropriate than other approaches because it captures the interpretations and nuances provided by teachers and NEPS psychologists in a more flexible way than approaches such as content analysis. The questionnaire data were subjected to the six-phase analytical process by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The phases followed are illustrated visually below:

Thematic Analysis Stages	**Description**
Data familiarisation	Reading, rereading and making initial notes about the data
Initial Coding	Generating descriptive codes based on the data
Searching for and generating themes	Grouping coded information to form themes
Reviewing themes	Critically examine the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data
Defining themes	Articulating what each theme captures

3.3.7.1 Steps Taken to RTA

Following an analysis of participant characteristics pertaining to the present research, the digital questionnaire files were gathered in Nvivo 14 as individual cases and initial codes were developed. A hybrid method that included inductive and deductive TA was used in the current study. Coding for research question 1 and 3 was conducted inductively, i.e. by explicitly describing the data without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame and allowing to form as many codes as appropriate.

Participants' responses were coded by identifying meaningful phrases, ideas, concepts and recurring ideas across the data. As an example for research question 1, 'updates and information', 'demonstrating the hub' and 'revision of sample session' were codes that were developed (Appendix R). These codes captured a selection of participants' perspectives about what worked well during the cluster group. The generated codes were then exported outside Nvivo to Microsoft Excel and Word to identify patterns across codes. To advance from stage 2 to 3 in line with the thematic analysis stages above, the previous codes listed were used to form the subthemes 'assistance with the books and online FRIENDS hub' and 'providing updates and information about the programme'. The subthemes in turn formed the theme 'programme-related guidance'. An equivalent process was followed for the data relating to research question 3.

Questionnaire data addressing research question 2 were extracted and grouped based on their shared relationship. The data were then categorised based on the cluster group framework by Ding et al. (2021), which outlines the 5 key principles including the ideal group, frequency, facilitation, support and content. Using this method, the data for RQ2 were coded deductively. After generating themes, they were reviewed in stage 4 to ensure they accurately represented the data. Themes were then clearly defined and are provided at the beginning of each subsection of the results. Finally, using NVivo, the research questions, themes and respective subthemes were labelled hierarchically. Examples of the process of data coding and thematic mapping for each research question are shown in the audit trail in Appendix R, S and T.

The 15-point checklist for conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021) supported in analysing the research data (appendix Q). Throughout the analysis stage, the researcher acknowledged his own perspectives and interpretations of the data set and reflected on how he made sense of the data using journal entries. Three examples of reflections are presented in the boxes below.

Reflective Log 1 (thoughts guided by Berger, 2015)

The feedback of grouping teachers by experience and role made me think about the different options for grouping the cluster group teachers. This teacher felt that the programme was quite different depending on the setting e.g. whole class vs. small group.

Reflective Log 2

I liked the simplicity offered by some respondents who talked about not overloading the cluster session with content, having hard copies of the manuals, workbooks and resources at hand, offering advice on how to make FRIENDS engaging for students e.g. lesson ideas, games. This information is practical and helps teachers share what works for them in facilitating FRIENDS lessons in their classroom.

Reflective Log 3

Comments from teachers 1, 2 and 5 indicate that ideal practice for the cluster groups would consist of targeted implementation activities/content. I think the teachers' responses show that opportunities for groupwork, talk and discussion are well received.

Coding reliability and validity was checked by asking two independent researchers to code two randomly selected questionnaires, one for each category of respondents (NEPS psychologists, teachers). The independent coders were colleagues of the principal researcher and

were familiar with thematic analysis. The researchers were sent a codebook outlining all the codes for their transcript, information on how to apply to the code and an exemplar. The exemplar did not apply to the transcript sent to the researcher, which ensured that they were not biased to code in the same way as the principal researcher. A small subsection of one of the codebooks is shown below.

Code	Group teachers at various stages of implementing Friends	Ideal frequency is at least once per term.
How to apply	Apply when the participant talks about grouping teachers in this way	Apply when participant talks about meeting at least once per term/twice per year
Example	'A mix of those who have already implemented the programme and those who have not yet implemented it'	'Maybe twice a year'
Instruction	Document quotes below for each coding category (teacher survey below)	

The inter-rater reliability was calculated using percentage agreement. The coding agreement (code consistencies/no. of decisions x 100) was 85% for the psychologist questionnaire (P4), indicating strong agreement and 75% for the teacher questionnaire (CT2), indicating satisfactory coding consistency. Inconsistencies in miscoded items were resolved between the independent coders and the principal researcher (Roberts et al., 2019).

3.4 Results

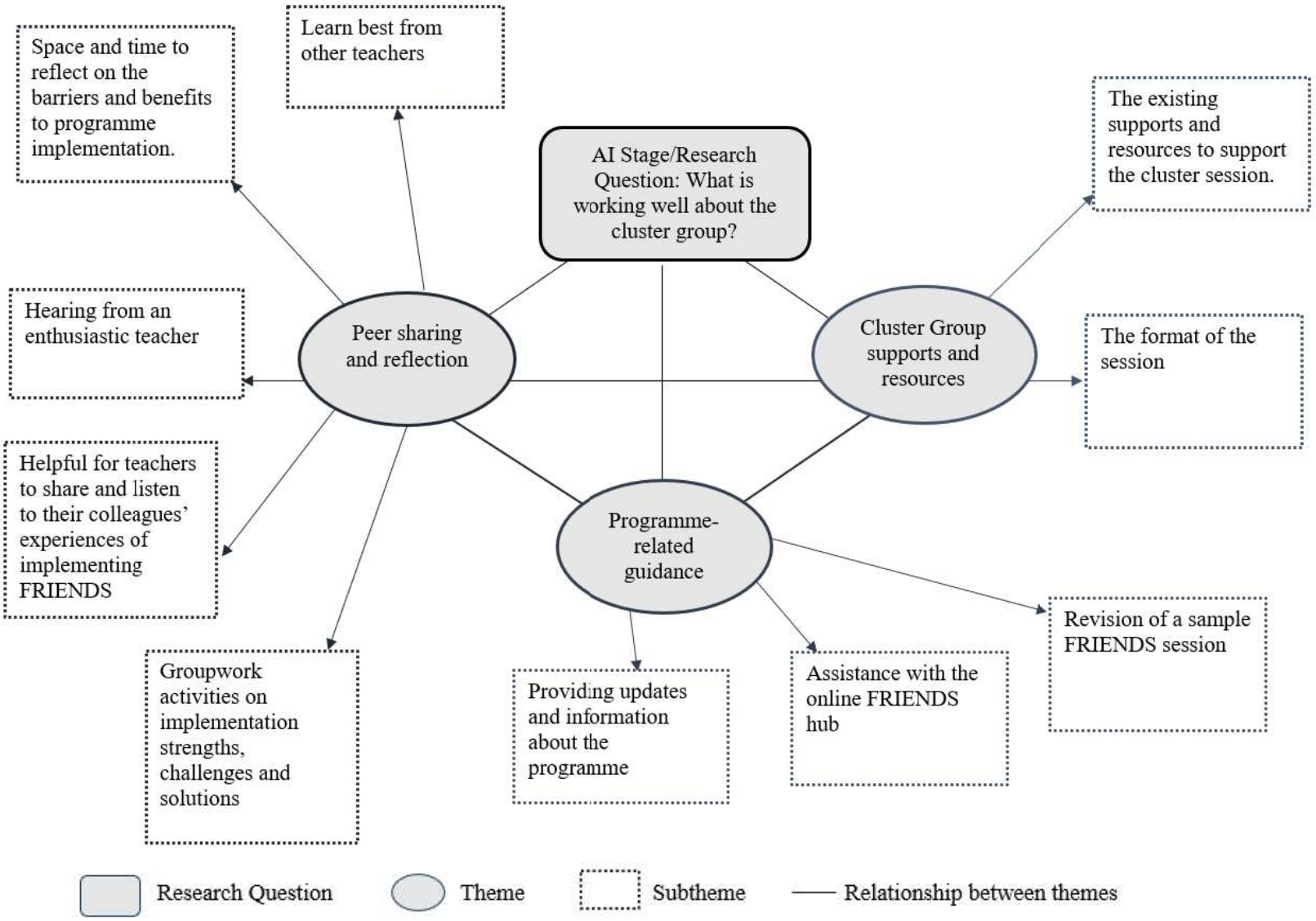
The following section is divided into two main parts. In the first section, an account of the steps to data analysis is provided. The second section includes the qualitative results for each of the three research questions and examples of supporting evidence/quotes. A summary of the overall themes and subthemes is shown using visual maps.

3.4.1 Qualitative Data

Psychologists who had not facilitated a cluster group were asked to imagine what the ideal cluster group might look like and what plans could be put in place by NEPS to achieve it. The next figure includes a concept map of the overarching themes and subthemes for the first AI cycle/research question 1.

Figure 17

Concept Map of Overarching Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1

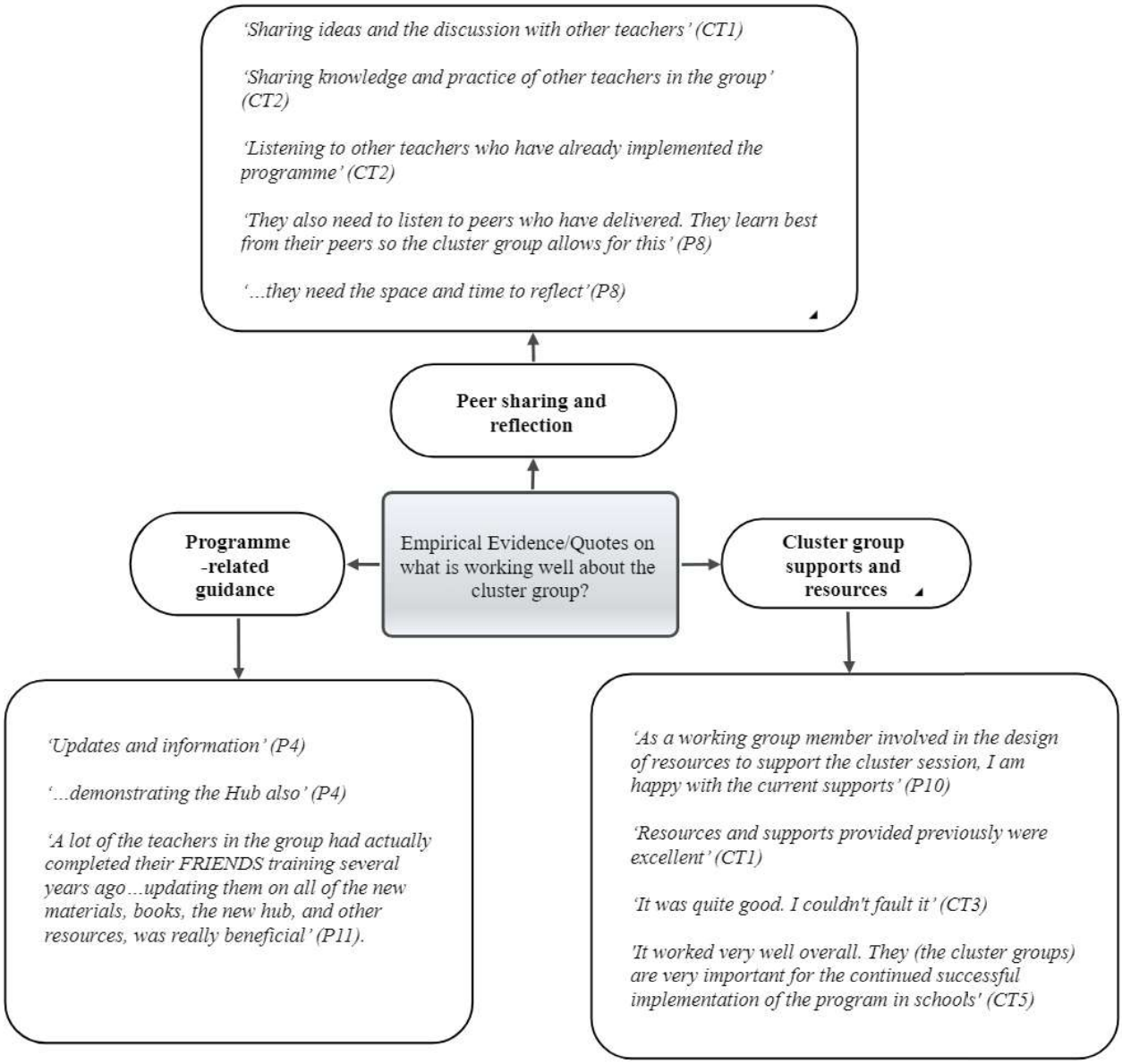


3.4.1.1 Research Question 1: What is working well about the cluster group?

Participants' perspectives and experiences about what worked well during the cluster group are presented in the visual map in Figure 18. Examples of empirical quotes from teachers and psychologists correspond with the presenting themes and subthemes.

Figure 18

Participants' Perspectives on what is working well about the Cluster Group



The questionnaire measures used to assess participants' perspectives are presented in Appendix O and P for teachers and psychologists respectively. Additional framework matrices are presented in Appendices R, S and T. These frameworks provide a full audit trail of participants' responses matched to each subtheme/theme. The matrix tables for each research question illustrate how the thematic analytic processes have been applied. An example of how the empirical evidence led to the development of subthemes and themes is shown above in Figure 18.

Theme 1: Peer sharing and reflection. This theme captures how school staff share their professional experiences, ideas and insights during the cluster group sessions. It reflects the collaborative exchange of implementation practices and the supportive nature within the group. Six psychologists and six teachers who attended a cluster group contributed to this theme.

Sharing and reflecting on experiences and teacher practice was expressed by psychologists and teachers as the main supportive aspect of the cluster group. Psychologists expressed that it was helpful for teachers to share and listen to other teacher's experiences of implementation. Two psychologists (P8, P11) who facilitated a cluster group felt that *'the teachers enjoyed the collaborative nature of the sessions. They were able to have group discussions and learn from each other'.* This sentiment was reported by teachers themselves who enjoyed '*sharing ideas and practice with other teachers in the group*' (CT1, CT2) and *'listening to other teachers who had already implemented the programme'* (CT2, CT5). Cluster Teacher 6 mentioned how she found it '*helpful to hear how people had adapted the programme to their own context'.*

Psychologists (P8, P11, P12) reported that the cluster group also provided needed space and time for school staff to reflect on the benefits and barriers to implementing the programme.

P11 suggested that for some teachers who hadn't implemented the programme in a while, the cluster group gave them a chance to '*reflect on the benefits and barriers to implementing the programme'*. When asked about the most helpful aspect of their cluster group, psychologist 12 recalled teachers' sharing practice about what worked well when they facilitated the FRIENDS programme in their classroom/school. The groupwork activity on implementation strengths, challenges and solutions as well as general Q&A were cited by two of the psychologists (P4, P10) as the most helpful aspects in supporting the teachers in their group.

Theme 2: Programme-related guidance. This theme reflects the guidance provided to participants in terms of programme-related updates and information such as the online hub and revision of the sample FRIENDS lesson. Four psychologists (P4, P10, P11, P12) noted that these practical activities were most helpful in supporting teachers to implement the FRIENDS programme. Psychologist 11 recalled how *'a lot of the teachers in the group had completed their FRIENDS training several years ago…so updating them on all of the new materials, books, the new hub, and other resources, was really beneficial'.* CT3 and CT6 agreed, stating that the cluster group was a *'good refresher course'* especially as aspects from the initial training may have been forgotten.

Theme 3: Cluster group supports and resources. One theme that emerged was the current supports and resources designed to support the cluster session and satisfaction with how the session went. These perceptions captured what is working well about the existing cluster group and how pleased psychologist 10 was about the resources designed to support the cluster session. Teachers 1 and 3 shared the same viewpoint and claimed that '*the resources and supports offered at the cluster group session were excellent' (CT1).* P12 spoke positively about how the cluster group showcased *'practical examples of how to embed FRIENDS in the*

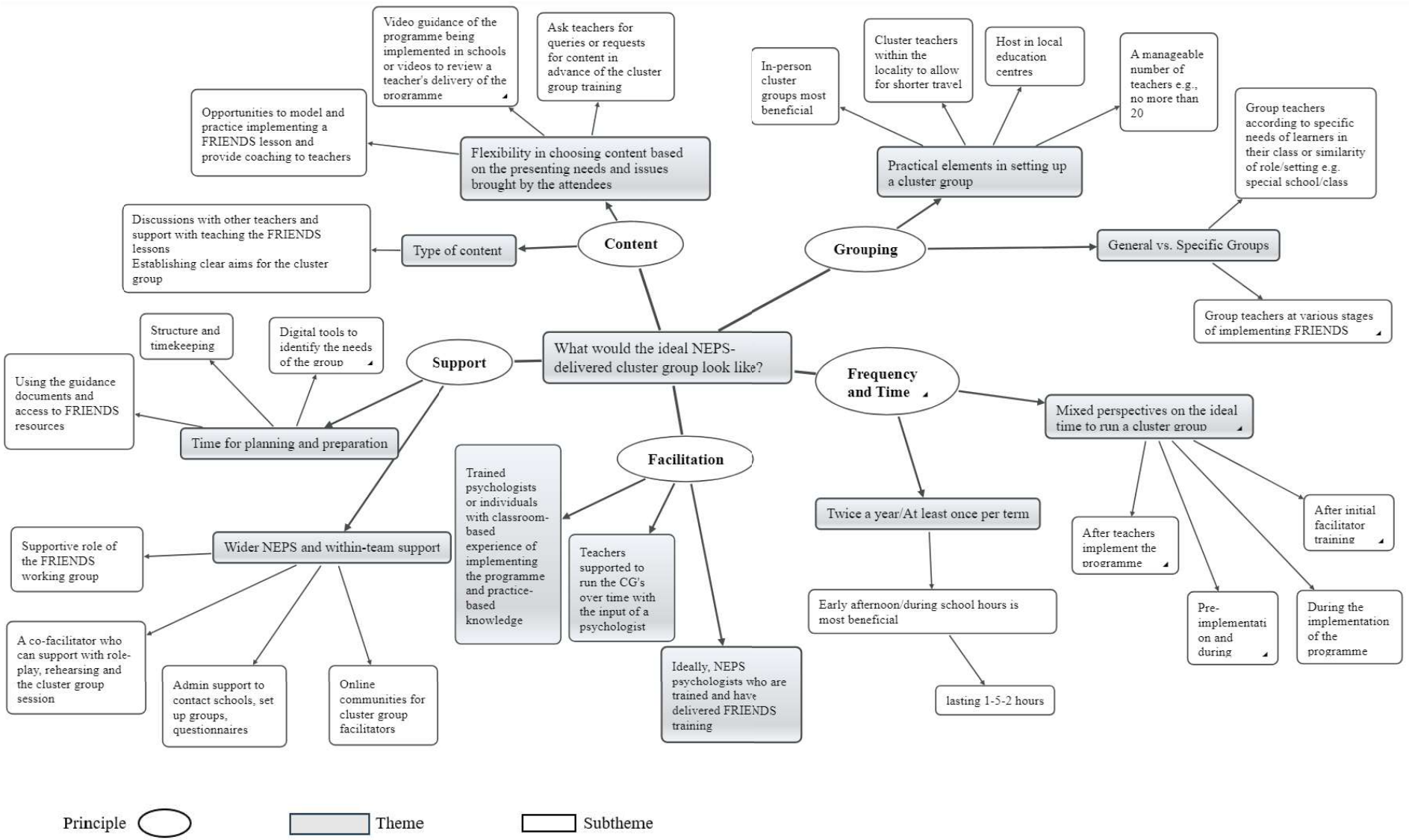
classroom/school, and how this can be sustained even after the program sessions have concluded (e.g. practicing gratitude daily)'. In describing her satisfaction with the cluster group, teacher 5 reported that *'it worked very well overall'* and described how the cluster groups *'are very important for the continued successful implementation of the program in schools'.* Responses from the above participants indicated an overall level of satisfaction with the format of the cluster group and linked together in forming the current theme.

3.4.1.2 Research Question 2: What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of FRIENDS look like?

To address this research question, participants were asked to imagine the ideal cluster group in relation to 5 principles including, the group, frequency and time, facilitation, support and content (Ding et al., 2021). The themes and subthemes for each principle are highlighted in Figure 19 and discussed chronologically along with empirical evidence provided by NEPS psychologists and the school staff sample.

Figure 19

Concept Map of Overarching Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2



Grouping Theme 1: Practical elements in setting up a cluster group. The third section of the questionnaire asked participants to imagine the most ideal way of grouping teachers for the cluster group. Grouping refers to the way teachers are trained together in the cluster group, such as which teachers are involved, the number in the group and the location. Four respondents articulated their preference for in-person cluster groups. Three participants (P3, P6, P8) suggested that cluster groups be held in localised areas to allow for shorter travel (P3, CT2). It was expressed that teachers in local groups may have already had contact with each other and *'might be more likely to reach out with queries/issues around implementing FRIENDS in their individual school'* (P9). Teacher 3 reinforced this point, stating that *'it's helpful when we are familiar with each other'* or when two teachers from the same school attend (CT6).

Arranging a cluster group for a manageable number of teachers (less than 20) was considered to be most beneficial by psychologists (P4, P7) and two of the teachers (CT2, CT6). The teacher referenced how manageable numbers would be suited to *'making small working groups to exchange knowledge and experience'.* The use of an education centre as an external location to schools was suggested to host the cluster group (P4, P7), in addition to the availability of tea and coffee (P3, P7).

In illustrating the practical aspects of grouping school staff, psychologist 7 stated that *'I personally, as a participant of group situations find them much easier when I am face to face…and think that having between 10 and 16 participants would be ideal. This would ensure that there are enough participants to keep the discussion going and not many to inhibit participation from quieter members.'* These suggestions regarding the design of the cluster group would *'ensure that teachers are getting to learn from a wealth of experiences'* (P7).

Grouping Theme 2: General vs. Specific Groups. This theme reflects differences between some participants who favoured general groups and others who preferred more specific groupings. In the dominant case, the ideas presented by teachers and psychologists included grouping teachers at various stages of implementing FRIENDS. It was stated that ideally there would be a mix of teachers who have implemented FRIENDS with newly trained teachers. Psychologist 10 indicated that the main reason is that variety allows for a breadth of experience to be shared. Additional ways of grouping teachers at a general level were suggested by psychologists 7 and 9, by inviting class teachers and SET's. These teachers are best placed to attend because they are practically involved in implementing FRIENDS or intending to implement the programme (P7). One teacher participant articulated that the ideal would be informed by a school-wide cluster group and that schools could be grouped according to size (TP1).

While generally grouping teachers at various stages of implementation was a dominant theme, a slightly lower level of evidence was suggested for grouping teachers according to their specific role, setting or needs of learners in their class (CT4, P2, P5, P9). For example, psychologist 2 mentioned using FRIENDS to support children with SEN or for teachers who implement FRIENDS in special schools/classes. It was stated: *"I would also like to see teachers grouped in relation to learner needs e.g. using friends with children with SEN. I would love to see supports for special schools, teachers in special classes and those supporting children with SEN with the Friends programmes".* Teacher 4 and psychologists 5 and 9 agreed that teachers would best be grouped according to the class level they teach, school type or role. Psychologist 9 elaborated that for primary schools, this could be the SET teacher, teachers with a role in wellbeing/nurture, and possibly school leaders.

Grouping teachers on the basis of their range of experience or when they were trained was also proposed (P5, P11, P12) as programme updates may differ based on this (P12). Grouping teachers according to the specific FRIENDS programme they are implementing (P2, P12) was another suggested way of organising the cluster group based on specific characteristics.

Frequency: At least one cluster group session per term lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

Frequency and time relate to how often the cluster group is held and when it is held. Despite an open-ended qualitative approach taken, the questions for frequency led to discrete boundaried responses. As there was a large volume of similar responses, they are better analysed via descriptive statistics than thematic analysis. The frequency analysis is presented in Table 15.

Table 15

Descriptive Statistics for the Ideal Frequency and Time of the Cluster Group

Ideal Frequency	**Descriptive Statistics (n, %)***
Twice a year or at least one cluster group session per term	n=14 (74%)
Lasting 1.5 to 2 hours	n=6 (32%)
The early afternoon	n=2 (11%)
Between once a month and twice a term (3 terms)	n=1 (5%)
One before training, one during training, and one after training.	n=1 (5%)
A single two-hour session	n=2 (11%)
Ideal Time	**Descriptive Statistics (n, %)**
After implementation	n=2 (11%)
During implementation	n=2 (11%)
During and after implementation	n=4 (21%)
Before and during implementation	n=3 (16%)
Before and after implementation	n=2 (11%)
After training	n=3 (16%)

*Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

Most participants described the ideal frequency of meeting twice a year or at least once per term lasting 1.5 to 2 hours, with the early afternoon (during school hours) the most beneficial time (P4, P7).

Time: Mixed perceptions on the ideal time to run a cluster group. Although an ideal frequency for the cluster group sessions was apparent, mixed perceptions were presented about the ideal time to facilitate a cluster group, as shown in Table 15. A previous cluster group facilitator (P8) recalled her preference, in hindsight, for running the cluster during teachers' implementation of the programme as opposed to after. In her cluster, 3 sessions were held over the 10-week duration of the programme. Three other facilitators and one teacher spoke of hosting a cluster group during and after implementation (P4, P11, P13, CT6). Teacher 1 and psychologist 9 suggested that during implementation would be of most benefit, to capture issues in real time. A further cluster group after implementation was recommended to *'allow for reflections and to help teachers envision how they might run FRIENDS groups in the future'.* Likewise, participant 12 commented that a cluster group after implementation would allow teachers to *'reflect on practice and consider how learning from the training can be reinforced in school throughout the year'.*

In contrast to responses advocating for the cluster group to take place during and/or after implementation, three participants acknowledged that a pre-implementation group in the autumn/start of the year be combined with another session in the Spring/middle of the school year when the programme is being implemented. While various options about the ideal time to run a cluster were presented, some participants (P1, P10, P11), including two psychologists who previously facilitated a cluster group argued that the stage of implementation may not be the

critical factor in deciding when to run a cluster group. Instead, it can be held after teacher's complete facilitator training.

Facilitation: Facilitation refers to identifying the ideal individual(s) to facilitate or lead the cluster group. The questions for facilitation also led to discrete boundaried responses and are presented using descriptive statistics in Table 16.

Table 16

Ideal Facilitator

Ideal Facilitator	**Descriptive Statistics (n, %)***
NEPS psychologists who are certified trainers and have delivered FRIENDS training	n=9 (47%)
Teachers supported to run the cluster groups over time with the input of a psychologist	n=4 (21%)
Trained psychologists or individuals with classroom-based experience of implementing FRIENDS	n=8 (42%)

NEPS psychologists who are certified trainers and have delivered FRIENDS training. Nine participants mentioned that trained NEPS psychologists who have delivered FRIENDS training to school staff would be well placed to facilitate the cluster groups. Participant 13 argued that ideally the psychologist would also have supported a school to implement the FRIENDS programme (P13). Teacher 5 reported that *"one of our NEPS psychologists had implemented the program herself which was really helpful"*

Teachers supported to run the CG's over time with the input of a psychologist. The second response emerging from the data was psychologists' belief that teachers be supported to run the cluster groups over time with their input (P7, P8, P9). As an example, one psychologist discussed that NEPS may need to take the reins for the first session or two to monitor and guide the group, but ideally, *'I think an experienced teacher or small committee of teachers taking ownership of the group would be ideal, as these are the people actually delivering FRIENDS in schools ad have the best sense of 'on the ground' issues'* (P9). A further rationale for this type of facilitation was emphasised by participant 7, who argued that *'this removes the 'expert' role of the psychologist who in reality has most likely never delivered the programme to a whole class'.* The teacher participants also emphasised the value of having NEPS psychologists and experienced teachers as co-facilitators.

The importance of a combination of facilitators and the need to have widely trained and experienced individuals was repeated across the transcripts and suggests that facilitators have previous experience with implementing the programme.

Trained psychologists or individuals with classroom-based experience of implementing FRIENDS. 8 of the participants suggested that facilitators would ideally be trained psychologists and/or teachers with classroom-based experience of implementing FRIENDS with children and young people. Two cluster group teachers (CT2, CT3), three cluster group facilitators (P4, P10, P12) and three FRIENDS trainers (P3, P5, P9), attested to the value of having practical experience and knowledge of facilitating a FRIENDS programme with children in a school setting. Teacher 4 and Psychologist 10 pointed out that the ideal trainer would have experience of running a FRIENDS programme and a '*background in dealing with anxiety in young children and what works in helping them to cope" (CT4).* This experience is

invaluable as *'teachers can ask very specific questions and well-informed practice-based answers are important'* (P4). As alluded to by participants, a person who understands and has expert knowledge of all aspects of the FRIENDS programmes and anxiety management is a critical factor in choosing a suitable facilitator. Two teachers summarised the ideal facilitator as someone who is *'well trained, has implemented the FRIENDS course recently (CT3) and has knowledge and experience to impart (CT2)'.*

Support Theme 1: Wider NEPS and within-cluster support. Support refers to the development of quality training and support for facilitators of the cluster group. A variety of supports were referenced as part of this theme. Support from a co-facilitator for the cluster group session was seen as pertinent by psychologists (P4, P7) and one teacher (CT5). Psychologists 2, 5 and 13 highlighted online communities for cluster group facilitators and having availability to discuss issues emerging with other trainers who have hosted clusters. The supportive role of the FRIENDS working group in terms of guidance on the cluster group format and linking in were also recounted by participants (P5, P9, P13). It was reported by psychologist 5 that *'the FRIENDS working group have been very helpful to date, developing outlines of expectations, some sample scripts and powerpoints that could be dipped in and out of'*

Psychologist 10, when asked how a cluster group facilitator could be ideally supported, outlined a myriad of technical supports offered to cluster group facilitators, including a support session webinar at the beginning of the school year, training slides and accompanying notes for the cluster group session. Frequently asked questions and a dedicated email address are also provided, prompting the psychologist to recognise the range of supports available and provided to NEPS colleagues running the cluster sessions.

Support Theme 2: Time for planning and preparation. Participants were asked about how facilitators could be ideally supported. Building in time for planning and preparation was identified by some psychologists and included activities such as gaining familiarity with the guidance documents (P1, P7) and having access to the FRIENDS resources (P11, CT4). Using digital tools to identify the needs of the group (P3), having a structure for the session and good timekeeping (P6) were also referred to by psychologists as important aspects of support for the facilitator. Psychologist 8 also documented that a group consultation model may support psychologists when running the cluster group.

Content Theme 1: The need for flexibility. Content refers to developing effective content for teachers in the cluster group to support them with implementing the FRIENDS programme. This principle was assessed by asking participants to respond to the following question; ideally, how would content for the cluster group sessions be decided and what might this content look like?

The need for flexibility in choosing content tailored to the presenting needs, queries and issues brought by the attendees was identified by the NEPS psychologists (P2, P3, P7). It was recognised that content for the cluster group also needs to be adaptable to the level of experience of attendees, including when they last trained and delivered the programme (P10). To highlight the need for flexibility in choosing content, psychologist 10 stated *"the suggested cluster group format covers all relevant areas and can be adapted to fit the needs of the group"*.

Subtheme 1: Asking for queries and requests for content in advance. 12 of the participants supported the view that the needs of the group and implementation issues be addressed by asking teachers for queries/requests for content in advance of the cluster group training, for example via checkbox registration (P10) or a questionnaire (P1, P4, P5). In

providing a rationale as to why feedback from participants is needed, participant 9 stated that: *'the facilitator can keep the session organised and structured and allow time to discuss these issues, empathise and problem solve'.* Teacher 3 suggested that feedback or a list of topics be compiled in-session at the end, which would provide a *'good indication of what is needed to be discussed at the next cluster meeting'.*

Subtheme 2: Videos of the programme being implemented. In addition to gathering knowledge about teachers' needs or queries in advance of the cluster group, one psychologist (P4) and teacher (CT2) spoke about the opportunity to watch videos of the programme being implemented in schools or of a teacher's delivery of the programme using Video Interactive Guidance. Psychologist 4 discussed the possibility of modelling and practicing a FRIENDS lesson and providing opportunities to coach teachers using this software. This type of content for the cluster group was equally supported by the teacher, who asserted that *'a mix of videos would be valuable to watch to see the programme in practice in some schools'*. This participant told of how she would find it beneficial to watch the programme operating in reality and recounted a previous experience of seeing a programme in action.

Content Theme 2: Content to focus on discussions with other teachers and support with teaching the FRIENDS lessons. Although many psychologists subscribed to the view that content for the cluster be led by teachers, this was coupled with feedback about the importance of establishing clear aims for the cluster group (P5). When asked specifically about what the content for the cluster group might look like, most participants signaled a focus on programme updates and discussions with other teachers about presenting needs and teaching supports (P4, P5, P6, P8, P9). Psychologist 9 espoused the importance of giving time for teachers to *"chat and network"* and take an "*appreciative approach, in which good practice is shared" (P12).* Two of

the teacher participants (CT1, CT4) equally reinforced the idea of lesson content by asserting that the cluster group present ideas for teaching the lessons in practice and provide a breakdown of activities that could be used for each session.

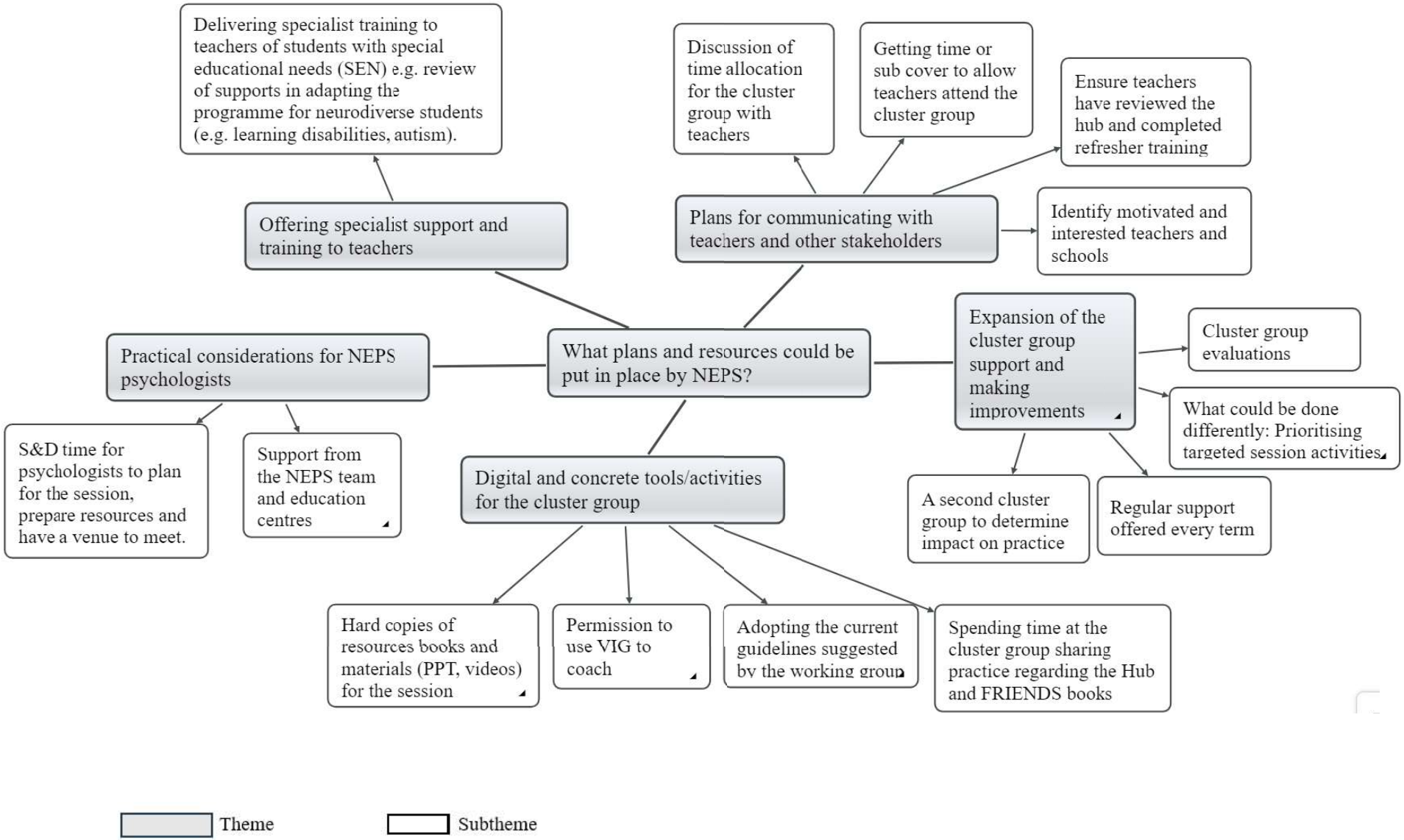
Subtheme 1: Practical issues arising during implementation. Some responses revealed that content for the cluster group be focused on practical issues that arise during implementation and that facilitators provide content for teachers based on fidelity towards the programme and its implementation (e.g., P6). One participant suggested that a portion of the session be dedicated to a 'success story', whereby, *'teachers share any positive comments they have from implementing FRIENDS within the schools and share helpful tips and resources which might help keep teachers motivated'.* This suggestion indicates the psychologist's focus on positive activities when planning content for the cluster group.

3.4.1.3 Research Question 3: What plans and resources could be put in place by NEPS/ NEPS psychologists to achieve the ideal cluster group?

This research question was examined using two questions; What plans could NEPS/a NEPS psychologist put in place to turn the ideal cluster group you mentioned previously into reality? and What resources or supports would be needed to action the ideal cluster group? Five distinct themes were visible in the data. Figure 20 includes a concept map of the overarching themes and subthemes for research question 3.

Figure 20

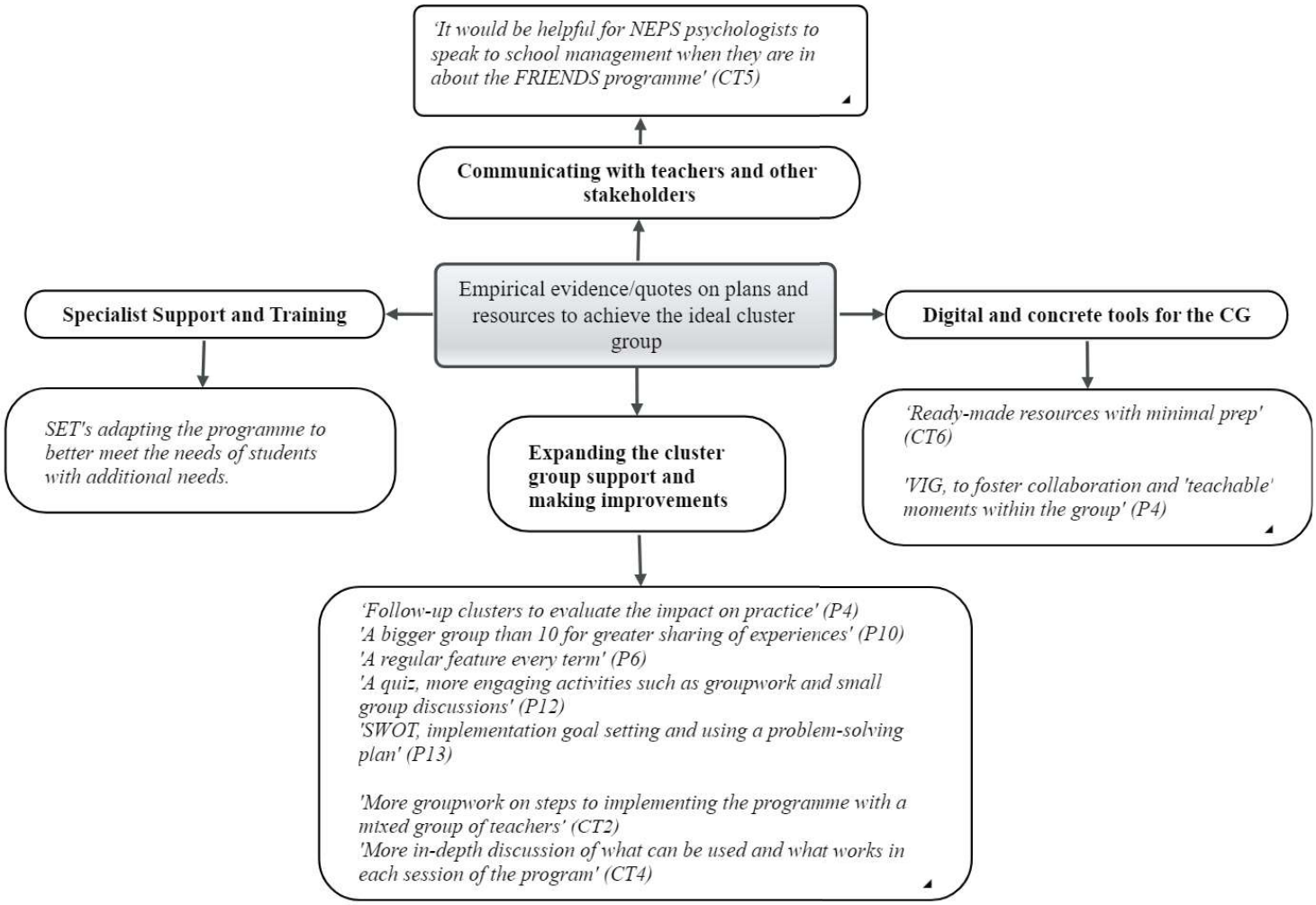
Concept Map of Overarching Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 3



Examples of participants' perspectives are presented in the visual map below using supporting quotes. The themes and subthemes are then discussed chronologically.

Figure 21

Examples of Participants' Perspectives of how to action the Ideal Cluster Group



Theme 1: Plans for communicating with teachers, schools and other stakeholders.

This theme captures the emphasis on co-ordination between psychologists, teachers, principals and local education centres to ensure optimal participation in the cluster group. It involves

discussions around scheduling, review of relevant resources and negotiating logistical arrangements such as classroom sub cover. Psychologists reported that the first steps in setting up a cluster is to identify motivated and interested teachers (P9), discuss with them the time allocation involved (P1, P3) and the cover needed (P3, P7). Psychologist 4 communicated that teachers can also be asked to review the Hub and complete refresher training prior to attending a cluster. In showing the importance of communication, Teacher 5 suggested that it would be helpful for NEPS psychologists to speak to school management when they are in schools about the implementation of the programme.

Theme 2: Expanding the cluster group support and making improvements. This theme emerged in light of psychologists' responses about what they could have done differently to achieve the ideal cluster group. Psychologist 4 advocated for a follow-up cluster group to see the impact on practice and an evaluation of the group. Psychologist 10 would have liked a bigger group (n=10), as this would have allowed for greater sharing of experiences across schools. Psychologists also suggested that pilot cluster training be completed first (P5) or that a cluster group become a regular feature every term (P6). When asked about what could have been done differently to achieve the ideal cluster group, psychologists 12 and 13 provided reflective comments. Psychologist 12 would have incorporated a quiz (to activate prior knowledge and/or reinforce key concepts) and more engaging activities, to promote reflection and learning such as group work and small-group discussions. Psychologist 13 suggested that an improvement could be made by asking participants at the outset to complete a SWOT analysis or what in their experience are the strengths/ weakness/ opportunities and threats to FRIENDS implementation in their school. This psychologist also suggested explicit goal setting with participants and that

participants could be supported in small groups to develop a problem-solving plan for meeting their goals around FRIENDS implementation.

When teachers were asked about what could have been done differently to achieve the ideal cluster group, some made a similar request for '*more groupwork on the steps to implementing the FRIENDS programme' and 'more in-depth discussion of what can be used and what works in each session'.* One participant (CT6) reported that teachers be encouraged to discuss the positive and negative aspects of implementing FRIENDS as some sections of the manual can be vague and resources difficult to navigate. Due to the extensive volume of lesson content, some teachers may spend a protracted amount of time covering individual sessions (CT5). Practical ways outlined by teacher 2 to structure group discussions centered around the topics of 'what worked well' and 'even better if'. The above reflections showcase teachers and psychologists' aspirations to expand, fine tune and prioritise targeted discussions and implementation activities as part of the cluster group support.

Theme 3: Digital and concrete tools for the cluster group. This theme encompasses the dual range of physical and digital resources designed to action the ideal cluster group. It includes specialised resources such as the Friends books, educational materials and Video Interactive Guidance (VIG) to foster collaboration and 'teachable moments' within the group. Upon investigation of the resources recommended to bring about the ideal cluster group in reality, participants spoke about hard copies of materials such as the FRIENDS books (CT2, CT6, P1, P6), manuals (CT6), sample resources (P1, P6) and suggested guidelines for practice (P1). Teacher 6 reported that *'ready-made resources could be downloaded by teachers for the lessons with minimal prep'.* As indicated by the data for the ideal cluster group content,

psychologist 4 and teacher 5 proposed that time be spent during the cluster group sharing practice regarding these resources.

Theme 4: Practical considerations for NEPS psychologists. This theme addresses the organisational aspects specific to NEPS psychologists in their role as facilitators of cluster groups. Perspectives that were shared included the need to sanction S&D time for psychologists to plan the session, prepare resources in advance and have a venue to meet. Designating time to organise and run the cluster group and give due regard to support from the NEPS team and the education centres was also deemed to be meaningful, thereby, ensuring that psychologists can fulfil their roles effectively.

Theme 5: Offering specialist support and training to teachers. The final theme focuses on providing targeted professional development and training to teachers, particularly, for those working within special education. This may include enhancing special education teachers' abilities to adapt the programme (e.g. Special FRIENDS or similar) to better meet the needs of students with SEN. Although this interpretation was provided by a single psychologist (P2), it was considered that a cluster group facilitator would be ideally placed to provide supports to teachers in adapting the programme for neurodiverse students (e.g., with learning disabilities, autism etc).

With the above key themes in mind, the following discussion will explore the broader implications of the findings in addressing the research questions. Findings are situated within the context of the literature and professional practice within the NEPS service.

3.5 Discussion

The goal of the current research was to explore teachers' and psychologists' perspectives of NEPS-delivered cluster groups. Practical insights about the strengths and successes of the cluster group were sought as well as perspectives about the best-case scenario and how it could be achieved. While research evidence has shown teachers' experiences of implementing the FRIENDS programmes in practice, no empirical literature has explored the present area of cluster groups.

The approach taken to the systematic review added to the under-researched area of teachers' experiences of FRINDS implementation. It allowed for a structured method of identifying and summarising the relevant evidence which is not always guaranteed in other types of reviews (Liberati et al., 2009). The use of alternative terms for the systematic literature search such as 'perceptions' was unlikely to have revealed further articles as a limited coverage of studies have been published in this area. Including further terms could also have introduced irrelevant studies that diverted from the core aspects of the review. By limiting the search terms, the researcher aimed to maintain the relevance of the selected articles.

The following section will reflect on how well the findings from the study address the original research questions. Key findings relevant to each research question will be discussed. The findings will be interpreted within the literature on cluster groups, specifically in relation to the Ding et al. (2021) study on recommendations for the effective design and delivery of cluster groups. An outline of the strengths and limitations of the research study are then provided.

3.5.1 Research Question 1: What is working well about the cluster group?

In interpreting the significance of the data, it is clear that cluster groups are favorably received among teachers and NEPS psychologists who attended. The findings revealed that sharing and reflecting on implementation experiences is a key strength. Both teachers and psychologists referenced the cluster group as an opportunity to reflect on the implementation of the FRIENDS programme. This sharing of ideas and practice is likely to proffer benefits for teachers regarding the implementation of the programme, as they can listen to and reflect on teacher practice in other schools.

To set this finding within the literature, Ding et al. (2021) posit that high-quality PD provides opportunities for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning. The importance of sharing and reflecting on implementation is also consistent with Henefer and Rodgers' research (2013), which showed that implementation is facilitated by having the necessary social acceptance given by other staff members towards the programme. The value placed on collaborative interactions by participants in this research indicates that cluster groups closely align to teachers' needs in sharing and reflecting on their experiences (Ding et al., 2021). One potential implication for practice is the prospect of teacher-led facilitation as this would help maximise collaboration and interaction. This is discussed further under implications for practice in section 4.7.3.

3.5.1.1 Programme Adaptation or Fidelity?

In relation to specific aspects of peer sharing and reflection, the comment from teacher 6 about it being helpful to hear how others *'adapted the programme to their own context'* is of interest, as it points to the idea of programme adaptation versus fidelity, which is a long-standing discussion within the FRIENDS literature (Green & Atkinson, 2016; Wigelsworth et al., 2018).

As FRIENDS is a highly manualised, prescriptive intervention designed to optimise fidelity of implementation, it could be disputed whether discussions around programme adaptation take precedence over content that centers on high programme fidelity.

Teachers appear to value the time to listen to how others adapt the programme. Equally, one psychologist spoke about enhancing teachers' abilities to adapt the programme to better meet the needs of students with additional needs and neurodevelopmental disabilities (e.g., autism and intellectual disabilities). This finding is consistent with Wigelsworth et al. (2018), who state that variability in implementation in real-world environments is inevitable and can be affected by a variety of factors (e.g. time availability, characteristics of deliverer, background characteristics of the recipient such as developmental level, particular special needs and culture). However, in contradiction to the above responses, some psychologists emphasised that feedback focus on adherence to the structure and sequence of the programme.

This suggests a tension between maintaining fidelity and the need for adaptation of interventions into the work of the school. This may also bring into question the prospect of whose responsibility it is to bridge these perspectives and how it might be achieved. As shown by the present research, the effective implementation of FRIENDS involves both active classroom facilitators and psychologists who can utilise research evidence to support teachers with strategies for implementing the programme. Concerns about fidelity and adaptation may be addressed through the NEPS consultative model of service as shown in Figure 7. School staff who have concerns in this area can work in partnership with NEPS psychologists to develop an actionable response that aligns with the research evidence below.

Based on the specific needs of the school, the FRIENDS facilitator manual (Irish edition) states that suitable adaptations can be made such as the number and duration of sessions, optional

group activities and adapting games with similar activities that are highly engaging. However, research has shown that CBT techniques are most effective when delivered in a structured, sequential way (Barrett et al., 2020). According to recommendations from FRIENDS resilience (2020), facilitators have the flexibility to adapt the programme according to the needs of learners provided the overall intervention framework and sequence of skills is implemented with fidelity.

Participants' insights about what worked well provides new knowledge to this research area by bringing into question the exact vision for cluster groups. Currently, it is unclear if the aim is to support implementation through programme adaptation or adherence. Ding et al. (2021) claim that a clear vision is one of the main principles on which effective teacher PD is based, thus more clarity is needed to establish the specific nature of the implementation support provided via cluster groups.

Striking a balance between teachers engaging in open discussions around adaptation as well as activities tailored towards implementation integrity may be the most sensible approach for the cluster group, provided that content is responsive to members' needs. This course of action is supported by literature suggesting that implementation is influenced by the extent to which teachers adhere to and drift from the intervention protocol (Lyon & Bruns, 2019, Wigelsworth et al., 2018). This implies that discussions with teachers are needed to make informed decisions on the best approach to meet their needs and the needs of learners in their classroom.

3.5.2 Research Question 2: What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group in supporting teachers' implementation of FRIENDS look like?

Data was collected from participants in relation to the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group. Aspects relating to the ideal group, frequency, facilitation, support and content for the

cluster group are summarised in Table 17 and linked to the summary of evidence framework provided by Ding et al. (2021). The table outlines how the results from the current study fit within the literature. The last column presents an account of how the ideal cluster group compares with current practice, hence showing areas in which the NEPS cluster groups can progress towards the ideal target.

Table 17

Key Questions for RQ2 and Summary of Evidence presented by Ding et al. (2021)

Key Question	Summary of Evidence from the literature (Ding et al., 2021)	Evidence of the Ideal Cluster Group as compared with current practice
Grouping: Who should be trained together?	For geographic clusters, elementary teachers who share a common grade level or subject (Gallimore et al., 2009)	Participants' preferences reflected a tension between grouping teachers at a general level (e.g. school wide with class teachers, SET's, school leaders) and grouping teachers according to the specific classes they teach. As teachers are mainly grouped for the cluster based on a specific FRIENDS programme (e.g. Friends for Life, ages 8-11), teachers from different classes are usually grouped together. To align with the evidence presented, future facilitators could consider grouping teachers from the same class level.
How frequently should teachers meet in their cluster groups?	Cluster-level meetings: Monthly (and/or held at least three times per term) to allow sufficient time for planning, strategizing, and evaluating different aspects of teaching at the cluster level (Jacobs 2015).	The ideal frequency for the cluster group as suggested by the current sample is at least one meeting per term for 1.5 to 2 hours, translating to three meetings per year. Although most participants described that the ideal cluster group would be held over multiple sessions throughout the year, only one cluster group facilitator held three sessions. The most common frequency was one session, which is not corroborated by the current evidence. To adhere to best practice, future NEPS facilitators can extend the number of sessions delivered to teachers as research evidence points to the importance of "sustained" continuous professional development.
Who should give the training?	At the cluster level, a cluster facilitator should be appointed. Effective trainings tend to be conducted by education practitioners (such as primary or secondary teachers).	NEPS psychologists and/or teachers with classroom-based experience of implementing FRIENDS with CYP. While most participants considered NEPS psychologists most suitable, psychologists advocated that teachers be supported over time to run the groups with their input. Reasons for doing so included teachers having the best sense of 'on the ground' issues and the need to remove the expert role of the Ψ. However, the research did not determine the extent to which psychologists incorporated a teacher as facilitator/co-facilitator of their cluster group. This may also be impacted by the nature of a once-off cluster session. In conforming with the

		evidence, future NEPS cluster groups may consider appointing an experienced FRIENDS teacher or committee of teachers as lead facilitators.
What are the quality training and support that can be provided for facilitators?	Ideally, cluster facilitators receive dedicated training on the content of the sessions that they are meant to facilitate and on facilitation strategies. Facilitators should be provided with structured materials to enable high quality meetings	Participants spoke of the wider NEPS support available, particularly in relation to the training provided by the working group and the myriad of supports offered (support session webinar, training slides, accompanying notes for the cluster group session, dedicated email address etc). To advance a facilitators skills, psychologists reported that online communities would be helpful in discussing emerging issues with other trainers.
What should be the content/focus of cluster-based training?	Content should tightly align to the needs of teachers, schools and systems. Training on general pedagogical skills and on pedagogical content knowledge lends itself to being practical and focused (Cilliers et al., 2019). Deliberate practice with other teachers. Use semi structured and structured materials and prompts.	The ideal content for the cluster group is consistent with the available evidence. It was understood from participants' responses that the ideal cluster group seeks to find the right balance between training in an overarching framework with clear aims and flexibility to address the needs of teachers at a local level. Some of the ideal content for the cluster group suggested by participants included focusing on programme updates, sharing ideas for teaching lessons and discussions with other teachers about presenting needs. The data showed that psychologists focused on these activities and used varied and practical materials to support the session. This is determined as an area of strength and aligns with the research evidence. RQ3 Theme 2 provides perspectives on how further improvements can be made to the cluster group content.

To elaborate on the key questions above, the ideal cluster group for Friends implementation, as based on the research evidence, includes the following. Firstly, teachers are grouped by common class level or subject area. Meetings are held three times per term and facilitated by education practitioners. Thirdly, providing dedicated training on session content, and aligning content as close as possible to the needs of teachers is most beneficial. Lastly, a focus on practical pedagogical skills and deliberate practice with other teachers in the cluster will lend itself to being most effective.

3.5.2.1 The Ideal Frequency and Current Practice

In comparing the ideal to current practice, some aspects of the cluster group align with the latest evidence while other aspects are not yet compatible (e.g. cluster group frequency). While it was unclear as to the ideal time to host a cluster group, there was unanimity that more than one session take place. Contrary to most participants' perspectives regarding the ideal frequency, the most common frequency was a single cluster session.

To set this finding within the literature, advancing practice involves the cluster group becoming a more regular feature every term (Ding et al., 2021; Jacobs 2015). As shown by the presenting data, the study highlights a discrepancy between one-off NEPS cluster groups and what the research evidence/literature recommends as best practice. It is argued, therefore, that aligning the cluster groups with the principle of ongoing professional development will yield the best results, in terms of improved implementation of the FRIENDS programmes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). To adhere more to the research evidence (Ding et al., 2021), future NEPS facilitators may consider a block of two to three sessions over an academic term to sustain the cluster group support and provide a comprehensive evaluation over time.

3.5.2.2 The Ideal Content and Current Practice

It was found that both the content and the quality of support available are notable strengths of the existing cluster groups. Directing the content for the cluster group towards pedagogical skills was supported by the teachers in the study. As with previous studies, the results indicate that teachers value specific support with teaching the FRIENDS lessons to overcome challenges with implementation fidelity and ensure optimal delivery and sustainability of the programme (Green & Atkinson, 2016; Skryabina et al., 2016; Dowling & Barry, 2021).

The main areas for improvement pointed out by the research evidence include increasing the number of sessions delivered, incorporating greater involvement of experienced FRIENDS teachers as lead facilitators of the group and providing targeted content around programme implementation. These findings are considered carefully as part of the recommendations for professional practice in section 4.7.3. Research question 3 will now discuss how suggestions for actioning the ideal cluster group can be put into practice.

3.5.3 Research Question 3: What plans and resources could be put in place by NEPS/NEPS psychologists to achieve the ideal cluster group?

The five themes that emerged provide insight into what can be done to turn the ideal cluster group into reality. While findings from research question 2 above provide an understanding of how to progress towards the ideal, participants also provided their own unique perspectives on concrete plans. These included: expanding and making improvements to the cluster group (e.g. prioritising targeted session activities), adopting digital and concrete tools and delivering specialist training to SETs. The findings above add new insights to the cluster group framework by Ding et al. (2021). While this framework presents key decision points when

designing best practice for cluster groups, it does not consider actionable steps to achieving best practice, which are addressed in the current study.

3.5.3.1 Targeted session activities

Of note, psychologists and teachers reflected on what could have been done differently in the cluster group they attended. The implications of these findings suggest that additional groupwork and small group discussions take place to promote reflection and learning. Groupwork, as suggested by teachers, may focus on steps to implementing the programme in their school. More in-depth discussion can also take place on what can be used and what works well for each session. This may include, as suggested by one participant, a "success story", whereby, teachers share positive comments they have from implementing the FRIENDS lessons and share helpful tips and resources. While group discussions are an existing strength of the cluster group, the findings suggest that teachers would like to see more of this during the cluster (figure 21). Prioritising engaging and interactive activities was also suggested by psychologists. For example, incorporating quizzes to activate prior knowledge and completing a SWOT analysis of the strengths/weakness/opportunities and threats to FRIENDS implementation. Equally, additional exercises may relate to explicit goal setting with participants and using small groups to develop a problem-solving plan for meeting their goals around implementation.

The above findings on targeted session activities sit in line with previous research highlighting that cluster groups provide training on pedagogical skills and promote deliberate practice with other teachers (Ding et al., 2021, Cilliers et al., 2019, see Table 17 key question 5). In line with this knowledge-base, the current study highlights that cluster groups provide targeted and tailored content around the implementation of the FRIENDS lessons, which research has shown is most effective and practical for teachers (Ding et al., 2021).

3.5.3.2 Digital and Concrete Tools

Additional concrete plans described by participants to reach the ideal cluster group include the preparation of digital and concrete tools in relation to the FRIENDS books, resources for the session (e.g. guidelines for practice, PPT slides etc) and exemplar videos of the programme being implemented. It was interpreted that these materials are crucial to the effective facilitation of the cluster group and time be spent during the cluster group sharing practice regarding these resources. The preparation of digital and concrete tools was not considered within the framework by Ding et al. (2021) and may help to showcase good practice within a cluster group. The incorporation of digital tools such as video feedback (VIG) may be particularly important as specific training can be provided on indicators of effective practice. Research within implementation science has shown that this positively influences teachers' competence with implementation (Blase et al. 2012; Cilliers et al., 2019). This provides new knowledge in terms of novel techniques and methods that can be used to structure the cluster group and support with implementation. This also has practice-based implications for cluster groups in relation to targeted content around programme implementation.

In conclusion, actions to achieve the ideal cluster group have been presented in this research. An evaluation into the effect of the cluster group on teachers' implementation of FRIENDS was not possible under the remit of the current study. What this means for the research field and how it might influence directions for future research is provided within the critical review. Before critically reflecting on the implications of the research process as a whole, an introduction to the strengths and limitations of the work are outlined in the following section.

3.5.4 The Strengths and Limitations of the Research

The following section introduces the strengths and limitations of the study, which will be reflected upon in further detail in Chapter 4 (Critical Review). The main strengths of the study include the practice-based implications of the work for NEPS psychologists as recommendations from the study will help inform the delivery of cluster groups in the future. The sample size of 13 NEPS psychologists (excluding one exclusion) provides a relatively high sample size given that a small number of cluster groups have been held to date. A further strength during data collection included a representative sample of psychologists. One psychologist reported reservations about positively biased researcher data from working group members as they devised the guidelines for the cluster groups. To reduce this potential bias, the overall sample included a cohort of NEPS psychologists who facilitated a cluster group but were not members of the working group. Participants across both samples also presented with varied training and experience in facilitating FRIENDS. Thus, the inclusion of multiple perspectives was a perceived strength of the research and enhanced the representativeness of findings.

The limitations of the research included non-response bias in the teacher sample. A low response rate of 20% of teachers who attended a cluster group responded to the questionnaire. A further limitation of the pilot questionnaire included the potential for self-selection bias. To account for the smaller sample of teachers, the use of participatory approaches may have enriched a better understanding of how school personnel experience the FRIENDS programme from their own perspectives.

The cancellation of a cluster group during the data collection phase halted the scale-up of the research and meant that the teacher sample was restricted to six respondents. Ultimately, their views cannot be extrapolated to represent the entire population of existing teachers who

have attended a cluster group. The research, therefore, may have benefited from greater population sampling of FRIENDS teachers, which would support a more accurate identification of the ideal cluster group.

Regarding the research data, an approach was taken to jointly analyse the psychologist and teacher datasets. This meant that teachers' views were not separated out from that of the psychologists. While it was considered that this may have represented a missed opportunity, the collective voice of participants was captured which provided robust conclusions to be made about the cluster group support at an aggregate level. Individual data for each subsample presented in the matrix table in Appendix R highlights the perspectives of the cluster group teachers and NEPS psychologists. This helped to inform the write-up of the results, considering overall trends and patterns while distinguishing between specific perspectives for each group.

Reflecting on the coding reliability process, consideration is given to the value of the percentage consistency and how this might have been undertaken differently. Conducting a reliability analysis ensured consistency and objectivity and reduced the subjective bias of the sole researcher. It also strengthened the trustworthiness of the research by showing a clear coding framework and that the themes identified were genuinely present in the data and not unduly influenced by one individual perspective (Leung, 2015). To make improvements to the reliability analysis, it could have been conducted as a reflexive discussion with colleagues to develop credibility when classifying the data. Yardley (2015) puts forward that discussions with other researchers helps to improve consistency and demonstrate validity when refining the coding categories and framework (Smith, 2024).

3.5.5 Implications for Practice and Policy

The main implications of this research relate to the NEPS policy and practice, as emphasised by the pragmatic approach adopted. It is noted that the current implications focus on cluster groups for FRIENDS implementation and consider cluster groups for general manualised programmes to a lesser extent. One of the main findings from the study was the need for ongoing cluster groups over the course of an academic term. Increasing the frequency of cluster group meetings, therefore, is a direct implication for practice. This implication for practice is supported by evidence from the current study, which has outlined guidelines for psychologists when designing the ideal cluster group (Figure 19).

The importance of peer sharing and reflection was apparent from the data, as shown in Figures 17 and 18, and highlights that teacher-led facilitation may be a prudent step for cluster groups in the future. Teachers have classroom-based experience of implementation issues in practice and therefore may be ideally placed in facilitating a cluster group to peers with similar experiences. This implication is supported by Ding et al. (2021) who suggest that effective training tends to be conducted by education practitioners.

Tailored content around the implementation of the FRIENDS lessons emerged from participants' responses regarding the need for additional groupwork, small group discussions, video footage of the programme being implemented and sharing ideas for teaching the lessons. In consideration of these insights, dedicated content on implementing the FRIENDS lessons is a notable implication for practice.

The current findings may help to guide future NEPS policy in relation to the different considerations for the design and structure of cluster groups, such as the frequency, content and facilitator profile. Data from the current study addressed various considerations of the ideal

cluster group based on the perspectives of informed practitioners. It is understood, however, that further research is needed to evaluate the different aspects of the ideal cluster group and so the above claim about the study's contribution to policy is made with caution. As a result of the above findings and new insights, the suggested implications for practice and policy are summarised in Table 18.

Table 18

Implications for Educational Psychology Practice and Policy

Implications for Educational Psychology Practice
• The findings from the current study may be used to inform guidelines for psychologists when designing and structuring the ideal FRIENDS cluster group (Table 17). One of these findings concerns the increased frequency of cluster group meetings, ideally for three sessions over an academic term (Ding et al., 2021). • Teacher-led facilitation of the cluster groups. Facilitators with classroom-based experience of implementing FRIENDS emerged as a theme from both datasets (Table 19). Teacher facilitation may be beneficial as the data suggest that teachers value opportunities for peer sharing and reflection. Psychologists also suggested that teachers could be supported to lead the cluster groups as they have the best sense of implementation issues in schools. • Targeted content around the implementation of the FRIENDS lessons. Participants proposed that the ideal cluster group could be achieved by providing support with teaching the lessons. Additional groupwork, small group discussions, engaging activities and video guidance were some examples of specific content suggested to aid programme implementation.

Implications for Policy
• One potential implication from this study is a specific NEPS policy on cluster groups. As further work is needed to evaluate the impact of CG's, a cautious contribution to policy is provided in the context of the scale and limitations of the present study. In light of this, the current findings may help to guide future NEPS policy, particularly in relation to different considerations for the design and structure of cluster groups. These considerations include the ideal frequency, support, content and facilitator for the cluster group sessions. It is suggested that policy informed by the current research may help to provide clinicians with greater guidance on good practice and research evidence on cluster groups (Table 17).

3.5.6 Conclusion

The current study was the first to contribute to the literature on the cluster group response to FRIENDS implementation. The findings are supported by the cluster group framework, highlighting key principles when designing cluster-based training for teachers (Ding et al., 2021). The study provides new insights into how the existing cluster groups provided by NEPS are received by both facilitating psychologists and school personnel who attend. Teachers and psychologists identified areas that are currently working well and noted how the ideal cluster group could be achieved. All suggestions, plans and resources suggested by participants were examined in a collective manner in order to provide clarity on best practice. One distinctive contribution of the study is the identification of areas for practice and policy development, as presented in Table 18. Further expansion on these areas as well as future research directions are reflected upon in the critical review chapter.

4 Critical Review

This chapter will review the research process as a whole by critically reflecting on the current work. The paradigm and theoretical framework underpinning the research are appraised for their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, a critique is presented on the research design, methodology, sampling, data collection and analysis procedures adopted. The implications for policy, practice and research are considered along with a personal reflection on my own position within the research process. Lastly, an impact statement detailing the prominent impacts of this research is provided.

4.1 Positionality, Ontology and Epistemology

My background as a teacher and FRIENDS facilitator was felt to enrich the research by fostering strong skills in problem-solving, time management, tracking and organising the data. It also supported complex ideas within the research to be presented in a clear and comprehensible manner given the researcher's experience of working with young people. In consideration of the researcher's previous background, attempts were made to guard against the risk of these qualities potentially biasing the research. Firstly, as the researcher critically reflected on his position, this ensured that a lack of awareness did not implicitly bias the interpretation of the research data. Furthermore, the researcher remained open to novel insights, questioned his decisions and engaged in reflexivity, as shown in the reflective logs in section 3.3.7.

Ontological and epistemological positions are key considerations in all psychological research (Tomlinson, 2023). For the current study, which is interested in exploring perspectives of how cluster groups might support teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes, a pragmatic philosophical approach was adopted. Theories and methods of inquiry chosen were guided by this approach.

Pragmatism seeks to strike a balance between the interpretivist and positivist perspectives and emphasises that we come to know and understand our world based on practical implications of our knowledge, beliefs, and actions. The position does not fully side with multiple subjective realities or that reality is a reconstruction of something stable that exists. Instead, pragmatism acknowledges reality as dynamic and constantly evolving based on the consequences of human actions and interactions (Hammond, 2013). It rejects the dualism of single and multiple views on the nature of reality and argues that there are real-life social issues that humans experience. Truth, therefore, is based off what is useful in solving real-world problems and so methods were chosen based on their usefulness and suitability to answer the research problem.

As pragmatism seeks to identify what works best in practice and uses that as the basis for understanding and action, it was deemed the most appropriate paradigm for the current research. Pragmatism emphasises practical outcomes from this research and how it can be applied in a real-world context. It aligns well, therefore, with the goal of the current research, aimed at developing practical insights that can be actioned to improve the cluster group support for teachers.

In contrast to the strengths of a pragmatic approach, limitations were considered by the researcher and alternative approaches examined. Within the current research, a pragmatic focus on practical outcomes of the cluster group for teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes might divert attention from addressing other social or systemic issues within the educational system.

Choosing a pragmatic perspective also affects the interpretation of the research findings (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Alternative philosophical approaches to this research might have been critical realism and interpretivism. Critical realism argues that there is an objective reality

of a cluster group, however, participants understanding of this reality is mediated by their subjective experiences and perspectives. An interpretivist approach espouses that social reality is an entirely subjective experience and is based on what an individual experiences it to be (Goldkuhl, 2012). Taking this stance, the researcher may have examined social interactions and what meaning participants gave to their cluster group experience. While interpretivism has its merits, it was determined that a pragmatic lens was more suitable for the pursuit of knowledge that is useful in action (Shah et al., 2018).

4.2 Research Framework

4.2.1 Appreciative Inquiry

AI was employed as the conceptual framework for this study. AI is rooted in a positive approach to organisational development and amplifies what is working well about cluster groups rather than problems or deficits. AI has been widely used in educational settings to promote collaborative effort and leverage strengths in relation to school initiatives and the adoption of evidence-based programmes. The theory is relevant to the current study as it emphasises positive thinking of cluster group experiences and the actions needed to build on a shared vision among teachers and NEPS psychologists. It also enables me as the researcher to share key recommendations and actions with NEPS and schools around the sustainability of cluster groups.

Given the flexibility offered by this approach in understanding cluster groups, it was used to underpin the research work. Lewis (2020) has queried whether the AI process can address challenges when it only focuses on the positive, however, the theory argues that perceived weaknesses are best addressed by imagining an ideal future (Bellinger & Elliot, 2011). The collaborative nature of the AI process, as it is intended, was not possible in the current study. As interviews or focus groups were not held, stakeholders could not engage in an inclusive, co-

created space. It is acknowledged, therefore, that this aspect could be perceived as a weakness of the study.

4.2.2 Alternative Perspective: The Problem-Solving Model

An alternative problem-solving model that is more evaluative than exploratory could have been considered for this research. An evaluative perspective was considered during discussions about auditing the cluster group. The NEPS problem-solving model, as shown in Figure 7 asks teachers and psychologists targeted questions at each stage of the cycle.

First, participants would identify the biggest challenge or difficulty with implementing the FRIENDS programmes and explore why this difficulty is happening. The focus would then shift to probing how the cluster group could help address this issue and whether the solution worked, evaluating outcomes and any needed adjustments. One positive of this approach is its structured focus on identifying and resolving concrete problems, leading to actionable outcomes. However, a drawback compared to Appreciative Inquiry is that the problem-solving model (DES, 2017) focuses on fixing deficits, while Appreciative Inquiry emphasizes strengths and potential, fostering a more positive, forward-looking perspective.

In keeping with this direction, it was considered that AI would provide a suitable way of investigating the research questions, not just as cluster groups are (evaluation) but what they could be (change). The chapter will now outline a detailed rationale for the selection of the design, measures, sampling and methods of analysis and a critical appraisal for these choices against available alternatives.

4.3 Design

A qualitative study exploring teachers' and NEPS psychologists' perspectives of cluster groups was chosen in consideration of the research questions, the available sample and the adoption of the AI framework. Qualitative research is a common methodology employed in psychological research that aims to capture perceptions and experiences, as in the present study. According to Yadav (2021), qualitive research allows for a detailed exploration of phenomena, which quantitative methods may lack.

Due to the lack of empirical evidence currently in relation to cluster-based teacher professional development, as well as limited numbers of cluster groups held, the nature of the current study was deemed to be exploratory, which supports the rationale for a qualitative approach. Rahman (2016) points out that fewer participants are often involved in qualitative research, thereby limiting the generaliseability of findings and the potential for researcher bias. While some researchers argue that the subjectivity of qualitative research is a weakness, others claim it is a strength while ensuring validity and methodological rigor (see section 4.4.1).

4.4 Data Collection Method

There are a number of key strengths of using a qualitative questionnaire for research. Questionnaires continue to be widely used because of their functionality and versatility (Porritt et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2020). A questionnaire also ensured teachers and NEPS psychologists could provide responses in their own language and with a high level of anonymity (Braun et al., 2020).

A review of methodological literature using AI found that researchers leaned towards a qualitative methodology or the integration of qualitative and quantitative data as part of mixed methods (Doggett & Lewis, 2013; Shuayb, 2014; He, 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 2001). Some

scholars have argued that mixed methods surpass standalone approaches (Feuer et al., 2002), enhance a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) and the integrity of conclusions. Creswell et al. (2006), however, relay some challenges associated with using mixed methods, including the need to specify the purpose of collecting quantitative and qualitative data.

In the present study, a variety of these methodologies were considered including observations, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. A direct observation would have allowed the collection of data as the cluster group occurred naturally. Equally, interviews and focus groups may have allowed the researcher to gain detailed descriptions of participants' experiences of the cluster groups. However, unlike questionnaires, these methods can unintentionally shape responses based on power imbalances and the skill of the interviewer (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). While interview and focus group methods may have generated rich insights from teachers and psychologists allowing greater interrogation, qualitative questionnaires also align with the principles of AI and pragmatism, and address the selected research questions (Shah et al., 2018).

Questionnaires, however, are not without methodological problems (Lavrakas, 2008). Confounds associated with the selected questionnaire method were the low response rate from teachers who had previously attended a cluster group (>20%) and the possibility of self-selection bias. It is possible that the original two school staff members who responded to the questionnaire had an interest in the FRIENDS cluster groups and may have been more inclined to participate in the research. Therefore, as Bethlehem (2010) claims, these responses as well as findings from the other teachers cannot be generalised or considered representative of the entire population.

The lack of a participatory and engaging process for participants may also lead to biased estimates. Greater interaction and probing responses about the strengths of the cluster group may have been possible with alternative data collection tools such as observations, interviews or focus groups (Frith & Gleeson, 2011). These methods, however, could not be adopted given the research timeframe and design restrictions and the author recognises that appreciative interviews can be conducted in the future as a qualified practitioner.

4.4.1 Strategies to Ensure High Quality Data Collection

In conducting this research, a series of data collection strategies were considered to ensure methodological rigour, including reflexivity, credibility and dependability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A summary of these strategies and how they relate to the current study is provided below.

4.4.1.1 Reflexivity

The researcher endeavoured to show reflexivity within this research as a means of ensuring objectivity in data collection and analysis. Researcher reflexivity involves awareness of one's emotions and tracking this during the research process (Rodham et al., 2015; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that the researcher actively participates in the process of understanding their data. The ability for the researcher to critically reflect on their own subjective viewpoints was important, therefore, when conducting this qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Berger, 2015). To consciously acknowledge how the researcher's perspectives may have affected the data gathering process, the researcher kept a research journal detailing attitudes, reactions and affect to what was said by participants (Berger, 2015). A reflective log of what participants meant and what I thought about the response was documented. Examples are presented in the approach to data analysis (3.3.7). Keeping a reflexive log during

the data collection phase supported the researcher in his attempt to accurately represent psychologists' and teachers' perspectives and not disproportionately represent any data based on his own unconscious feelings or attitudes.

4.4.4.2 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is determined by the truth of the findings and the extent to which the findings are representative of the sample population. Although data from multiple informants were gathered, triangulation from more than one source was not performed in the present study and therefore, could not be used to gain a further understanding of the topic area. However, evidence gathered from both NEPS psychologists and teachers was considered to enhance the overall accuracy of the findings. Further attempts to promote credibility included engagement with other researchers and practitioners in the field. A pilot study of teachers and psychologists without experience of attending a cluster group may also increase the representativeness of findings. The researcher was also careful to maintain anonymity and clear language in the questionnaires, which served to reduce social desirability and participation biases.

4.4.4.3 Dependability

Dependability can be achieved where the research process is logical and there is a clear description of the steps taken to meaningfully advance knowledge in the field. In the current study the design chosen to answer the research questions is in line with the chosen methodology and philosophical orientation. AI aligns well with the philosophical underpinnings of pragmatism and implementation science research. The researcher has outlined the evolution of the study from identification of the research area to the literature review and empirical paper. The framework for best practice in the design of cluster groups has been described (Ding et al., 2021, see Table

17 also) and used to contextualise the questionnaires to the Irish context. The research checklist for good reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) is shown in Appendix X, which was used to reinforce the reliability and transparency of the research study.

4.5 Sampling

Convenience sampling for the pilot project and purposive sampling for the main study facilitated the collection of rich data. Recruiting psychologists at a group meeting may have reduced the confound of coercion to participate than if contacted individually for the study. Equally, teachers emailed by the NEPS psychologist who facilitated the cluster group may be more inclined to respond than if contacted by an unfamiliar researcher. The sampling approach selected was necessary as the research looked specifically at the perspectives and experiences of two distinct populations. Purposive sampling facilitated access to teachers and NEPS psychologists who would be able to report on meaningful experiences relevant to the research questions (Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

The employment of convenience and purposive sampling also had notable limitations. The teacher sampling technique excluded teachers who have not had the opportunity to attend a cluster group or are waiting to attend. While the pilot questionnaire offset this flaw, future research could adopt a stratified sampling approach, particularly with the expansion in the roll out of cluster groups.

Achieving data saturation for the teacher sample was also a struggle. As data from six teachers was collected, the researcher intended to sample more teachers attending a cluster group this term. This cluster session was cancelled, however, due to a low level of interest. While the overall teacher sample was small in comparison to psychologists, it indicates potential barriers for teachers in engaging with the cluster group training. Difficulties for teachers in attending

FRIENDS training may reflect wider issues with the implementation of the programme. Previous researchers, Henefer and Rodgers (2013) and Skryabina et al. (2016) have described some of these barriers to include time constraints, competing demands (Maclean & law, 2022) and other curricular priorities (Goodwin et al., 2023; March et al., 2022). This aspect is considered in further detail as part of teacher-led facilitation in 4.7.3.2.

4.6 Data Analysis

4.6.1 Strengths

A qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions was performed using a two-stage hybrid method that included inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Terry et al. (2017) clarify this distinction by explaining inductive coding as working bottom-up from the data, while deductive coding takes place in light of a previous theoretical model or framework. In the initial inductive phase of this study, the data were carefully examined, coded and categorised into themes, as guided by the research questions and principles of AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Bushe, 2012). The second stage of data analysis involved the deductive mapping of emergent themes for the second research question onto the cluster group framework proposed by Ding et al. (2021). The inductive theoretical approach of AI helped to make sense of the findings and provided a data-driven approach while the deductive coding added rigor using previous theory and research. Overall, the combination of inductive and deductive coding aided a comprehensive understanding of the data. The analysis was thorough, comprehensive and inclusive of all codes, subthemes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021), as illustrated in Appendix R.

As researcher reflexivity is a core part of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the researcher journalled throughout the process of conducting the research and interpreting meaning from the data. This allowed him to consciously reflect upon how his own subjective viewpoints,

experiences and thoughts about the research, as shown in the reflective boxes in the section 3.3.7.

4.6.2 Critique of Data Analysis

In terms of the descriptive analysis for the questionnaire, specific responses pertaining to the ideal frequency and facilitator for the cluster group emerged. It was considered, therefore, that this portion of the data would be more suited to descriptive than thematic analysis. Although the questions were framed in an open-ended way, the decision to integrate a frequency analysis was based on the nature of participants' responses and therefore had to deviate from the original plan for data analysis. Indeed, research commonly uses descriptive methods to present qualitative data from surveys, offering a clear summary of trends within the data and a big-picture view before delving into qualitative detail (Elliot & Timulak, 2021).

To support the data analysis process, two independent coders familiar with the process of TA, coded a sample of the research dataset. A random psychologist and teacher transcript were sent along with the codebook and examples of how codes were applied to the data. Although full secondary coding of all questionnaire responses was preferable, it was not feasible in the present study as the sole researcher. This meant that the quality of the themes was governed by the time given by the researcher to develop and revise the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While some researchers state that intercoder reliability is not a criticism of thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013) and is sufficient with the interpretation of the researcher, others recommend interrater reliability checks as good practice for qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe 2020). Despite debate over the usefulness of inter-coder reliability, the researcher deemed it a necessary step to enhance the credibility of the analysis and trustworthiness of the findings.

This is especially on account of varied interpretations when multiple perspectives of teachers and psychologists are considered (Zartler, 2010).

An alternative method of content analysis was considered during the research process. However, in contrast to thematic analysis, content analysis does not lead to theme development but captures how often codes occur. As a central aspect of the present research was to explore patterns across cases and themes to gain insight into cluster groups, thematic analysis was perceived as a good fit for data analysis.

4.7 Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

A review of the implications for educational psychology research, policy and practice are presented below. These implications are reviewed tentatively based on the limitations of the study and an acknowledgement of the researcher's own inexperience in facilitating cluster groups. Thus, the recommendations provided are based on the researcher's interpretation of the data. It is also recognised that some implications for practice may have been previously addressed by psychologists as part of their ongoing facilitation of cluster groups. Identifying areas for further exploration and how these findings can inform ongoing research in the field are outlined below.

4.7.1 Implications for Future Research Directions on Cluster Groups

One main implication of this research is the increased knowledge and understanding of the cluster group model to promote the effective implementation of the FRIENDS programmes (Barrett et al., 2000). The study adds substantial value to the FRIENDS implementation literature by highlighting psychologists' and teachers' aspirations for improving the cluster groups. Yet, the researcher recognises that additional research is required. While further research could inform many areas of the NEPS response to implementation issues for teachers in practice, it is

argued based on the study's findings that future research a) evaluate the impact of ongoing cluster groups on implementation practice and b) investigate online cluster groups against in-person approaches. These avenues for research are supported by research data within the present study, as presented in table 19 (rationale).

Table 19

Future Research Directions with Rationale

Question/Direction for future research	Rationale
How do we know if CG's make a positive difference on implementation practice?	It is considered that qualitative evidence in this study on the ideal cluster group be coupled with evidence about its resulting impact on the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. A finding from the study was the proposed evaluation of the impact of cluster groups on implementation practice (Ding et al., 2021). Future research, therefore, may consider evaluating the long-term impact of cluster groups on changes in implementation practice over time. This could be achieved through more evaluative measures such as teacher checklists, weekly reports, observations and video interactive guidance. In the present study, evidence on post-primary teachers' perspectives of implementing the My FRIENDS Youth programme was not provided. Further research is therefore required to identify the perceived fit and impact of cluster group training in this setting.
What are the comparative strengths and weaknesses of online and in-person approaches?	As a similar line of inquiry into the impact of cluster groups, future research could explore the efficacy of online cluster groups against current in-person approaches, as this was not possible based on the current study data. The roll out of on-demand FRIENDS training is currently being designed for primary school staff, which allows for self-directed learning. Investigating the comparisons between online and in-person training may help determine the strengths and limitations of the respective approaches.

4.7.2 Implications for Policy

The present research may have a potential contribution to future policy within the NEPS service, primarily in relation to cluster groups. As previously suggested, the findings from the

study addressed teachers' and psychologists' perspectives of the ideal CG and therefore may have implications for the design and structure of these groups in the future. The present study may help to guide future policy on considerations for the design and structure of cluster groups, including the ideal frequency, support, content and facilitator profile. Policy informed by the current research may help to support cluster group provision and align with the research evidence (Table 17).

4.7.3 Implications for Professional Practice

This research presents recommendations for the design of cluster groups and therefore has practical implications for scientist practitioners who facilitate cluster-based training for teachers. In particular, the research has attempted to answer questions about the best way to group teachers, when to hold a group, who is ideally positioned to facilitate and what the content might consist of. The research, therefore, makes a distinct contribution to implementation science by exploring how cluster groups can promote the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. Implementation science has applications in the NEPS service to schools, as psychologists are primarily involved in drawing on research to support teachers with evidence-informed implementation (Moir, 2018). This means applying interventions based on the best-available evidence while considering the local context and needs of the school.

The use of AI in the current study as a strengths-based approach to promote change may have implications for psychologists' exploration of systems-based issues. The systems issue identified in the current study involved the challenge of implementing the FRIENDS programme. As this can emerge as a practice-based issue for teachers and schools, psychologists may gain insight in using appreciative inquiry as a framework that fosters and builds on available assets, especially if attempts at problem-solving prove unsuccessful (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The AI approach is also particularly suited to the current area as implementation is influenced by multiple factors within nested systems (Lyon & Bruns, 2019).

In addition to the broad implications of the research on implementation science and appreciative inquiry, the research also provides a specific roadmap and actionable steps for psychologists to improve the cluster group support. The suggested implications for educational psychology practice include additional cluster group meetings, teacher-led facilitation and targeted content around programme implementation.

4.7.3.1 Additional cluster group meetings

Greater frequency of cluster group meetings is one implication for practice. Research recommends monthly meetings for cluster groups to comprehensively plan, strategise, and evaluate different aspects of the cluster (Jacobs 2015, as cited in Ding et al., 2021). While this recommendation needs to be balanced alongside teachers' and psychologists' other duties and responsibilities, it is apparent that participants in the present study would prefer at least one cluster group per term. Participant 9 stated that *'somewhere between once a month and twice a term would likely be best'*, which aligns more with the empirical evidence. Further support for more frequent meetings was provided by three FRIENDS teachers who responded to the pilot. These teachers preferred 5-7 monthly meetings over the school year. The discrepancy between the ideal frequency of three sessions per term and that of standard practice of one cluster session is worthy of mention. Future cluster groups can be extended in response to optimal cluster group delivery, as indicated within the literature (Ding et al., 2021).

4.7.3.2 Teacher-led facilitation

As mentioned, factors relating to time and competing demands may impact upon teacher attendance at cluster group training. Psychologists may give due regard to this so expectations

can align with teachers about what is achievable for the cluster in supporting the implementation of the FRIENDS programme. One potential way of ensuring teacher commitment and 'buy in' is to increase teachers' responsibilities as part of the cluster group session. For example, teachers with knowledge and practical experience of implementing the FRIENDS programme could be supported by the NEPS psychologist to model and practice implementing a FRIENDS lesson for other teachers. This is likely to reinforce greater reflection on implementation experiences and align with teachers' own suggestions for targeted implementation activities as part of the cluster group. This is described as part of the final implication for practice below.

4.7.3.3 Targeted content around programme implementation.

Delivering targeted content to teachers around the implementation of lessons and related queries is a critical aspect of the cluster group. Groupwork, in-depth discussions and sharing ideas on teaching the lessons within the programme were highlighted by teachers and psychologists as beneficial ways of actioning the ideal cluster group. As with previous studies, March et al. (2022) contend that the practicality and ease of use of a programme facilitate sustained implementation. It can be predicted, therefore, that content which focuses on the practical implementation of the lessons is likely to benefit teachers most. Ding et al. (2021) indicate that pedagogical content knowledge lends itself to being practical and focused (Cilliers et al., 2019). Cluster groups, therefore, may concentrate on opportunities for deliberate practice of the FRIENDS programme with other teachers using a variety of engaging materials and prompts.

NEPS psychologists and teachers who participated in a cluster group provided reflections on content based on their experiences and what could have been done differently to achieve best practice, as shown in Figure 21. Taken together, the reflections encourage additional groupwork

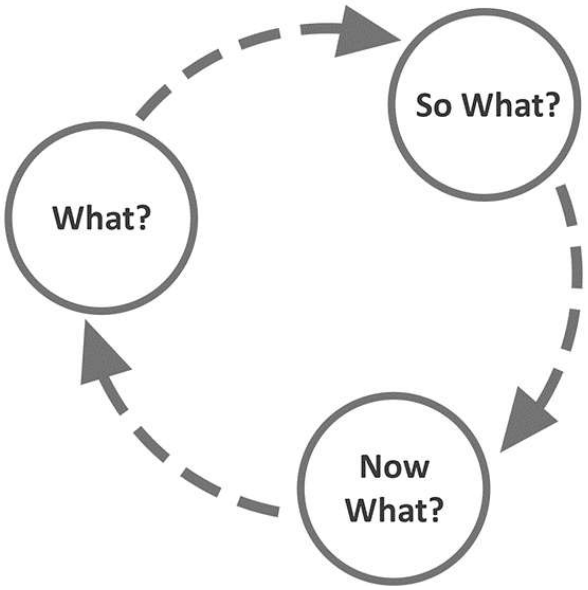
on the steps to implementing the programme, goal setting around implementation and using VIG to showcase real-world examples of the programme in schools. The implication of targeted content around implementation is predicated, therefore, on the perspectives provided by teachers and psychologists within the study. To complete a critical review of the research, a final personal reflection on the research process is provided.

4.8 Personal Reflection on the Research Process

This section will focus on my own personal reflection of the doctoral research process, using the model adopted by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001). This model argues that critical reflection is composed of three central questions: 'what?', 'so what?' and 'now what?'.

Figure 22

Reflective Practice by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001)



As part of the present study on NEPS-delivered cluster groups, my experiences and actions have modified my understanding of 'what' a critical researcher is. A critical reflection of this

research means understanding the quality and shortcomings of its theory, study design, methods and analyses. My experience of training in Educational and Child Psychology at MIC has been significant in this regard as it has impacted my understanding of how to conduct doctoral level research.

The ‘so what’ aspect of the reflective model asks about why this matters or why a critical refection of the research counts. In the process of exploring cluster groups, which have been identified as a practice-based priority, I find it rewarding that the present research has the potential to inform the delivery of cluster groups in the future. The research also matters because questioning and scrutinizing the scientific strengths of my arguments has allowed me to be conscious of evidence that is contrary to my assumptions and beliefs, which will benefit my future work as an educational psychologist. This, of course, was challenging at times and I felt tested in maintaining flexibility as a researcher, as the project was refined over time and unforeseen decisions were made based on new evidence.

In terms of my experience as a critical researcher, I have thought about the value of this research in building on best practice for cluster groups and FRIENDS implementation. I think the practical utility of recommendations emerging from the study has the potential to benefit psychologists and teachers who play a role in the implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. I feel the strengths of the study are the actionable recommendations and application to practice for teachers and psychologists working on the ground, which has sustained my curiosity in the research topic.

Having reflected on my personal journey, the insights gained not only enrich my understanding but highlight significant implications of the work. A closer examination of this

research on the field of educational and child psychology is provided in the impact statement below.

5 Impact Statement

A systematic review was conducted to add to the under-researched area of teachers' experiences and perspectives of FRIENDS implementation. The empirical study of the thesis aimed to explore teachers' and psychologists' perspectives of cluster groups in supporting implementation. Although some research has explored teachers' perspectives on implementation (e.g., Skryabina et al., 2016; Green & Atkinson, 2016), no studies have looked specifically at the potential role of cluster groups. To the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first to explore NEPS cluster groups as a response to implementation challenges in practice.

This research contributes significantly to the FRIENDS and implementation science literature. Teachers and psychologists report cluster groups as an effective means of progressing implementation in schools. Best practice for cluster groups and novel methods for achieving it have been evidenced as part of this study. As a substantial contribution to the applied work of NEPS psychologists, this research builds understanding of good practice for teacher training and professional development.

An estimated number of 170 NEPS psychologists provide annual FRIENDS training to 1000 teachers at a national level, which suggests the importance of the current area of research. Despite the number of cluster groups operating at a smaller level to date, the potential for psychologists to efficiently reach a large number of school personnel is promising. The current research has highlighted some of the achievements of the cluster group initiative to date including peer sharing and reflection and programme-related guidance. It has also highlighted the potential for expanding the roll-out of this support on a more frequent basis, providing increased opportunities for groupwork, teacher-led facilitation and activities tailored towards the practical implementation of the FRIENDS lessons (Ding et al., 2021).

These suggestions regarding how NEPS cluster groups could be improved were facilitated by the conceptual framework of AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The final stage of the AI cycle is the realization of best practice and enacting plans for the optimal cluster group (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The researcher intends to bring about these changes for practice by disseminating findings from the study with NEPS and other scholars in the format of research briefs and conference presentations. A distinct effort is made in sharing the knowledge of this study with practitioners as they endeavor to support teachers and schools with implementing the FRIENDS programmes at a ground level with children and young people.

It is hoped that recommendations from this study will help inform the delivery of cluster groups in the future and profit educational psychologists with practical insights on how to design cluster groups that build teachers' capacity with implementation. While the current research has looked specifically at FRIENDS cluster groups, the findings may be applied as a tool to improve the implementation of any manualised, evidence-based programme in schools. Similar to previous research (Goodwin et al., 2023; March et al., 2022; Askell-Williams et al., 2013), the current work has shown that quality training is a determinant of implementation success. It is motivating to see how collaborative efforts can transform classroom practice and ensure all psychologists and educators feel supported in this vital work. In view of this consideration, the researcher encourages further exploration of high-quality cluster groups that address the professional learning needs of all teachers and school communities.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Studies excluded with rationale (Broad Literature Review Question)

Study	Rationale
Huang et al. (2022).	Concerned with fidelity/quality of implementation approach and effectiveness of intervention. Teacher perspectives of implementation were not investigated. Excluded by Criteria 5.
O' Farrell, Wilson & Shiel (2023).	Teachers' perceptions of the barriers to assessment of mental health in schools, not barriers to intervention implementation. Excluded by Criteria 4.
Osagiede et al. (2018).	Service delivery by on-site therapists and community-based therapists. Excluded by Criteria 2.
Houdyshell, Kratt & Greene (2021).	Wrong design, setting and population. Excluded by Criteria 2.
Zhang, Bai & Li, (2020).	Studied the effect of resilience on the mental health of special education teachers. Inappropriate study design. Excluded by Criteria 2.
Heller et al. (2011).	Inappropriate study design. Excluded by Criteria 2.
Mulla & Bawazir (2020).	Purpose of the study was to explore the levels of mental health knowledge among secondary school female teachers, their readiness to support the mental health needs of their students, and the perceived barriers to supporting mental health. Excluded by Criteria 3.

Tyson, Roberts & Kane (2009).	Impact of mental health promotion programme on teachers' job-related affective wellbeing. Excluded by Criteria 2.
Torsheim & Samdal (2004).	Not an intervention. Excluded by Criteria 3.

Appendix B

Included Studies (Broad Review Question)

Included Studies
March, A., Stapley, E., Hayes, D., Town, R., & Deighton, J. (2022). Barriers and facilitators to sustaining school-based mental health and wellbeing interventions: a systematic review. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *19*(6), 3587.
Goodwin, J., Behan, L., & O'Brien, N. (2023). Teachers' views and experiences of student mental health and well-being programmes: A systematic review. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Mental Health*, 1-20.
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Han, S. S., & Weiss, B. (2005). Sustainability of teacher implementation of school-based mental health programs. *Journal of abnormal child psychology*, *33*, 665-679.
Maclean, L., & Law, J. M. (2022). Supporting primary school students' mental health needs: Teachers' perceptions of roles, barriers, and abilities. *Psychology in the Schools*, *59*(11), 2359-2377.
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Appendix C

Included Studies (Systematic Review Question)

Included Studies
Skryabina, E., Morris, J., Byrne, D., Harkin, N., Rook, S., & Stallard, P. (2016). Child, teacher and parent perceptions of the FRIENDS classroom-based universal anxiety prevention programme: A qualitative study. *School Mental Health*, *8*, 486-498.
Kösters, M. P., Chinapaw, M. J., Zwaanswijk, M., van der Wal, M. F., Utens, E. M., & Koot, H. M. (2017). FRIENDS for life: implementation of an indicated prevention programme targeting childhood anxiety and depression in a naturalistic setting. *Mental Health & Prevention*, *6*, 44-50.
Green, S. L., & Atkinson, S. (2016). Implementation Issues: a 'FRIENDS for life' course in a mainstream secondary school. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *32*(3), 217-230.
Wigelsworth, M., Squires, G., Birchinall, L., Kalambouka, A., Lendrum, A., Black, L., & Britteon, P. (2018). FRIENDS for life.
Kösters, M. P., Chinapaw, M. J., Zwaanswijk, M., van der Wal, M. F., Utens, E. M., & Koot, H. M. (2012). Study design of 'FRIENDS for Life': Process and effect evaluation of an indicated school-based prevention programme for childhood anxiety and depression. *Bmc public health*, *12*(1), 1-8.
Henefer, J., & Rodgers, A. (2013). 'FRIENDS for Life': a School-based Positive Mental Health Programme. Research Project Overview and Findings. National Behaviour Support Service.
Ruttledge, R., Devitt, E., Greene, G., Mullany, M., Charles, E., Frehill, J., & Moriarty, M. (2016). A randomised controlled trial of the FRIENDS for Life emotional resilience programme delivered by teachers in Irish primary schools. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *33*(2), 69-89.

Appendix C

Studies excluded with rationale (Systematic Review Question)

Study	Rationale
Zwaanswijk & Kösters, (2015).	Criteria 4. Outcomes. Children's and parents' evaluations of Friends for Life. Research did not consider teachers' experiences.
Clarke, O' Sullivan & Barry (2010).	Criteria 3. Measures. Research examines teachers' experiences of the process of implementing Zippy's Friends, which is a different programme.
Clarke, Sixsmith & Barry (2015).	Criteria 3. Zippy's Friends.

Appendix D

Example of Completed Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Studies (JBI, 2019)

Study Reference:
Skryabina, E., Morris, J., Byrne, D., Harkin, N., Rook, S., & Stallard, P. (2016). Child, teacher and parent perceptions of the FRIENDS classroom-based universal anxiety prevention programme: A qualitative study. *School Mental Health*, *8*, 486-498.

JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research

Reviewer: Oliver O' Driscoll Date: 01/11/2023

	Yes	No	Unclear	Not applicable
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	√	☐	☐	☐
2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	√	☐	☐	☐
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	√	☐	☐	☐
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	√	☐	☐	☐
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	√	☐	☐	☐

6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?	☐	√	☐	☐
7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice- versa, addressed?	☐	√	☐	☐
8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	√	☐	☐	☐
9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	√	☐	☐	☐
10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data?	√	☐	☐	☐

Overall appraisal: Include √ Exclude ☐ Seek further info ☐

Comments (Including reason for exclusion)

The beliefs and values of the researcher and their potential influence on the study were not discussed. Their cultural and theoretical orientation was not clarified.

The study obtained a score of 8/10.

Appendix E

Example of Completed Coding Protocol for Group Experimental and Quasi Experimental Research (Gersten et al., 2004)

Study Reference: Kösters, M. P., Chinapaw, M. J., Zwaanswijk, M., van der Wal, M. F., Utens, E. M., & Koot, H. M. (2017). FRIENDS for life: implementation of an indicated prevention programme targeting childhood anxiety and depression in a naturalistic setting. *Mental Health & Prevention*, *6*, 44-50.

Essential Quality Indicators

Quality indicators for describing participants

1. Was sufficient information provided to identify the population of **participants**?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

2. Were appropriate procedures used to increase the likelihood that relevant characteristics of participants in the **sample were comparable** across conditions?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

The school composed a group that was balanced regarding age and sex

3. Was sufficient information given characterizing the **interventionists** or teachers provided? Did it indicate whether they were comparable across conditions?
☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Comment: Prevention workers were described nebulously, only that they did not receive specific or additional training or supervision during the trial.

Quality Indicators for Implementation of the Intervention and Description of Comparison Conditions

4. Was the **intervention** clearly described and specified?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

5. Was the **fidelity of implementation** described and assessed?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

A number of randomly selected sessions were observed by two observers, to prevent coder drifting and to ensure that scoring was consistent.

6. Was the nature of services provided in **comparison conditions** described?

☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Quality Indicators for Outcome Measures

7. Were **multiple measures** used to provide an appropriate balance between measures closely aligned with the intervention and measures of generalized performance?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

8. Were outcomes for capturing the **interventions effect** measured at the **appropriate times?**
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Quality Indicators for Data Analysis

9. Were the **data analysis techniques** appropriately linked to key research questions and hypotheses? Were they appropriately linked to the limit of analysis in the study?
☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Comment: Only data from the intervention groups were used. As no data were collected from the control groups, only cautious claims should be made about the effect of the intervention on outcomes of child anxiety.

10. Did the research report include not only inferential statistics but also **effect size** calculations?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Desirable Quality Indicators

1. Was data available on **attrition rates** among intervention samples? Was severe overall attrition documented? If so, is attrition comparable across samples? Is overall attrition less than 30%?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

2. Did the study provide not only **internal consistency reliability but also test-retest reliability and interrater reliability** (when appropriate) for outcome measures??
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

3. Were **outcomes** for capturing the intervention's effect **measured beyond an immediate posttest?**
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

4. Was evidence of the **criterion-related validity and construct validity** of the measures provided?
☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

5. Did the research team assess not only surface features of fidelity implementation (e.g., number of minutes allocated to the intervention or teacher/interventionist following procedures specified), but also **examine quality of implementation?**
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Yes. The researchers examined protocol adherence and the quality of teacher implementation using Programme and Group Leader Integrity Checklists (Barrett et al., 1999).

6. Was any documentation of the nature of **instruction** or series provided in comparison conditions?
☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

7. Did the research report include **actual audio or videotape excerpts** that capture the nature of the intervention?
☐Yes ☒No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

8. Were **results** presented in a **clear**, **coherent** fashion?
☒Yes ☐No ☐N/A ☐Unknown/Unable to Code

Appendix F

Example of Completed Coding Protocol for Mixed Methods Research (Hong et al., 2018)

Study Reference:

Green, S. L., & Atkinson, S. (2016). Implementation Issues: a 'FRIENDS for life' course in a mainstream secondary school. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *32*(3), 217-230.

Part I: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018

Category of study designs	**Methodological quality criteria**	**Responses**			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	x			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	x			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	x			*Implementation was quantitatively and qualitatively assessed in order to gather a well-rounded and accurate evaluation of implementation.*
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	x			*Different methods were used to answer the research question (quant for how the FRIENDS programme was implemented and qual for features of context impacting implementation).*

	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	x			*Yes. Implementation characteristics are clearly described and activity theory effectively used to find trends in interview data.*
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?		x		*Quantitative data revealed concerns around programme integrity (60% of suggested activities were implemented), however, this was not expanded upon further or explained by qualitative interviews. Indication that rules and division of labour may impact on programme integrity, however, this is unclear.*
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	x			

Appendix G

Criteria and Rationale for Quality of Methodology (WoE A) for Systematic Review Question

WoE A	Criteria	Rationale
HIGH (3)	• Study meets at least 9 essential criteria and 4 desirable criteria on quasi-experimental protocol by Gersten et al. (2005). • Study meets at least 8 out of 10 criteria on Qualitative Appraisal checklist (JBI, 2019) • Study meets 5 criteria on the Mixed methods Appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018)	Studies that achieve a high weight of evidence clearly explain the quality of their methods according to the criteria of each tradition involved.
MEDIUM (2)	• Study meets at least 7 essential criteria and 3 desirable criteria on experimental protocol by Gersten et al. (2005). • Study meets between 5 and 7 criteria on Qualitative Appraisal checklist (JBI, 2019). • Study meets between 2 and 4 criteria on the Mixed methods Appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018)	Studies that achieve a medium weight of evidence are not as detailed or clear to warrant a high weight of evidence for methodological quality.
LOW (1)	• Study meets at least 9 criteria altogether on quasi-experimental protocol. • Study meets less than 5 criteria on Qualitative Appraisal checklist (JBI, 2019). • Study meets between 0 and 1 criteria on the Mixed methods Appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018)	Methodology poorly explained or flaws in research design

(Adapted from Gough, 2007; Koller et al., 2019)

Appendix H

Criteria and Rationale for Appropriateness of Methodology in Answering the Review Question (WoE B)

WoE B	Criteria	Rationale
HIGH (3)	• Qualitative Study	Provides a strong weight of evidence for studies which examine process delivery or implementation.
MEDIUM (2)	• Questionnaire, non-experimental evaluations or mixed-method research	Second highest weight of evidence by Petticrew and Roberts.
LOW (1)	• Quasi-experimental designs	Lowest on weight of evidence in answering questions relating to implementation process or delivery.

(Adapted from Gough, 2007; Koller et al., 2019)

Appendix I

Criteria and Rationale for Relevance of the Studies' Evidence in Answering the Review Question (WoE C)

WoE C	Criteria	Rationale
HIGH (3)	• Adequate measures/data that are focussed on: teachers' experiences of the barriers and facilitators to FRIENDS implementation.	Criteria are highly relevant to current review question. Includes measures and evidence that reflect the concepts of the review.
MEDIUM (2)	• Data not fully relevant to the focus of the review as mentioned above. • Data focuses on implementation fidelity of FRIENDS programme. • Study does not target cohort of teachers implementing the programme.	Strands of evidence do not capture the breadth of the research question for a high weight of evidence
LOW (1)	• Outcome measurements are inadequate for the focus of the review.	Does not relate to the review question

(Adapted from Gough, 2007; Koller et al., 2019)

Appendix J

Mapping the Field: Summary of Included Studies (Systematic Review Question)

Authors and Aim of Study	*Country*	*Participants*	*Design*	*Measures*	*Key Findings (incl. effect sizes)*
Skryabina et al. (2016) To evaluate the views of children, parents and school staff about a universal school-based anxiety prevention programme FRIENDS.	UK	Three groups of participants: children (115), teachers (47) and parents (20) in primary education.	Qualitative descriptive study using semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups undertaken as part of a large randomised controlled trial PACES (Preventing Anxiety in Children through Education in Schools).	Participants were asked for feedback about their experience and perceptions of the FRIENDS programme, their overall views, their most positive and negative experiences, the skills the children learned, programme contribution to the school PSHE curriculum and how the children had benefited. In addition, parents were asked about changes in their	Analysis identified programme delivery as one of six distinctive themes. Barriers: teachers reported that there were too many strategies, not enough time to cover content and too much passive learning. Many felt the sessions were too long and the intervention overlapped with the PSHE curriculum. However, these opinions were divided.

				children's mood and anxiety, general behaviour, overall confidence, Friendship, engagement in out of school social and recreational activities and educational progress.	Facilitators: Session plans, good fit in busy timetable, practical exercises, valuable in teaching about emotional regulation, FRIENDS workbook, opportunity for groupwork and enjoyment of hands-on activities. Authors conclude that social acceptability and perceive value of intervention impact teacher implementation.
Kosters et al. (2012) Part of the study's aim was to conduct a process evaluation to investigate programme integrity.	Amster dam	Children from grades 6, 7 and 8.	Process evaluation of whether the programme was implemented according to the protocol followed on from a randomised control trial.	Aspects of programme integrity as a secondary outcome measure were evaluated using the measures in Kosters et al. (2017).	The application of the FRIENDS for life intervention in schools allows the opportunity to reach a large number of children. The extent of implementation (adherence, exposure: number of sessions implemented,

					quality of delivery, responsiveness) are likely to affect intervention outcomes.
Kosters et al. (2017) To assess the implementation characteristics of FRIENDS for Life in a naturalistic school setting	Amster dam	35 FRIENDS for Life intervention groups at 23 elementary schools consisting of a total of 339 children.	Part of a larger quasi-experimental trial evaluating the effects of FRIENDS for Life, in which the intervention group received FRIENDS for Life, control group received no intervention.	Anxiety measured by the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) by Chorpita et al., (2000). Implementation characteristics were assessed through structured live observations by trained observers. Standard integrity checklists were used to evaluate protocol adherence (Integrity checklist) and quality of delivery (Group leader checklist) and likert scales to measure participant responsiveness.	Implementation characteristics (e.g., protocol adherence/fidelity, dosage, quality of delivery) were not significantly associated with programme outcomes/effectiveness in self-reported anxiety and depressive symptoms at post-intervention. Replicated finding by Durlak & DuPre (2008) and Dane & Schneider (1998) Prevention workers did not adhere completely to the protocol.

Wigelsworth et al. (2018) One objective was to conduct an implementation evaluation of the FRIENDS programme delivered by external professionals	UK	122 Year 5 classes in 79 participating primary schools	Mixed methods. Contextual detail regarding the implementation of FRIENDS was captured through the participation of 10 case study schools.	Implementation evaluation involved interviews with various stakeholders, classroom observations, focus groups with pupils, self-reports and practice questionnaires. Quant. assessment tools for 4 subdomains: fidelity/adaptation/quality/engagement and reach. Programme acceptability (degree to which the intervention is judged as suitable, agreeable, convenient or satisfactory) by schools was considered important for FRIENDS implementation.	Several factors were identified as affecting the implementation of FRIENDS. Time was unanimously found to be the biggest barrier in ensuring consistency and quality of delivery. Schools often struggled to fit the FRIENDS sessions within the school timetable. At a school level, half of the case studies reported positive involvement from senior leaders while other schools said it was unclear, limited or lacked wider school involvement. Competing priorities such as space and timetabling issues. At the intervention level, there were mixed responses about the manual, ‘bible’ vs ‘restrictive’. Tone of resources geared

					towards Australian lifestyle. Activity books were rated positively, with half of schools believing it would be worth continuing the programme in an adapted format. Overall, mixed responses from teachers and divided opinions
Green and Atkinson (2016) To evaluate the implementation of 'FRIENDS for Life' within one secondary school and the impact of participation in the programme on students' emotional distress and coping strategies.	UK	5 pupils aged 11-13 in secondary school	Mixed methods case study of one school. Implementation was quantitatively assessed using records of intervention implementation (proportion of intended tasks implemented) and semi-structured	Data regarding implementation was collected and framed using activity theory (Daniels, 2004), which argues that implementation is situated within a broader social, historical and cultural context.	Contextual features impacting upon implementation: Time (contradiction between time available and time required), space for delivery, experience and training and nature of student-implementer relationship. Programme adherence was lower than expected (59.6% of the suggested programme activities were delivered), exposure was less than ideal (7-

	interviews with learning mentors (to discuss aspects of programme implementation e.g., training, delivery, content, participants, future use).	9 sessions attended) and adaptation occurred (i.e., a number of aspects were not delivered). The lack of involvement of parents in the homework activities was a barrier to pupil contribution. Aspects of the programme delivered with fidelity included the encouragement of positive thinking and identification of good experiences, relaxation techniques and recognising emotions and coping supports. Incomplete programme implementation and fidelity results in less impact of FRIENDS on students' emotional distress and coping skills. Training and instruction

					manual alone may not be sufficient to bring about high-quality implementation. Suggestion of ongoing supervision by EP's.
Ruttledge et al., (2016) The final aim of the study was to examine if teachers, trained and supported by educational psychologists, were able to deliver the FRIENDS for Life programme effectively.	Ireland	709 children from 27 primary schools	Randomised controlled design whereby schools were used as the unit of random assignment to either an intervention or a to a wait-list control group	Anxiety, self-concept, behaviour, coping, school connectedness and social validity	Qualitative data attested to teachers' capacity to deliver the programme. Fidelity checklists, confirming that each component of the programme had been completed, indicated high adherence to the programme. Authors conclude that a challenge is to continue delivering evidenced-based programmes with fidelity through ongoing support and coaching.
Henefer & Rodgers (2013)	Ireland	244 students in 26 Irish post-primary schools.	Mixed Method study	Fidelity checklists including quantitative (for each activity how well they felt they had	Two themes that emerged included 'more time for preparation and delivery' and

Research Question 2: Can the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme be effectively delivered through the Post-Primary School Curriculum?	achieved the stated aims) and qualitative (anecdotal) measures. Teachers' Review document after implementing the programme e.g. rom your experience of teaching the programme this year, do you have suggestions for ways in which the implementation of 'FRIENDS for Life' could be improved next year?	'adapting of content'. Many teachers felt under pressure to deliver the ten sessions as set forward and believed that starting the programme earlier in the academic year would be one way to improve implementation.

Appendix K

Typology of Evidence (Petticrew & Roberts, 2003)

Table 1 An example of a typology of evidence (example refers to social interventions in children) (adapted from Muir Gray[24])

Research question	Qualitative research	Survey	Case-control studies	Cohort studies	RCTs	Quasi-experimental studies	Non experimental evaluations	Systematic reviews
Effectiveness Does this work? Does doing this work better than doing that?				+	++	+		+++
Process of service delivery How does it work?	++	+					+	+++
Salience Does it matter?	++	++						+++
Safety Will it do more good than harm?	+		+	+	++	+	+	+++
Acceptability Will children/parents be willing to or want to take up the service offered?	++	+			+	+	+	+++
Cost effectiveness Is it worth buying this service?					++			+++
Appropriateness Is this the right service for these children?	++	++						++
Satisfaction with the service Are users, providers, and other stakeholders satisfied with the service?	++	++	+	+				+

Appendix L

Ethical Approval

MIREC-5, Created November 2021

MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL

MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:	A23-057 2nd Amendment

1. PROJECT TITLE:
NEPS Cluster Groups in Supporting Friends for Life Implementation: An Appreciative Enquiry

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Oliver O'Driscoll
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher (DECPsy)

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

☐	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
✓	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair ***pro tem*** without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
☐	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

Proposed amendments:

1. Due to changes in the research field, the research is now framed by the following research questions: What is working well about the cluster group support for Friends for Life implementation?, What would the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group for Friends for Life implementation look like? and What plans could be put in place by NEPS to achieve the ideal cluster group? 2. Research Design: The mixed methods research design has changed to an appreciative inquiry-based qualitative design. AI is a strengths-based approach that seeks to reflect the high-point moments and best experiences of attending a cluster group. It is a cyclical process that seeks to identify and build on what is working well in order to achieve positive change (Cooperrider et al., 2008). It was determined that AI would be an appropriate methodological tool to explore teachers' and psychologists' experiences of the cluster group and what the ideal cluster group might look like 3. Data Collection: Previously, the researcher was to collect data from teachers who had attended a cluster group via online semi-structured interviews and a survey. The researcher was then to attend and observe a second cluster group, hold semi-structured interviews with teachers and NEPS psychologists and administer pre and post survey questions (see previous amendment form). The previous methods are now replaced by anonymous web-based questionnaires for school staff (click https://forms.office.com/e/4Pzuvw8qMr) who attended a previous cluster group (n≈14) and NEPS psychologists (n≈6) (click https://forms.office.com/e/bZUmYkhwLr). All appendices are attached here. Developments in the field and further design consultation indicated that the present design is the most suitable to answer the research questions. The school staff questionnaire will be piloted with school staff trained in Friends to identify potential issues with the clarity or comprehension of questions and make revisions to improve quality. A list of pilot questions for school staff is shown in the appendices. Participants can decline to participate in the study by simply leaving the survey at any stage without giving a reason and without personal consequence. Once participants complete the survey and click submit, they cannot withdraw their data as it is stored anonymously. 4. Changes to Supporting Documentation: Please see attached the information sheets for NEPS psychologists and teachers. An electronic check box at the start of the questionnaire confirms that participants consent to participation. The previously included inducements for participants in the form of digital gift vouchers have been removed. 5. Data Analysis: The previous mixed methods triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data has changed to qualitative analysis only using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

I have reviewed this proposal and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	23rd May, 2024

Appendix M

Recruitment Materials

Email to School Staff who attended a FRIENDS Cluster Group

RE: Research into Friends Cluster Groups

Dear Teacher,

I hope your return to school has gone well and you've enjoyed the good weather we have had recently.

You'll remember (hopefully!) that we met a group of you at the end of last year in the Education Centre at a FRIENDS Cluster Group, where we shared updates and ideas for the programme. Thank you very much for your participation, it was really helpful and informative.

I am sending a message on behalf of my colleague, Olly O' Driscoll, a trainee educational psychologist. Olly is conducting a study to explore teachers' experiences of cluster groups and how they contribute to teachers' implementation of the FRIENDS programmes. **Currently, greater research is needed to understand how cluster groups can best support teachers to implement the FRIENDS programme in their school or class setting.** Even though it is a short while ago now since the cluster group, **your insights as a teacher who has been involved in this process would be incredibly valuable!**

Here is a questionnaire link and there's further details below (attached also).

Questionnaire link

https://forms.office.com/e/u4fiK7MW6f.

We hope the programme is going well in your school and if you have any questions, you know where we are.

Best wishes,

(Cluster Group Facilitators)

_____
_____
_____
_____

Research Details

What was the cluster group?

The cluster group consisted of a community of teachers across several schools who attended a meeting to improve their practice in implementing the FRIENDS programme. Examples of activities facilitated by the NEPS psychologist may have included sharing updates on the programme, offering advice on best practice and providing opportunities to collaborate and exchange ideas.

What will I be asked?

The current research will ask you to identify the strengths and positive experiences of the cluster group you attended. The study also addresses what the ideal cluster group might look like for you, and the plans that NEPS could put in place to achieve this goal.

Research Format

The method of data collection for this study is an anonymous web-based questionnaire, which can be accessed here: ***https://forms.office.com/e/u4fiK7MW6f.***

The questionnaire will ask a series of closed and open-ended questions and will take a maximum of 20 minutes to complete.

Finally, Olly understands how busy your schedule is and appreciates, that by participating in this study, you'll have the opportunity to share your thoughts and provide practical recommendations that will help inform the delivery of cluster groups.

Follow-up Email to School Staff who attended a FRIENDS Cluster Group

Dear Teachers,

Thank you to those who have already completed the questionnaire about the cluster group you attended. Your feedback is incredibly valuable in helping to share practice and tailor future sessions for teachers. If you haven't had the chance yet, I kindly ask that you take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire. Your insights are essential, and every response makes a difference. I would really appreciate it if you could complete the questionnaire today, as I am keen to get working on the analysis of the data. I realise that you are of course extremely busy yourselves so your time and input is greatly appreciated!

https://forms.office.com/e/u4fiK7MW6f

Best regards,

Olly O' Driscoll

Information Letter for Teachers

Research study on the Role of Cluster Groups in Supporting Friends Implementation

What is the project about?

This project explores teachers' perspectives of Friends cluster groups facilitated by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). A cluster group consists of a community of previously trained teachers across several schools working together to improve their professional practice in implementing the Friends programme.

Why is it being undertaken?

The purpose of the research is to explore the strengths and positive experiences of cluster groups for Friends implementation. The study addresses what the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group might look like for teachers, and the plans and resources needed to achieve this goal.

To date, no evaluation of Friends cluster groups has been conducted and so greater understanding is needed to examine the benefits of cluster groups and what aspects of the existing cluster group, if any, could be improved to best assist teachers with implementing the programme.

What are the benefits of this research?

Should you wish to partake in this study, the data gathered will identify teachers' perspectives about what could be done to achieve the ideal scenario in the future. The study, therefore, will provide NEPS with practical recommendations from teachers that will help inform the future delivery of cluster groups in the context of Friends implementation.

Exactly what is involved?

The method of data collection for this study is an anonymous web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask a series of closed and open-ended questions and will take a maximum of 20 minutes to complete.

Right to withdraw and anonymity

Participation is voluntary. You are free to decline participation by withdrawing at any stage by simply leaving the questionnaire without giving a reason and without personal consequence. Consent will be asked of participants at the start of the questionnaire via a check box.

All data related to the questionnaire is anonymous. Once the questionnaire is completed the data will be stored anonymously. Please note, once you click submit on the questionnaire you won't be able to withdraw your data as it is stored anonymously.

How will the information be used / disseminated?

Anonymous data from respondents will be used to form the results section of the current thesis. The findings of the study will not be shared directly with school participants. Findings will be made available via the Mary Immaculate College Research Repository (MIRR), research conferences and future publications. As data are fully anonymous, all data records will be held by the researcher indefinitely.

How will confidentiality be kept?

As all data related to the questionnaire are anonymous, identifiable personal information such as participants names will not be known by the researcher.

What will happen to the data after the project has been completed?

The data will be used in my thesis and in other publications/conference presentations. The anonymous data will be retained permanently.

The following link will transfer you to the online questionnaire:
https://forms.office.com/e/4Pzuvw8qMr

Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

Olly O' Driscoll, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Email: [redacted]

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact my research supervisors, you may contact:

Dr. Therese Brophy, Lecturer in Educational and Child Psychology at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061 774767/ E-mail: Therese.Brophy@mic.ul.ie

Dr Aoife McLoughlin, Lecturer in Educational Psychology with expertise in Research Methodology, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. E-mail: Aoife.Mcloughlin@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number: A23-057) and the NEPS Research Ethics Committee (NREC) (approval number: 0620244). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Presentation to NEPS Psychologists on 17/09/2024 at Implementation Cluster Meeting

RE: Research into NEPS-facilitated Cluster Groups for Friends Implementation

Hello all,

My name is Olly O' Driscoll. I am a third year trainee on the Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology programme at Mary Immaculate College. I am in the process of conducting research for my doctoral thesis. I am writing to request your participation in the current research project.

The research aims to recruit educational psychologists with NEPS who are certified to train teachers in the Friends programmes (Fun Friends, Friends for Life or My Friends Youth) and have facilitated a cluster group. Psychologists who have not facilitated a cluster group are also eligible to participate in light of their varied knowledge and expertise in providing Friends training. The overall sample, therefore, may include a mix of educational psychologists with and without experience of facilitating a cluster group, and all of whom are certified Friends trainers.

A second sample of school staff who have previously attended a cluster group will also be recruited for the study.

What is the project about?

The research explores the strengths and positive experiences of NEPS-delivered cluster groups in supporting the implementation of the Friends programmes. The study also addresses what the ideal cluster group might look like, and the plans that NEPS could put in place to achieve this goal. To date, no evaluation of cluster groups has been conducted and so greater understanding is needed to examine how cluster groups contribute to teachers' implementation of the Friends programmes.

At a professional practice level, this research will provide NEPS with the opportunity to consider the recommendations from the study and may help inform the future delivery of cluster groups in the context of Friends implementation.

Research Format

The method of data collection for this study is an anonymous web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask a series of closed and open-ended questions and will take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete.

Background

Further information about the background of the study is provided in an information sheet for psychologists and is attached to this email. This information sheet details exactly what is involved.

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number: A23-057) and the NEPS Research Ethics Committee (NREC) (approval number: 0620244). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. The link to the questionnaire for NEPS psychologists can be accessed here: https://forms.office.com/e/bZUmYkhwLr

Yours sincerely,

Olly O' Driscoll

Information Letter for NEPS Psychologists

Research study on the Role of NEPS-delivered Cluster Groups in Supporting Friends Implementation

What is the project about?

This project explores teachers' and psychologists' perspectives of cluster groups facilitated by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to support teachers' implementation of the Friends programmes. Cluster groups consist of a community of previously trained teachers across several schools working together to improve their professional practice in implementing Friends.

NEPS-delivered cluster groups aim to empower teachers to implement the Friends programme in their school or class setting. The purpose is to promote the practical application of new learning and skills in the classroom. Examples of activities include sharing updates on the Friends programme, offering advice on best practice and providing opportunities to collaborate and exchange ideas.

Who is eligible for recruitment?

This project aims to recruit 6-12 educational psychologists with NEPS who are certified to train teachers in the Friends programmes (Fun Friends, Friends for Life or My Friends Youth). Psychologists who are certified Friends trainers and have facilitated a cluster group are prioritised. In practice, this means that their responses to the questionnaire are sought first. Psychologists who have not facilitated a cluster group are also eligible to participate in light of their varied knowledge and expertise in providing Friends training. Therefore, the overall sample may include a mix of educational psychologists with and without experience of facilitating a cluster group, and all of whom are certified Friends trainers.

Why is it being undertaken?

The purpose of the research is to explore what is working well in terms of cluster group support for Friends implementation. The study also addresses what the ideal NEPS-delivered cluster group might look like, and the plans and resources needed to achieve this goal.

To date, no evaluation of Friends cluster groups has been conducted and so greater understanding is needed to examine the strengths of cluster groups and what aspects of the existing cluster group, if any, could be improved to best assist teachers with implementing the programme.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the study will provide NEPS with practical recommendations that will help inform the future delivery of cluster groups in the context of Friends implementation.

Exactly what is involved?

The method of data collection for this study is an anonymous web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask a series of closed and open-ended questions and will take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete.

Right to anonymity

All data related to each psychologist is anonymous. Consent will be asked at the start of the questionnaire via a check box. All data related to the questionnaire is anonymous. Once the questionnaire is completed the data will be stored anonymously. Please note, once you click submit at the end the questionnaire you won't be able to withdraw your data, as it will be stored anonymously.

Right to withdraw

You are free to decline your participation without giving a reason and without personal consequence. You can decline participation by exiting the questionnaire at any point. All data related to the questionnaire will be anonymous.

How will the information be used / disseminated?

Anonymous data from respondents will be used to form the results section of the current thesis. The findings of the study will not be shared directly with school participants. Findings will be made available via the Mary Immaculate College Research Repository (MIRR), research conferences and future publications. As data are fully anonymous, all data records will be held by the researcher indefinitely.

How will confidentiality be kept?

As all data related to the questionnaire are anonymous, identifiable personal information such as participants names will not be known by the researcher.

What will happen to the data after the project has been completed?

The data will be used in my thesis and in other publications/conference presentations. The anonymous data will be retained permanently.

The following link will transfer you to the online questionnaire:
https://forms.office.com/e/bZUmYkhwLr

Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

Olly O' Driscoll, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Email: [redacted]

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact my research supervisors, you may contact:

Dr. Therese Brophy, Lecturer in Educational and Child Psychology, Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061 774767/ E-mail: Therese.Brophy@mic.ul.ie

Dr Aoife McLoughlin, Lecturer in Educational Psychology with expertise in Research Methodology, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. E-mail: Aoife.Mcloughlin@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number: A23-057) and the NEPS Research Ethics Committee (NREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

List of Questions following the pilot questionnaire

1. What did you think about the length of the questionnaire?
2. Were the questions clearly understandable?
3. Were any questions or terms confusing or difficult to answer?
4. Were there any questions you would like to see changed or removed?
5. Did you encounter any technical issues navigating the questionnaire?

Additions made to the Questionnaire based on Pilot Data

At the time of the cluster group:

- what was your role?
- how was the programme being implemented in your school?
- which FRIENDS programme was the CG convened for? and
- did implementation take place before or after the cluster group?

Appendix N

Pilot Teacher Questionnaire[1]

Pilot: Exploring Teachers' Perspectives of FRIENDS Cluster Groups

Purpose of Questionnaire

Cluster groups are a key feature of the support and development service offered by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Within the current context, a cluster group consists of a community of teachers who are trained to deliver the Friends programme in their school or class setting. As part of the cluster group, teachers across several schools attend a meeting to improve their practice in implementing Friends.

This questionnaire will briefly ask about your training and experience of implementing the FRIENDS programme. It will also ask you to imagine what the ideal cluster group might look like for you and what plans could be put in place by NEPS to achieve it.

[1] The questionnaire for the pilot sample excluded questions that asked about what worked well during the cluster group.

Consent

By electronically ticking the boxes below, I confirm that:

Please select 5 options.

- [ ] I have read the Participant Information Sheet
- [ ] I understand what the project is about
- [ ] I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can decline to participate in the study without giving a reason and without consequence.
- [ ] I am aware that the questionnaire is anonymous
- [ ] I understand that by submitting the questionnaire with my responses I am consenting to take part in this research

Friends Training and Role

Please provide some information about your Friends training and role by ticking the boxes be- low that most closely represent your experience.

Was your Friends training completed via:

○ Online training ○ In-person training

Which Friends programme(s) did you receive training in?

- [ ] Fun Friends
- [ ] Friends for Life
- [ ] My Friends Youth

Have you completed the online refresher training on the Friends hub? *

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

What year did you last receive Friends training from NEPS? *

What was your role at the time of Friends training? *

- [ ] Mainstream Class Teacher
- [ ] Special Education Teacher
- [ ] Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)
- [ ] Special School Teacher
- [ ] Principal

☐ Other e.g., HSCL

Programme Implementation and Support

Please provide a little information about your experience of implementing the Friends programme.

Have you implemented the Friends programme? *

- ○ Yes I have implemented all of the lessons
- ○ Yes I have implemented most of the lessons
- ○ Yes I have implemented some of the lessons
- ○ I have not implemented the programme

In your most recent implementation, how many of the lessons did you facilitate? *

How many Friends programme deliveries have you facilitated? *

Which Friends programme did you facilitate? *

- ○ Fun Friends
- ○ Friends for Life
- ○ My Friends Youth

How is the programme implemented in your school? *

- ☐ Whole class (e.g., single stream or multi-grade)
- ☐ Whole class (more than one classroom in my school)
- ☐ Targeted group e.g. for pupils identified with emotional distress/anxiety
- ☐ Individual student(s)
- ☐ The programme is not being implemented

Have you received follow-up consultation or advice from the school's educational psychologist in relation to Friends implementation? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What was the nature of this advice/consultation from NEPS? *

Imagining What the Ideal Cluster Group Could Be

Five key considerations have been identified in the literature when structuring cluster groups for teachers. These are grouping, frequency, facilitation, support and content. You are asked to imagine what the ideal cluster group for FRIENDS implementation could be in relation to each of these principles.

Grouping

Grouping refers to the way teachers are trained together in the cluster group, such as which teachers are involved, the number in the group and the location.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to group teachers for the cluster group? *

Frequency

Frequency means how often the cluster group is held

Ideally how frequently should teachers meet in their cluster group? How many sessions would there be and how long would the session last? *

Ideally, when would the cluster group be held? (i.e. before, during or after teachers implement?) *

Facilitation

Facilitation means identifying the ideal individual(s) to facilitate or lead the cluster group.

In your opinion, what would be the ideal profile of the individual who facilitates a cluster group? How would they coordinate with teachers? *

Support

Support refers to the development of quality training and support for facilitators of the cluster group

In your opinion, how could a cluster group facilitator be ideally supported? *

Content

Content refers to developing effective content for teachers in the cluster group.

Ideally, how would content for the cluster group sessions be decided and what might this content look like? *

Are there any other considerations you would like to mention about the ideal cluster group?

Designing What Will Be

This final section will ask about concrete plans and resources for turning the ideal cluster group into reality. While responses relating to financial, staffing and logistical issues may be relevant, please consider as many ways in which the 'dream' could be achieved.

What could NEPS/a NEPS psychologist do to turn the ideal cluster group you mentioned previously into reality? *

What resources or supports could NEPS/ a NEPS psychologist put in place to action the ideal cluster group? *

Appendix O

Questionnaire for Cluster Group Teachers

Exploring Teachers' Perspectives of FRIENDS Cluster Groups

Purpose of Questionnaire

Cluster groups are a recent initiative offered by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to teachers trained in the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programmes. A cluster group is a community of teachers within a single school or across several schools who meet to improve their practice in implementing FRIENDS. The group is typically facilitated by a NEPS psychologist.

This questionnaire will briefly ask about your training and experience of implementing the Friends programme. The main part of the questionnaire will inquire into your perspectives of what worked well during your recent attendance at a Friends cluster group. Finally, questions about the ideal cluster group and the plans that could be put in place to achieve it will be explored.

Consent

By electronically ticking the boxes below, I confirm that:

Please select 5 options.

- ☐ I have read the Participant Information Sheet
- ☐ I understand what the project is about
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can decline to participate in the study without giving a reason and without consequence.
- ☐ I am aware that the questionnaire is anonymous
- ☐ I understand that by submitting the questionnaire with my responses I am consenting to take part in this research

Friends Training and Role

Please provide some information about your Friends training and role by ticking the boxes be- low that most closely represent your experience.

Was your Friends training completed via:

○ Online training ○ In-person training

Which Friends programme(s) did you receive training in?

- [ ] Fun Friends
- [ ] Friends for Life
- [ ] My Friends Youth

Have you completed the online refresher training on the Friends hub? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What year did you last receive Friends training from NEPS? *

What was your role at the time of Friends training? *

- [ ] Mainstream Class Teacher
- [ ] Special Education Teacher
- [ ] Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)
- [ ] Special School Teacher
- [ ] Principal

☐ Other e.g., HSCL

Programme Implementation and Support

Please provide a little information about your experience of implementing the Friends programme.

Have you implemented the Friends programme? *

- ○ Yes I have implemented all of the lessons
- ○ Yes I have implemented most of the lessons
- ○ Yes I have implemented some of the lessons
- ○ I have not implemented the programme

In your most recent implementation, how many of the lessons did you facilitate? *

How many Friends programme deliveries have you facilitated? *

Which Friends programme did you facilitate? *

- ○ Fun Friends
- ○ Friends for Life
- ○ My Friends Youth

Have you received follow-up consultation or advice from the school's educational psychologist in relation to Friends implementation? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What was the nature of this advice/consultation from NEPS? *

At the time of the cluster group, what was your role?

- ☐ Mainstream Class Teacher
- ☐ Special Education Teacher
- ☐ Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)
- ☐ Special School Teacher
- ☐ Principal

At the time of your cluster group attendance, how was the programme being implemented in your school? *

- ☐ Whole class (e.g., single stream or multi-grade)
- ☐ Whole class (more than one classroom in my school)
- ☐ Targeted group e.g. for pupils identified with emotional distress/anxiety
- ☐ Individual student(s)
- ☐ The programme is not being implemented

Which Friends programme was the cluster group convened for?

- ☐ Fun Friends
- ☐ Friends for Life
- ☐ My Friends Youth
- ☐ Not specified
- ☐ All

How many cluster group meetings did you attend?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4 or more

Was the cluster group held online or in-person?

- ☐ Online
- ☐ In-person

Did you implement the Friends programme before or after your recent attendance at the cluster group?

- ☐ Before the cluster group
- ☐ After the cluster group
- ☐ I implemented the programme before and after the cluster group

Experience of a NEPS-delivered Cluster Group

The next section will ask about your recent experience of attending a Friends cluster group. The focus is on what worked well during the cluster group and how NEPS can deliver the ideal cluster group to school staff in the future.

Discovering the Best of What is Within the Cluster Group

What worked well about the cluster group in supporting you to implement the FRIENDS programme?

Were there any specific aspects or activities from the cluster group that you found most helpful with regards to implementing the programme?

Imagining What the Ideal Cluster Group Could Be

Five key considerations have been identified in the literature when structuring cluster groups for teachers. These are grouping, frequency, facilitation, support and content. You are asked to imagine what the ideal cluster group for FRIENDS implementation could be in relation to each of these principles.

Grouping

Grouping refers to the way teachers are trained together in the cluster group, such as which teachers are involved, the number in the group and the location.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to group teachers for the cluster group? *

Frequency

Frequency means how often the cluster group is held

Ideally how frequently should teachers meet in their cluster group? How many sessions would there be and how long would the session last? *

Ideally, when would the cluster group be held? (i.e. before, during or after teachers implement?) *

Facilitation

Facilitation means identifying the ideal individual(s) to facilitate or lead the cluster group.

In your opinion, who would be the ideal person(s) to facilitate a cluster group? What would their profile and background be? *

Support

This refers to the development of quality training and support for cluster group facilitators

In your opinion, how could a cluster group facilitator be ideally supported? *

Content

This refers to developing effective content for teachers in the cluster group to support them with implementing the FRIENDS programme.

Ideally, how would content for the cluster group sessions be decided and what might this content look like? *

Overall perspective of the Ideal Cluster Group

In thinking about the cluster group you attended, what could have been done differently to achieve the ideal?

Are there any other considerations you would like to mention about the ideal cluster group?

Designing What Will Be

This final section will ask about concrete plans and resources for turning the ideal cluster group into reality. While responses relating to financial, staffing and logistical issues may be relevant, please consider as many ways in which the 'dream' could be achieved.

What plans could a NEPS psychologist put in place to turn the ideal cluster group you mentioned previously into reality? *

What resources or supports would be needed to action the ideal cluster group? *

Appendix P

Questionnaire for NEPS Psychologists

Exploring NEPS Psychologists' Perspectives of FRIENDS Cluster Groups

Purpose of Questionnaire

Cluster groups are a recent support and development initiative offered by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to teachers trained in the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programmes. A cluster group is a community of teachers within a single school or across several schools who meet to improve their practice in implementing FRIENDS. The group is typically facilitated by a NEPS psychologist.

This questionnaire will briefly ask about your role and experience of training school staff in the Friends programmes. For those who have facilitated a Friends cluster group, the questionnaire will inquire into your perspectives of what worked well. Psychologists who have not facilitated a cluster group will be directed to the last two sections, which

will ask you to imagine what the ideal cluster group might look like and what plans could be put in place by NEPS to achieve it.

Consent

By electronically ticking the boxes below, I confirm that:

Please select 5 options.

- ☐ I have read the Participant Information Sheet
- ☐ I understand what the project is about
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can decline to participate in the study without giving a reason and without consequence.
- ☐ I am aware that the questionnaire is anonymous
- ☐ I understand that by submitting the questionnaire with my responses I am consenting to take part in this research

Your Role

Please provide some information about your role and Friends training by ticking the boxes below that most closely represent your experience.

- [ ] Educational Psychologist
- [ ] Senior Educational Psychologist
- [ ] Regional Director

Have you previously provided Friends training to school staff? *

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

How many years of experience do you have in providing Friends training? *

How many Friends trainings with teachers have you delivered (including in-person and online)?

Please tick the box below that best reflects your training and experience with the cluster group. *

- [ ] I am a certified Friends trainer who has not facilitated a cluster group. **Ticking this box will bring you to page 6/13 on the questionnaire**
- [ ] I am a cluster group facilitator part of the Friends Working Group
- [ ] I am a cluster group facilitator but not part of the Friends Working Group
- [ ] I am a Friends working group member who helped develop guidelines for the cluster group but have not facilitated a cluster

Which Friends programme was the cluster group convened for?

- ○ Fun Friends
- ○ Friends for Life
- ○ My Friends Youth
- ○ Not specified
- ○ All

How many teachers attended the cluster group?

Was the cluster group held online or in-person?

- ○ Online
- ○ In-person

How many cluster group meetings were held?

- ○ 1
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4 or more

Experience of a NEPS-delivered Cluster Group

The next section will ask about your recent experience of attending a Friends cluster group. The focus is on what worked

well during the cluster group and how NEPS can deliver the ideal cluster group to school staff in the future.

Discovering the Best of What is Within the Cluster Group

What worked well about the cluster group in supporting teachers to implement the FRIENDS programme?

Were there any specific aspects or activities from the cluster group that you found most helpful in supporting teachers with implementing the FRIENDS programme?

Imagining What the Ideal Cluster Group Could Be

Five key considerations have been identified in the literature when structuring cluster groups for teachers. These are grouping, frequency, facilitation, support and content. You are

asked to imagine what the ideal cluster group for FRIENDS implementation could be in relation to each of these principles.

Grouping

Grouping refers to the way teachers are trained together in the cluster group, such as which teachers are involved, the number in the group and the location.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to group teachers for the cluster group? *

Frequency

Frequency means how often the cluster group is held

Ideally how frequently should teachers meet in their cluster group? How many sessions would there be and how long would the session last? *

Ideally, when would the cluster group be held? (i.e. before, during or after teachers implement?) *

Facilitation

Facilitation means identifying the ideal individual(s) to facilitate or lead the cluster group.

In your opinion, who would be the ideal person(s) to facilitate a cluster group? What would their profile and background be? *

Support

This refers to the development of quality training and support for facilitators of the cluster group

In your opinion, how could a cluster group facilitator be ideally supported? *

Content

This refers to developing effective content for teachers in the cluster group to support them with implementing the FRIENDS programme.

Ideally, how would content for the cluster group sessions be decided and what might this content look like? *

Overall perspective of the Ideal Cluster Group

In thinking about your facilitation of the cluster group, what could have been done differently to achieve the ideal?
If you have not facilitated a cluster group, please skip this question

Are there any other considerations you would like to mention about the ideal cluster group?

Designing What Will Be

This final section will ask about concrete plans and resources for turning the ideal cluster group into reality. While responses relating to financial, staffing and logistical issues may be relevant, please consider as many ways in which the 'dream' could be achieved.

What plans could NEPS/a NEPS psychologist put in place to turn the ideal cluster group you mentioned previously into reality? *

What resources or supports would be needed to action the ideal cluster group? *

Appendix Q

15-Point Checklist in Conducting Good Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Process	No.	Criteria	Response
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'	All questionnaire responses transcribed to an appropriate level of detail and checked
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process	All quotations reviewed to generate coding.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive	Themes, and the findings described herein, were developed from a complete coding process of the entire dataset (see framework matrices). The coding process was thorough, inclusive and comprehensive, as all quotations were used to generate codes, and develop themes. Each theme was developed based on numerous subthemes gathered across a range of questionnaires and participants quotations.
	4	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated	Yes.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set	Yes.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive	Yes.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed- interpreted, made sense of- rather than just paraphrased or described	Yes, evident from the results.
	8	Analysis and data match each other- the extracts illustrate the analytic claims	The analysis and findings from it closely match the data set.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic	Yes.

	10	A good balance between analytical narrative and illustrative extracts is provided	Yes. Illustrative extracts have been used within the results section.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly	Yes.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated	Yes, stated in the methods section.
	13	There is good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done- i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent	Yes.

Appendix R

Research Question 1: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes

Themes	**Peer sharing and Reflection**				**Programme-related guidance**		**Satisfaction with the cluster group supports**
Subthemes	**A : (Subtheme) Groupwork activities e.g. focusing on implementation strengths, challenges and solutions**	**B : (Subtheme) Helpful for teachers to share and listen to their colleagues' experiences of implementing FRIENDS**	**C : (Subtheme) Learn best from other teachers**	**D : (Subtheme) Space and time to reflect on the barriers and benefits to implementing the programme**	**E : (Subtheme) Assistance with the books and online FRIENDS hub**	**F : (Subtheme) Providing updates and information about the programme**	**G : (Theme 3) Satisfaction with the format of the CG and the supports offered**
Cluster Teacher 1		Sharing ideas with other teachers The discussion with other teachers					
Cluster Teacher 2		Sharing knowledge and practice of other teachers in the group.					advice from experienced teachers/NEPS psychologist face to face

Cluster Teacher 3		Listening to other teachers who have already implemented the programme				It was a good refresher course	It was quite good. I couldn't fault it.
Cluster Teacher 4		It was great to meet other teachers that are using the FFL PROGRAM			learn about the online resources that are available		
Cluster Teacher 5		Hearing the perspectives and experiences of others and how it's implemented in schools			I found the online tools really helpful		I think they're (cluster groups) are very important for the continued successful implementation of the program in schools
Cluster Teacher 6		People shared information and what they had found was working well. I found it helpful to hear how people had adapted the program to their own context				I had my memory refreshed regarding things that I had learned at the initial training and forgotten.	I enjoyed looking at the resources and picture books on display. I think it worked very well overall.

P4	groups work on strengths, challenges	Sharing of experiences within the group, a community of practice.			demonstrating the Hub also.	Updates and information	
P8		Meeting. Sharing. The concrete examples between teachers. The enthusiasm of a teacher especially if others feel overwhelmed	They learn best from their peers so the cluster group allows for this.	They need the space and time to reflect.			
P10	The group activity focusing on challenges and solutions				FR Hub and general Q&A	Revision of the sample session	I was satisfied with the format of the session As a working group member involved in the design of resources to support the cluster session, I am happy with the current supports

P11		It was good for them to have the chance to talk through everything, share experiences, and get up to speed on the latest developments. I think the teachers enjoyed the collaborative nature of the session. they were able to have group discussions	They were able learn from each other.	time to reflect For some who hadn't implemented the programme in awhile, this gave them a change to reflect on the benefits of implementing the programme, they also were able to think about barriers to the implementation of the programme.		A lot of the teachers in the group had actually completed their FRIENDS training several years ago, and since then, there have been some really big changes. Updating them on all of these, like the new materials, books, the new hub, and other resources, was really beneficial.	
P12				Teachers' sharing practice regarding what worked well when they facilitated the FRIENDS program in their classroom/school.			The most helpful aspect was the practical examples of how to embed FRIENDS in their classroom/school, and how this can be sustained even after the program sessions have

							concluded (e.g. practicing gratitude daily)
P13	Positive attention exercise.				Update on the books and the hub.		

Appendix S

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes (Grouping Theme 1: Practical Considerations)

Theme	**Practical elements in setting up a cluster group**				
Subthemes	**A : (Subtheme 1) In-person most beneficial**	**B : (Subtheme 2) Cluster teachers within the locality (allowing for shorter travel and contact between schools)**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Host in local education centres**	**D : (Subtheme 4) A manageable number of teachers e.g., no more than 20 teachers**	**E : (Subtheme 5) Tea and coffee is important**
Cluster Teacher 2		Location is also important - no longer than a 30 min drive.		The number of teachers in the group should also be manageable and suited to make small working groups to exchange knowledge and experience.	
Cluster Teacher 3		Location helps. It's helpful when we are familiar with each other.			
Cluster Teacher 6			I think it worked well to have two people from a school at the education centre	in a group of 10-15.	
P3	in person would be the most beneficial	Having clusters in localised areas to allow for shorter travelling distances for teachers			for tea/coffee

P4			the Education Centre model in the early afternoon works well outside of schools is important	Group no bigger than 20.	
P5	I think that some in person cluster groups would be helpful - particularly initially.				
P 6		Invite to schools from the same locality			
P 7	In an ideal world cluster groups in person I personally, as a participant of group situations find them much easier when I am face to face. in person sessions is ideal		in the education centre (or in schools that take turns in hosting) would work best.	I think that having between 10 and 16 participants would be ideal. This would ensure that there are enough participants to keep the discussion going and not many to inhibit participation from quieter members. This number provides enough participants to ensure that teachers are getting to learn from a wealth of experiences.	providing tea and coffee which I believe is important. tea and a biscuit tea/coffee/biscuits.
P 8	In person	proximity between schools			

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for (Grouping Theme 2: General Groups)

Theme	**General Groups**	
Subthemes	**A : (Subtheme 1) Group teachers at various stages of implementing Friends**	**B : (Subtheme 2) Invite class teachers and SETs delivering or intending to deliver the programme**
Cluster Teacher 2	a mix of those who have already implemented the programme and those who have not yet implemented it. In summary - I believe it is important to consider: - which teachers are involved - how experienced they are and a mix of those who have already implemented the programme and those who have not yet implemented it.	
Cluster Teacher 6	I think it is important to have people who have implemented it and people who haven't together to encourage others	
P 1	I think a varied group including those who have and have not run groups would be good I don't think implementation should be the key factor for attending the cluster	
P 3	I think teachers mixed between those who have implemented FRIENDS over time with newer or newly trained teachers	

P 4	I think having a mixture of experienced and newly trained teacher/facilitators would work well.	
P 7		Class teachers and SETs are best placed to attend, those actually delivering (or intending to deliver) the training in their classrooms.
P 9		teachers most likely practically involved in implementing friends being invited to the cluster group.
P 10	I think it is useful to have a variety in the group, ie non homogenous. This allows for a breadth of experience to be shared. Teachers with greater experience can support those more recently trained It is useful to have both teachers who have run the programme with children and young people, as well as those who have not yet done so.	
P 13	Ideally it would be nice to have a mix of staff experienced delivering and some staff who are new to delivering it.	

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes (Grouping Theme 2: Specific Groups)

Theme	**Specific Groups**		
Subtheme	**A : (Subtheme 1) Group teachers according to the specific needs of learners in their class, role or setting e.g. special school or class**	**B : (Subtheme 3) Group teachers based on their range of experience or when they trained**	**C : (Subtheme 2) Group teachers according to the specific FRIENDS programme they are implementing**
Cluster **Teacher 4**	According to class level		
P 2	I would also like to see teachers grouped in relation to learner needs e.g. using friends with children with SEN. I would love to see supports for special schools, teachers in special classes and those supporting children with SEN with Friends programmes.		I think it would be helpful to group teachers based on FRIENDS programme e.g. My Friends Youth, Fun Friends, etc.
P 5	Based on the school type, classes they teach	Based on their range of experience	
P 9	I think teachers would best be grouped by their role within the school. For primary schools, that could be the SET teacher, teachers with a role in wellbeing/nurture, and possibly school leaders who		

	may be overseeing and supporting the implementation of FRIENDS with their schools. For Post-Primary schools, SPHE teachers, members of the Pastoral Care team and school leaders could be grouped.		
P 11		based when the teachers completed the training. so maybe offer the cluster group after six months or a year of having completed the training. and then other groups for those who have completed training several years ago	
P 12		Group according to when trained, as updates may differ based on this.	Group according to class level/program teachers are facilitating the training with (i.e. FUN FRIENDS - junior classes, or Friends for Life - senior classes)

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto Frequency and Time

	A : Ideal frequency is at least once per term for 1.5 or 2 hours.	**B : Timing of early afternoon or during school hours is most beneficial**	**D : One 2-hour session would suffice**
Cluster Teacher 1	Twice a year		
Cluster Teacher 2	Maybe twice a year for a morning or afternoon session		
Cluster Teacher 3	As often as possible		
Cluster Teacher 4	one or 2 sessions are useful, early in the first term so that any new info would be fresh for the year ahead.		
Cluster Teacher 6	Maybe once or twice per year for an afternoon.		
P 1			I think one 2 hour session sounds plenty
P 2	Once per term, 1.5 hour session I feel would suffice.		
P 3	I think once a term would be ideal, to allow teachers to put suggestions into practice. If running multiple, then one each term.		
P 4	Maybe twice, approx 1-1.5 hours.	the early afternoon works well so not rushed.	

P 5	Teachers would not need to meet too often, perhaps twice a year. I think if it happened twice a year		
P 6	Other clusters meet once a term and last 1.5 hours		
P 7	once per term for 2 hours (1.5 hours if online)	Ideally, during school	
P 9	Somewhere between once a month and twice a term would likely be best. A well organised hour would probably be sufficient for teachers to discuss needs and seek support.		
P 10			one session for 2 hours
P 11	maybe 2 - 3 times per year. duration; 90 mins to 120 mins.		
P 12	One before training, one during training, and one after training. Each session would last one hour.		
P 13	Twice a year. Each session could be 60- 90 minutes. Ideally the cluster group may meet once in person and once online a year		

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto Frequency and Time (Mixed Perspectives)

	A : (Subtheme 1) After teachers implement the programme	**B : (Subtheme 2) During the implementation of the programme**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Pre-implementation in the autumn but preferably with another session in the spring or middle of the year**	**D : (Subtheme 4) Held after teachers complete facilitator training**
Cluster Teacher 1		During		
Cluster Teacher 2			Before and after	
Cluster Teacher 3			Just before	
Cluster Teacher 4		Before I think and maybe during		
Cluster Teacher 5		At start of year, before and during the year when it is being implemented		
Cluster Teacher 6	I think during and after implementation.			
P 1				I think it should be approximately 2 months after training.
P 2	After implementation.			

P 3		a spring session for implementation as teachers tend to run in the Spring term	an autumn session pre-implementation If only one is being run then I think earlier in a school year prior to implementation	
P 4	During or after implementation would work best for a richer conversation and sharing of ideas from implementing the programme.			
P 5			at the beginning of the year when people are getting ready to implement	
P 8		3 sessions during the 10 weeks of the course for the first time running it. Once a year after Run during the course and not after		
P 9	maybe one cluster session after implementation to allow for reflections and to help teachers envision how they might run FRIENDS groups in future, with the benefit of hindsight.	I therefore feel during FRIENDS implementation would be of most benefit, to capture issues in real time		

P 10			I think it should be at the very least one term after completing facilitator training
P 11	During and after implementation.		maybe offer the cluster group after six months or a year of having completed the training.
P 12		Before to aid with establishment of program in the class, after to reflect on practice and consider how learning from the training can be reinforced in school throughout the year.	
P 13	During and after implementation		

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto Facilitation

	A : Ideally, NEPS psychologists who are trained and have delivered FRIENDS training	**B : Teachers supported to run the CG's over time with the input of a psychologist**	**C : Trained psychologists or individuals with classroom based experience of implementing the programme with CYP and practice-based knowledge**
Cluster Teacher 1		NEPS Psychologist with a teacher	
Cluster Teacher 2			Neps psychologists and experienced teachers who have already implemented the programme and has knowledge and experience to impart.
Cluster Teacher 3			Someone who has implemented the friends for life course recently. With their own experience of implementing it in a class.
Cluster Teacher 4			Someone with a background in dealing with anxiety in young children and what works in helping them cope.
Cluster Teacher 5	NEPS were great as they gave you the evidence, the psychology. One of our NEPS psychologists had implemented the program herself which was really helpful		Equally, being in a group with fellow teachers contributed to the group massively

Cluster Teacher 6	I think the NEPS psychologist would facilitate.		
P 1	NEPS psychologist who has run a FRIENDS training		
P 2	I think NEPS psychologists would be well placed to facilitate these clusters.		
P 3	I think initially psychologists who have been trained, delivered training		initially psychologists who have delivered the programme would be best placed as they have an indepth knowledge of the programme and have had discussions re: issues
P 4		Someone who is open to new ideas.	Someone who is experienced in running a programme in a classroom someone who knows all aspects of the programme. Teachers can ask very specific questions and well informed practice based answers are important.
P 5	NEPS psychologists who are trained in Friends		
P 6			Trained in friends and experienced in delivering the program

P 7		I think ideally teachers should be supported to run these cluster group sessions themselves over time, perhaps with the input of the psychologist. So maybe one experienced teacher and one psychologist. This removes the 'expert' role of the psychologist who in reality has most likely never delivered the programme to a whole class.	
P 8	NEPS psychologist for those new to FFL.	A teacher can then take over	
P 9		A NEPS psychologist may need to take the reins for the first session or two to monitor and guide the group, but ideally I think an experienced teacher or small committee of teachers taking ownership of the group would be ideal, as these are the people actually delivering FRIENDS in schools and have the best sense of "on the ground" issues. Having NEPS support (i.e. having a NEPS psychologist physically present), particularly in the early sessions, regular check ins with the FRIENDS working group	A facilitator would have to be someone with an expert knowledge of FRIENDS and someone ideally highly experienced in delivering FRIENDS.
P 10			A trained psychologist with experience in running the programme with children and young people

P 11	NEPS Ed Psychologist with experience of FRIENDS		
P 12	someone who has facilitated the training to teachers		someone who has gained familiarity with the program by facilitating it with children/ in a school setting,
P 13	A trainer who has delivered FFL to school staff but who has also supported a school to implement FFL		

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Support (Theme 1: Wider NEPS and within team support)

Theme	**Wider NEPS and within cluster support**			
Subthemes	**A : (Subtheme) Supported by a co-facilitator for the cluster group session**	**B : (Subtheme) Online communities for cluster group facilitators**	**C : (Subtheme) Admin support to contact schools, set up groups, questionnaires etc.**	**D : (Subtheme) Supportive role of the FRIENDS working group**
Cluster Teacher 5	Having people present who have implemented the course			
P 2		I think through cluster groups (online) for facilitators that psychologists could opt into.		
P 4	Having a co facilitator, someone to scribe and summarise.			
P 5		running a support group for psychologists.		The NEPS FRIENDS working group have been very helpful to date, they could play a key role, developing outlines of expectations, some sample scrips, powerpoints that could be dipped in and out of
P 6			admin support for contact with schools Admin support to set up groups	

P 7	co facilitation always A Co facilitator			
P 9				Guidance from the FRIENDS Working Group on the form the cluster group should take.
P 10				provided with a support session webinar at the beginning of the school year, as well as training slides with accompanying notes for those slides and a myriad of other support materials, e.g. re costs, FAQs etc. We also have a dedicated email address for any queries.
P 11			support around administration, for questionnaires	
P 12			Access to admin support as required for psychologists (e.g. access to zoom, attendance list)	
P 13		By discussing issues emerging with other Trainers who have hosted implementation clusters.		By linking in with the Friends working group

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Support (Theme 2: Time for planning and preparation)

Theme	**Time for Planning and Preparation**			
Subthemes	**A : (Subtheme 1) Using the guidance documents and having access to FRIENDS resources**	**B : (Subtheme 2) Structure and timekeeping**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Support with digital tools to determine the needs of the group**	**D : (Subtheme 4) Support using the group consultation model**
Cluster Teacher 4	Given the proper resources e.g. copies of books			
P 1	The existing guidance documents are pretty good			
P 3			Time to prepare for the sessions.	
P 6		Have a structure, allow for 'cases' to be heard, timekeeping		
P 7	some guidelines on the outline of a session			
P 8				Using group consultation model
P 11	Access to friends resources	time allocation		

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Content (Theme 1: Flexibility)

	Theme: Flexibility in choosing content	**A : (Subtheme) Ask teachers for queries or requests for content in advance of the cluster group meeting**	**B : (Subtheme) Content led by teachers themselves**	**C : (Subtheme) Opportunities to model and practice implementing a FRIENDS lesson and provide coaching**	**D : (Subtheme) Videos of the programme being implemented in schools or videos to review a teacher's delivery of the programme using Video Interactive Guidance**
Cluster Teacher 2					I think videos of the programme in practice in schools would be very beneficial. Again I think videos would be very beneficial. we found it very beneficial to see the programme in practice in schools In summary. -Content - A mix of videos to see the programme in practice, group work

Cluster Teacher 3		Perhaps if people gave feedback at the end of each cluster meeting as its been refreshed in their heads. This would be a good indication of what is needed to be discussed in other cluster meetings. Compile a list of topics to be discussed at the next cluster meeting at the end of a cluster meeting.			
Cluster Teacher 5		A questionnaire sent to attendees in advance to see what they want to learn or discuss			
P 1		it would help to ask for queries from attendees in advance so it could be tailored to their questions			
P 2	enables psychologists to have flexibility to discuss and support the issues brought to the cluster by participants.				
P 3	Based on the needs of the group				

P 4		A questionnaire pre training is important to get the balance of the group to figure what the emphasis should be on		An opportunity to model and practice a session coaching opportunities would be ideal.	use of VIG also to review a teacher's session delivery and to enhance the coaching opportunity.
P 5		it may be helpful to questionnaire teachers and see if this is something that they want.	I think it could be led by the teachers themselves. Their experiences of running FRIENDS, sharing of ideas etc... like the SET Cluster Groups		
P 6			Content centered on the programme with issues arising		
P 7	flexibility for the facilitator to respond to the needs presented by participants	suggested session content for sessions would be important as it would reduce the load for the facilitator but allows flexibility for the facilitator to respond to the needs presented by participants. alternatively, participants could be asked to email ahead to request content to			

		be covered or a questionnaire of participants in advance could help to identify key issues			
P 8		And then queries from schools			
P 9		a way for the group to submit queries/topics they would like raised in the cluster group ahead of time to the facilitator, so that the facilitator can keep the session organised and structured and allow time for discussion/problem solving gathering knowledge about what issues teachers are having with implementing FRIENDS ahead of time could enable time to discuss these issues, empathise, problem solve			
P 10		The content should be tailored based on the training and experience of the group of teachers attending. This info is available through checkbox when teachers			

		register for attendance.			
P 11		Feedback could be collected from teachers prior to the session, outlining their concerns, what's working well, what they would like support with or further discussion around.			
		collect feedback before the session to gather insights			
P 12		Ask participants to email in areas/questions that they would like to discuss in advance and have this as part of the session. An appreciative approach, in which good practice is shared.			
P 13		There could be capacity for staff attending the cluster to send in questions/ queries ahead of the implementation cluster.			

Research Question 2: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Content (Theme 2: Type of Content)

	A : (Subtheme) Discussions with other teachers and support with teaching the FRIENDS lessons	**B : (Subtheme) Importance of establishing clear aims for the cluster group**	**C : (Subtheme) Content to focus on practical issues that arise during implementation**
Cluster Teacher 1	Teaching lessons		
Cluster Teacher 2	advice from experienced teachers/ neps psychologists		
Cluster Teacher 4	A breakdown of activities that could be used for each session		
P 4	sharing experiences.		
P 5	Their experiences of running FRIENDS, sharing of ideas etc...	I think that it's important that the cluster group has a key purpose.	
P 6	advice given based on fidelity to the programme		
	Chance to share experiences and learn from other teachers what works best		
P 8	Quick run through of programme. Schools identify useful materials.		

P 9	time for teachers to chat and network, as I feel this could be beneficial in establishing a community of practice. teachers to discuss needs and seek support.		the cluster group to really focus in on the practical issues that arise during implementation. There could also be a "success story" portion of the session, to allow teachers to share any positive outcomes they have had from implementing FRIENDS within the schools, share helpful tips and resources etc., which might help keep teachers motivated when they go back to their individual schools to implement FRIENDS.

Appendix T

Research Question 3: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Theme 1 (Plans for communication)

	A : (Subtheme 1) Getting time or sub cover to allow teachers attend	**B : (Subtheme 2) Discussion of time allocation for cluster group with teachers**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Ensure teachers have reviewed the Hub and completed refresher training before the cluster group**	**D : (Subtheme 4) Identifying motivated and interested teachers, identifying schools that are currently implementing FRIENDS or who have implemented in the past**
Cluster Teacher 3	Sub cover			
Cluster Teacher 5				I think them speaking to school management when they're in about the implementation of the program in the school
P 1		Just time allocation		
P 3	Getting time/sub cover to allow teachers to attend would be beneficial.	Discussion re: time for teachers to attend		
P 4			Teachers come in having reviewed the Hub and completed the refreshers, so the opportunities for sharing practice are enhanced. Time for teachers to review	

			the refresher training in advance.	
P 7	releasing teachers from their classrooms to attend would be ideal. Ideally, cover provided for the teacher to be released. teacher cover to attend in person during the school day (or at the very end, e.g. 1:30-3pm)			
P 9				Identifying motivated and interested teachers, identifying schools that are currently implementing FRIENDS or who have implemented in the past.

Research Question 3: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Theme 2 (Expanding the CG support and making improvements)

	A : (Subtheme 1) Cluster group evaluations	B : (Subtheme 2) A second cluster group to see the impact on practice	C : (Subtheme 3) Complete a pilot cluster group training	D : (Subtheme 4) Regular support offered every term	E : (Subtheme 5) What could be done differently? – targeted discussions and activities.
Cluster Teacher 2					More group work on the steps to implementing the programme and mixed groups with teachers who have carried out the programme and those who have not yet carried it out - what worked well - even better if.. etc
Cluster Teacher 4					More in dept discussion of what can be used and what works in each session in the program resources etc and how to make the students can apply it to their lives more.
Cluster Teacher 5					I'm currently implementing FFL with 5th class. We have spent the last 4 weeks covering Session 1. There's a lot in it.
Cluster Teacher 6					Encourage talk and discussion among teachers in the cluster group to share the positive and negative aspects of implementing the FRIENDS program. I think that people should be encouraged to say what they find challenging about implementing FRIENDS. It's an excellent program but some sections of the Teacher

					Manual are vague and the resources website is difficult to navigate.
P 4	Evaluations of the cluster groups.	A follow up cluster would be lovely to see how the initial cluster's ideas impacted on the practice.			
P 5			Complete a pilot cluster group training.		
P 6				Have it a regular feature every term.	
P 7	evaluate teacher perceptions of in person versus online sessions.				
P 10					I would have liked to have had a bigger group as this would allow for greater sharing of experience across schools
P 11		follow up sessions			

P 12					Plan cluster which incorporates a number of engaging activities (e.g. a quiz, small-group discussions) Incorporate a quiz (to activate prior knowledge and/or reinforce key concepts) Implement engaging activities, to promote reflection and learning Incorporate group work/ small-group discussions, and feed insights back to the larger group.
P 13					I could have asked participants at the outset to compile a SWOT for FFL. What in their experience is the strengths/ weakness/ opportunities and threats to FFL in their school. Could have used AHA slides for this. Perhaps consider explicit goal setting with participants. If participants are comfortable these goals could be shared amongst the group. Participants could be supported in small groups to develop a problem solving plan for meeting their goals around FFL implementation

Research Question 3: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Theme 3 (Digital and concrete tools/activities)

	A : (Subtheme 1) Hard copies of resources, books and materials (e.g. PPt's, videos) for the session	**B : (Subtheme 2) Permission to use VIG to coach FRIENDS sessions**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Spend time at the cluster sharing practice regarding the Hub and FRIENDS books**	**D : (Subtheme 4) Adopting the current guidelines suggested by the working group**
Cluster Teacher 2	has support materials to deliver content to the group.			
Cluster Teacher 4			Access to the online resources and how to implement them	
Cluster Teacher 5			A little more time would have been great to look at resources and hear each other's experiences	
Cluster Teacher 6	Manuals, samples of resources that could be used, ready-made resources that could be downloaded by teachers for the lessons with minimal prep.			
P 1	hard copy of resources and materials to bring along to a cluster			I think the current suggested set up is pretty good

P 4		Getting permission to use Video Interactive Guidance (VIG) to coach sessions and lead to 'teachable' moments. VIG, would need to review our data sharing policy/GDPR.	Limited access to the Hub and books before the training so the time at the cluster can be spent sharing practices.	
P 6	Up to date books and information			

Research Question 3: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Theme 4 (Practical considerations for NEPS psychologists)

	A : (Subtheme 1) S&D time for psychologists to plan for the session and prepare resources	**B : (Subtheme 2) Support from NEPS team and education centres**	**C : (Subtheme 3) Energy, time to organise, run the cluster group and have a venue to meet**	**D : (Subtheme 4) Trainers who have experience of running a FRIENDS programme with children or young people**
P 3	S&D Time	Support from Team		
P 8			Time to run, organise it, in person Time and a place to meet	
P 9		support from the ESCI/Teacher's Centres.	Time! Energy! A nice venue.	
P 10				The trainers should have experience of actually running a FRIENDS programme with children or young people
P 11	all resources prepared in advance			

P 12	Preparation time Send invites and gather information regarding topics that are important for participants in a timely manner	NEPS admin support	Be organised	

Research Question 3: Participant data mapped onto the subthemes for Theme 5 (Offering specialist support and training to teachers)

	A : (Subtheme 1) Delivering specialist training to teachers of students with SEN	**B : (Subtheme 2) Providing additional info or review of supports in adapting FRIENDS for neurodiverse children with learning disabilities or autism**
P 2	Providing specialist training to teachers working with children with SEN.	Greater info about adapting the Friends programme e.g. reviewing "Special Friends" or similar Further review of supports/how to use Friends with those with learning disabilities and autism.