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**HPRC**  
Health Promotion Research Centre



**IRISH HEART**  
FOUNDATION

## **Evaluation of the Slí@School programme**

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**May 2023**

## Executive summary

The Slí@School programme is an adjunct programme to Slí na Sláinte, which translates to ‘path to health’, an initiative developed by the Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) to encourage walking. This study set out to evaluate the perceived value of the Slí@School programme, to inform the IHF’s current work programme for schools and to assist in prioritisation of health promotion programmes for the school sector.

Data were gathered through interviews with key school staff and through participatory workshops with students. The findings illustrate that the Slí@School programme is valued by schools and has considerable potential for improving the health and lives of young people, as well as members of the community. Staff were aware of the programme and branding associated with it; however, most students did not recognise the Slí@School logo nor the phrase ‘Slí na Sláinte’. The routes were predominately used at break and lunch times, but they were also used during class time for Physical Education or other subjects. Notable attributes of the routes included positive impacts on physical, mental and social health.

Barriers to the use and uptake of the Slí@School routes included poor awareness of the routes, cost implications, and access to and accessibility of the routes. Facilitators for the programme included existing school infrastructure, supportive management, students’ enthusiasm, cross-linkages with other programmes and a holistic health promoting perspective to the routes. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for the Slí routes to be utilised by teachers extensively, for Physical Education and other subject classes, and also by students of their own volition.

The Slí@School programme is valued by schools, evidenced by their engagement and investment in the programme to date coupled with their desire and creative ideas to improve and extend the programme.

## Table of Contents

Executive summary .....	1
Introduction .....	3
Methods.....	4
Sampling and recruitment .....	5
Response rate .....	6
Analysis .....	8
Results.....	8
Profile of participating schools .....	8
Structured and unstructured use of Slí routes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Barriers and facilitators to use of Slí routes .....	10
COVID-19 and its impact on use of Slí routes.....	13
Student and staff attitudes toward the Slí routes.....	13
Awareness and attribution to Slí branding.....	15
Future of Slí routes and resources or supports needed .....	16
Strengths and weaknesses.....	19
Recommendations .....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Appendix .....	22
References .....	30

## Introduction

Slí na Sláinte, which translates to ‘path to health’, is an initiative developed by the Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) to encourage walking, by establishing walking routes and training local walking leaders (IHF, 2022). Accessible and inclusive paths have been developed and promoted within communities and schools across Ireland. There is a total of 400 routes across the country, of which 177 are school-based (IHF, 2022). Walking is a simple and low risk form of exercise which improves physical and mental health and reduces the risk for chronic disease development (Lee & Buchner, 2008; Murtagh, Murphy & Boone-Heinonen, 2010; Oja et al., 2018). While a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (PA) per day is recommended for children and adolescents (DoH & HSE, 2009), national data suggest that very few children meet this requirement (Woods et al., 2018; Költő et al., 2018; McNamara et al., 2021) with inequalities between groups of children also evident (McNamara et al., 2021). Moreover, being sedentary in childhood increases the risk of developing non-communicable diseases, lower well-being and poorer academic performance (Hidding et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2020; Simmonds et al., 2016). Children and adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in school, making schools an ideal setting for health promotion (Naylor & McKay, 2009). Indeed, a whole-school approach is recommended for various health promoting activities (S.H.E Network, 2022). These include healthy physical environments to make school grounds more appealing for recreation and physical activity.

A collaborative study by the Health Promotion Research Centre (HPRC) and the IHF sought to explore the perceived value of the Slí@School programme by students and staff to inform the IHF’s current work programme for schools and to assist in prioritisation of health promotion programmes for the school sector. **Teachers who were responsible for the Slí@School programme**, and students, particularly those in Junior Cycle and Transition Years, were engaged through interviews and participatory workshops **respectively**. The last few decades have seen an increased impetus toward community engagement and participation in health promotion research and practice to generate effective and appropriate programme insights and robust research results (Wallerstein and Duran, 2006). Participatory and consultative evaluations can help improve programme interventions and performance through the involvement of key stakeholders in decisions that affect them and an inherent ‘action’ component that ensures findings are relevant and useful to the programme’s users (Burke, 1998). Such approaches also allow for insights into people’s motivations and experiences helping to build sustainable interventions or initiatives, and place a greater emphasis on participant ownership, in which stakeholders or users inputs are both sought and recognised, facilitating research findings to be better used to improve the programme or intervention (Patton, 2008). It is

envisaged that the insights and evidence generated from this study can help to promote adaptations or refining of IHF's investment in this programme in schools.

**Aim:**

To explore the value of existing Slí na Sláinte routes perceived by school staff and students.

**Objectives:**

- To explore structured and un-structured use of the Slí routes during the school day
- To examine attitudes to the Slí routes and to the branding and attribution of Slí@School
- To explore perceived value of the routes for health promotion
- To examine barriers and facilitators to using the Slí routes
- To explore the future of Slí routes and the resources/supports needed as perceived by schools
- To understand the context of COVID-19 on the use of Slí routes

## Methods

A qualitative design was used to explore the perceptions of staff and students. The research team (MOL and RM) was responsible for data collection, organisation and analysis, overseen by the lead principal investigators (CK and SNG). A combination of thematic and content analysis was utilised to generate insights, supplemented by an inductive analysis of data in the narratives. Preparation of background materials - participant information sheets, drafts of interview guidelines, drafts of workshop formats - commenced in January 2022. These instruments were revised in March and April 2022 following a comprehensive ethical review process. Data were collected pre- and post-Summer 2022.

**Ethical approval**

An application seeking ethical approval for this study was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Galway in February 2022. Ethical approval was granted in March 2022 with amendments required such as the use of 'active consent' for the participation of the students, and some minor modifications to the research instruments.

## Sampling and recruitment

The Irish Heart Foundation maintains a database of schools involved in the Slí@School programme. A redacted list of schools was shared with the research team for the purpose of sampling and recruitment. An adapted Latin Squares sampling design was used to randomly sample schools based on school size, type (girls, boys, mixed), disadvantaged status (as defined by DEIS programme) and time involved with the Slí programme. Twenty-six schools were sampled and invited to participate using a personalised email with follow-up phone calls to explain the study and its purpose. The school Principal nominated a member of staff, **the teachers responsible for the Slí@School programme**, to participate in the qualitative interview and facilitate the **participatory** workshops with students.

The Principals decided which year groups and which classes within year groups would participate in the workshops based on their availability and workload. The research team followed up with the Principal or nominated teacher via email to get information on which day and time was suitable for the class(es) to participate in the workshop, and the number of students assigned to the class(es). The research team then posted packages to the school with information sheets and consent forms for each student in each class. Every student in the classes selected by the Principal received an information sheet and a consent form for their parents, as well as an information sheet for themselves. In keeping with the ethical requirement of 'active consent', every student who returned the consent form signed by their parent and who themselves consented to be involved, took part in the workshop. Any student who did not return the signed consent form was not included in the participatory workshop and instead completed study or other work during the class time.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Schools were informed that they would receive no direct benefits (incentives or compensation) nor any direct benefits to the study participants (staff or students). Schools, staff and students and their parents were informed of the study, its objectives and the procedures, and written permission was sought from the schools to conduct the study with their staff and students. Parents were informed about the study, the right to withdraw their children and active (opt-in) written consent was requested, organised through school management. The purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of participating in the study, voluntariness of participation, right to withhold any information and/or withdraw without penalty, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality were explained in both written and oral formats.

The study instruments for the workshop were pilot-tested to determine whether any questions or their framing needed to be simplified or changed to ensure the questions were understood by students and staff. The workshop format was modified based on the pilot findings.

## **Response rate**

Ten schools consented to participate in the study, nine declined participation, two schools were removed from the sample (on the grounds that they were never involved in the Slí@School programme) and no definitive response was received from the remaining five schools. Efforts were made to contact the remaining five schools that were sampled but due to other activities/commitments, five schools neither sent a refusal nor consent to participate in the study. Many of the sampled schools expressed an interest in participating in the study after September 2022, especially to conduct the participatory workshops with the students. The final sample consists of nine schools.

## **Primary data collection**

All primary data were collected from schools at a time and in a manner that was convenient to them.

### ***Interviews with staff:***

Interviews with staff **members (teachers)** were held in April and May with one staff interview taking place in October 2022. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom by the research team. Semi-structured interviews conducted with nominated school **teachers**, lasted an hour on average and were digitally voice recorded after obtaining informed consent from the respondents. Scripts for introductory or prompting purposes were prepared to ensure that the interviews would meet the **study** objectives. The interview guides included key topic areas, which were open-ended to invite respondents to share their opinions and perceptions of the Slí@School programme in line with the study objectives. Broadly, the interviews captured information on the use of the Slí routes, the schools' motivation to participate in the programme and suggestions for improvement/future supports. Files were transcribed verbatim and all transcripts pseudo-anonymised (including names of respondents, schools, and any other identifying information) by the research team. These transcripts along with the digital audio files were subsequently imported into qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 20) using a password protected and university networked computer for analysis.

### ***Participatory workshops with students:***



All of the participatory workshops with students were conducted between September and November 2022. There were a total of 147 students who participated in 8 workshops across 5 schools. The workshops were conducted primarily with students from junior cycle, transition years, and leaving certificate (applied) classes.

Participatory workshops were carried out with students during the school day, in-person and online, employing creative activities on the Padlet platform to gather information and co-analyse results in a consultative manner. Padlet is a global application that provides a 'wall layout/canvas' platform that can be used to gather information in an easy and intuitive manner. This platform was chosen for its easy accessibility and because it supports posts across multiple formats (text, images/GIFs, drawing, links, among others), as well as the option for anonymous contributions. Students used iPads, tablets, individual PCs or phones to engage with the Padlet platform. The workshops were planned with a participatory approach, and dialogue and probes were used concomitantly as research tools to generate evidence on students' attitudes and use of Slí routes. Through the use of Padlet, students were also able to (critically) engage with the knowledge that their peers were generating or sharing.

Two members of the research team facilitated workshops with the students, with the same protocol being used in-person and online. The workshops were divided into three parts covering:

- Introduction: In this section, the facilitators introduced themselves and the purpose of the workshop as well as a demonstration of how to use Padlet. Students were invited to practice using the Padlet by discussing and adding 'ground rules' to the board.
- Designing an ideal walking route: In this section, participants were invited to share the characteristics of an 'ideal' walking route for themselves and their friends. Once all the participants had added to the 'wall', they were invited to go through their classmates' comments and suggestions, and to engage with them through comments and star-ratings.
- Assessing Slí@School route: In the final section, facilitators asked participants to respond to a set of pre-prepared statements/prompts about the Slí route at their school. Facilitators further probed the students for information related to the prompts to elicit further information through comments.

This workshop format helped gain insights into students' perceptions of the use and value of the Slí@School programme. A participatory approach with participants interacting with (anonymous)

content also helped in building collective and consultative insights through contributing to group dynamics and synergies among the class.

## Analysis

### ***Interviews with staff:***

Transcripts were inspected through iterative listening and reading to ensure an accurate transfer of information between the digital audio files and transcription. Two researchers coded the first few transcripts independently and consulted with each other to agree a coding strategy and draft themes.

### ***Participatory workshops with student:***

After the workshops, the data from the Padlets was charted onto an excel sheet and an interpretive technique was used to examine the data. This was accomplished by examining the data line by line, underlining and organising key words and phrases.

A combination of deductive coding based on the objectives and pre-established themes and inductive coding identified from the data was applied. The findings from analysis of staff and student data are presented collectively below to enable a pragmatic use of the data and results.

Quotes presented below are taken directly from the transcripts of interviews with the teachers. In the participatory workshops, students responded through 'Padlet' comments, which were provided anonymously and in the vernacular, and have not been used as individual quotes in this report.

Additional quotes that reflect the themes are provided in Appendix A.

## Results

### **Profile of participating schools**

Only one school was designated as disadvantaged according to the DEIS programme. Of the nine schools, four were mixed gender schools, four were all-girls schools and one was an all-boys school. Three schools were of a small size (<600 pupils) while the remaining six were of large size (>600 pupils). Schools' involvement with the Slí programme also varied from 2018/19 (six schools) to as recent as 2020/21 (three schools).

## Use of the Slí routes

*Structured use of the routes:* Teachers reported encouraging students to walk the routes during Physical Education (PE) classes. A lot of students reported using the Slí routes during their PE classes, or when a non-PE teacher supervised a PE class. For students, the preference to use the routes during PE varied within and across the schools. Some pupils expressed the desire to play sports instead of walking the routes, while others noted that the routes could be used more during PE class. Students were also required to walk the Slí routes on 'movement breaks' which were structured into the daily class timetable in order for staff and students to get fresh air and remove masks while social distancing during the COVID-19 lockdowns. When the programme was first implemented, teachers allocated time slots for students to use the routes while they could be supervised.

*Unstructured use of the routes:* This research study found that gradually, students and staff began using the routes of their own volition during breaks and free periods. All the students who participated in the workshops reported using the Slí routes at their schools, mostly during break or lunch times. Students reported that they used the routes on their own, without being asked to do so by their teachers. Teachers stated that students were taking the initiative and creating healthy habits for themselves by getting exercise outside of class time without being asked to do so.

*"So, you found that there were people walking, talking, eating just subconsciously. They were just walking because the area was there, but they weren't really using it because it's the Slí route but just when the day was good and instead of being stuck indoors and particularly like first and second years, they would just go walking anyway."*

*Physical activity:* The routes were considered to be a positive addition to the school for students who do not take part in team sports. The routes offered a chance to 'walk and talk' with their 'buddies'. Slí routes were sometimes used by teachers to 'discipline' students who did not comply with other physical education training or classes (e.g. intentionally not bringing their PE gear) while **some teachers stressed** that they do not use physical activity as a form of punishment. **Teachers** reported that because of the Slí routes being established in their schools, students began walking habitually. They reported that students and staff also seem more conscious of their physical activity levels and well-being than before.

*“It could be possibly subliminal now at this stage because we have the Slí or the maps and because we push it in PE and because we talked about it in SPHE and because the well-being that they're so used to it now. It's really a routine or a force of habit which is the big success story.”*

**Teachers** acknowledged that school staff are not as actively encouraged to use the routes as **much as** the students are, with few staff self-motivated to use the routes. It was noted that there is a lot of focus on students' wellbeing and not enough on staff wellbeing.

*Age and gender differences:* The interviews demonstrated that students in junior years (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> year) were more likely to keep physically active and engaged with the Slí routes **more** than students in senior years (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> year). There were no clear differences documented in the use of the Slí routes between genders. However, the 'sociability aspect' of the Slí routes for girls was noted as a facilitator, while **one staff** respondent suggested that if girls were involved in an activity or project, boys would themselves be encouraged to get involved.

## **Barriers and facilitators to use of Slí routes**

### **Barriers**

*Low branding/visibility:* A significant barrier to **the** use of Slí routes was the lack of branding or promotion of the Slí@School programme. Every staff member **interviewed expressed** that the programme has more potential to be promoted among staff and students.

*Lack of government funding:* Cost implications for maintaining the walkways, and lack of funding for improving the accessibility and quality of the paths, were considered a barrier to the facilitation of the programme, according to the teachers. They considered that it **may** be prohibitively costly to invest in making the routes accessible to all and attractive to use.

*Accessibility:* Physical accessibility for all students was mentioned as a barrier to the use of the routes. The routes were reported to have uneven surfaces with loose chippings, gravel or are generally inaccessible to students with mobility needs. Students felt the Slí routes were not always accessible to their classmates with different needs, especially for people on wheelchairs or crutches. Student suggestions for improvement included adding ramps and smooth paths as well as adding benches or areas for sitting along the routes. Some **teachers** expressed that the Irish language isn't

used or understood by students and that students do not refer to the routes as the Slí routes or the Slí@School programme. Indeed, the routes were referred to in different ways between schools with “the track” or “the walkway” used by some.

*Weather conditions:* Students overwhelmingly reported that the use of Slí routes was hampered by weather conditions, as there were no shelters, and the rain made the paths very “mucky”. Bad weather and rain were also considered barriers to use of the Slí routes by most staff, who also reported that shelters may not be an effective method of addressing the challenges presented by bad weather.

### **Facilitators**

*School infrastructure:* Teachers reported that having good facilities available in the school was a facilitator to the adoption and uptake of the routes. They said that the low cost of establishing the routes was a deciding factor for their school volunteering to implement the programme.

*“It wasn't going to cost anything for us. We already had a pathway; we already had the proper tarmac and stuff down.”*

However, the quality of the facilities varied across schools. Some schools had several tracks available to be used as pathways for Slí@School, whereas other schools (often in cities/towns) did not have the funding, space or infrastructure to establish routes on the school campus. Slí routes were reported to have disabled access (e.g. tarmac instead of gravel paths) **only in some schools**. **Staff respondents did not express a great concern for lighting and shelter, when prompted, because the routes were not generally used in winter time or after hours at night**. Some staff respondents noted concerns for safety at night due to isolation or absence of lights. **They** suggested that IHF **could** consider providing resources to schools that are underfunded, lacking space or infrastructure so the Slí@School program is equitable across all schools.

*Supportive management:* For some **staff respondents**, the support of the Principal for the Slí@School programme was an important facilitator for its implementation. This support included but was not limited to quick granting of permission to adopt the initiative, facilitation of processes or sprucing up of existing infrastructure within the school, using and printing Slí route maps in the school journals/newsletters, etc. Some schools shared their physical grounds with other organisations or institutions, which had caused disputes during the implementation of the programme. Such disputes

were either diffused by the Board of Management or by a compromise between the respective parties.

*Health promotion:* Staff recognised the Slí routes to be congruent with health promotion activities in school. They reported a lot of overlap between Slí@School and various initiatives in the schools such as sports day, wellbeing week, charity fun runs and internal school challenges between students and staff using the 'Strava' app and 'Cooper' tests, which drew students and staffs' attention to the availability of the Slí routes.

*"We do an annual fun-run or walk, so the entire school participates in it, and we always collect €2.00 off the students for a charity. One of the routes of the Slí program would be part of the route."*

*Cross-curricular links:* Teachers discussed using the Slí route for initiatives and on-going programmes run by or with other external organisations such as the active schools flag, the yellow flag, and the green school's initiative. The use of Slí routes often linked in with PE and SPHE subjects. In addition, subjects such as Geography, Maths, Home Economics, and Biology used the Slí routes to some extent for curriculum-based learning. These links were seen to facilitate the use of the Slí routes. In one school a respondent mentioned that the Leaving Certificate Applied students took on the implementation of the Slí@School programme as an action project, which raised awareness of the Slí route in the school.

*"They [the LCA students] actually took this project as an action project to get Slí na Sláinte into the school and just for them to see it in the journal means that the teachers gave it a lot of a lot of weight and they're very proud still to see that they're the ones who did this in school."*

*"I really haven't kind of brought them out (on the routes) in Home Ec time but that's really down to we're just so time sensitive, it's a heavy curriculum... I actually didn't ask Science. They've used it in terms of ecology, kind of the, you know, to walk around and see what what's coming off, but that might be an opportunity maybe again. But I think at the moment, I would say probably the SPHE, Religion classes are using the most in terms of well being and getting out..."*

*"We would use it for covering distance for pacing and orienteering. We use the map for orienteering and so it has helped in terms of the PE department to crossover there and it is used by other class groups. I know the maths group have used it to do distance, to plan out for distance, and stuff like that and....I think it's mainly just PE and maths. Geography might use it to look at the map, but normally PE and maths ...."*

## COVID-19 and its impact on use of Slí routes

COVID-19 was considered a significant enabling factor for the uptake and use of Slí routes in schools and the Slí routes were considered of huge benefit during the time of the pandemic.

*“Yes, because during COVID it was after the first block of lockdown and there was a whole conversation everywhere about the importance of physical activity and taking movement breaks. So, we were able to build that in to using the route.”*

Schools used the Slí routes more during the pandemic than pre-pandemic, particularly for activities which required social distancing, for both ‘mask breaks’ and ‘movement breaks’.

A recurring theme in the interviews with **teachers** was gratitude for the Slí@School programme during COVID-19. Specifically, PE teachers were appreciative of the routes as teaching aids when it was not possible for students to engage in contact sports and other activities in PE. When cases of COVID-19 in the area were high and restrictions were in place, **teachers** reported feeling safer walking with students outside rather than being inside and using PE or other equipment with students. However, some **teachers** reported that the staggered lockdowns interrupted students’ awareness and use of the Slí@School programme. **Teachers** also felt that members of the school community were unaware of the link between the school routes and Slí na Sláinte, in part because of school closures during COVID-19. In some schools setting up the Slí@School programme was interrupted by COVID-19 and national lockdowns.

*“I’d say I initially made contact maybe just before COVID from what I can vaguely remember because I think we were due a visit and it had to be cancelled then because of lockdowns et cetera.”*

**Teachers** reported an increase in students’ awareness of the benefits of walking **primarily** due to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions rather than as a direct result of the Slí@School programme in their schools. Staff attitudes to walking had not changed because of Slí@School programme but respondents were mostly PE teachers with a professional and personal interest in physical fitness and being active.

## Student and staff attitudes toward the Slí routes

The attitudes of students and staff toward the Slí routes were positive. Staff **respondents** felt that students were enthusiastic to use the Slí routes and they been more active since schools re-opened after the pandemic. 'Active step challenges' or 'classroom step challenges' were cited as examples of activities involving the Slí routes that both students and staff engaged with. School members enjoyed using the routes and students were excited about the opportunity to use a walking route and requested to walk the Slí routes regularly during class time.

*"They very quickly took to walk at break time and things. Didn't have to be encouraged or anything like that."*

Most students agreed that the routes at their schools were clean and green, however, many also reported that there was often litter around the walkway and not enough bins. Students agreed that the Slí routes in their schools were safe. This may be attributed to most of the routes being inside gated walls of the schools. Students also described the Slí routes as being "grand", "'useful", and "good for socialising". There was diversity in attitude about the length and width of the Sli routes, the proximity to their school and the interest and appeal of the routes, with some students describing it as "quiet", "boring", "not interesting" and "too supervised".

**Teachers** discussed the successes of the programme at length. They reported that Slí@School contributed to the students being happy to attend school. Some of the respondents made special note of the social value of using the routes for students who were on the autism spectrum, as it allowed them to have conversations without making eye-contact, which they can find uncomfortable. Respondents also reported that students with neurodiverse needs were supported in developing strong social skills as they walk the routes alongside their classmates.

*"But they really do come out of the school and out of themselves and they're funny when you're walking alongside them. It's different. You can take them out of their shell because when they're walking in the same direction rather than you know sitting, they don't really do eye contact very well ... he's putting on the tracksuit now and he's fitting in. You know, socially it's better for him."*

**Teachers** expressed concerns about students' declining mental health due to a consequence of reduced human interaction resulting from excessive use of social media and technology, as well as lockdowns, social distancing, and isolation. They felt that the Slí routes could be utilised to promote social development and mental health awareness.



*“So, in our school the PE department teaches SPHE as well and there's a massive focus on mental health. And you know it's trying to get that digital detox and get them to get away from the devices, get away actually from homework or the TV screen and just go for a walk.”*

**Teachers** reported being eager to move away from an emphasis on traditional team sports and they appreciated the Slí@School programme being in their school for that reason. **Teachers** were open to new and innovative ways of promoting physical activity for students and staff.

All of the staff members who were interviewed acknowledged that no documentation or monitoring of the Slí routes had taken place since the initiation of the programme. Respondents' perceptions of the value in documenting or monitoring the use of the routes to determine the success of the programme varied.

### Awareness and attribution to Slí branding

Most participating students did not recognise the Slí na Sláinte logo, while some were not even familiar with the phrase or connection with the Slí routes at their school, suggesting that further efforts could be made to promote the visibility of the initiative. This was consistent with the views of staff members, who reported that students would not recognise the Slí na Sláinte symbol or the IHF logo.

*“They wouldn't be familiar with seeing the Irish Heart Foundation and the Slí na Sláinte symbol.”*

On the other hand, **teachers** were aware of the branding and most reported becoming acquainted with the Slí@School programme through other activities with IHF (e.g. **YPATH 'PE4Me'**, President's award, CPR training) or through colleagues in other schools who were involved with the Slí@School initiative in their own schools. **Teachers** reported that the process of implementing the programme was efficient and rapid with the help of the IHF co-ordinator. The need for better advertising of the Slí@School programme, and suggestions to expand the routes and open them up for community access emerged from the interviews with **teachers**.

*Need for better advertising:* Advertising the Slí@School programme was identified as being important for branding Slí na Sláinte. To improve the advertising of the Slí@School programme, **teachers** suggested more signs, more efficient placement of signs, promoting use of the Irish language, incorporating the Slí routes into the school routines, and planting Slí routes into conversations between students and staff. However, **teachers** were unsure of their role in promoting

the Slí route and acknowledged not fully understanding the actions they could take in promoting the programme.

*Expanding routes and community access:* Some teachers suggested that expanding the routes could be an opportunity to include better branding and may encourage other members of the community to use the Slí routes. To improve the branding of the routes within the community, respondents suggested making the routes longer or establishing more routes. Slí routes were mostly used during school hours and most schools do not offer community access to the school grounds. Most agreed that there would be value in keeping school grounds and Slí routes open all day, every day, to offer access to parents, grandparents, and the public.

*“Our school grounds are left open all night. We don't lock the front gates and we never have done and there's no vandalism. We don't push the Slí na Sláinte cause the track looks after itself. The track almost says come and run on me, you know, but you could almost guarantee people are looking for safe places to run. You know, with any bit of forward thinking at all, every school grounds could be left open, and it could have a little Slí na Sláinte in them.”*

## **Future of Slí routes and resources or supports needed**

In the participatory workshops with students an ‘ideal walking route’ was discussed. The attributes shared by the students included, greener and cleaner routes, smooth surfaces, well-lit with high visibility, accessible, and open to the community. These ‘ideal’ attributes are described further below:

- *Green:* Students overwhelmingly described their ideal walking route to be verdant with grass, flowers, and trees (such as cherry-blossom and chestnut)
- *Clean, wide, smooth paths:* Across schools, students expressed that their ideal paths should be clean (have adequate bins for rubbish), wide and smooth. Some students noted that the paths should be “non-slippery”, “pebbled” or “concrete”
- *Dog-friendly:* Many students expressed a desire for dogs and animals to be allowed on the paths
- *Well-lit and high visibility:* Most students noted the importance of a well-lit path, with high visibility from the outside so that they would feel safer
- *Accessible:* Some students mentioned that paths could be wheel-chair accessible, with railings, and could potentially have sensory spaces and music
- *Benches:* Across schools, students noted that they could have benches on their walking routes. Some students also noted that they would install weather shelters for the rain

- *Sport and exercise:* A few students expressed that their ideal walking route would have some sports playgrounds (e.g. soccer, basketball, ice skating), exercise machines, cycling tracks or obstacle courses
- *Community:* A few students noted that their ideal walking routes would be accessible and open to the community
- *Water:* Some students added that ‘free water’ should be available on their walking route
- *Location:* Students noted that they would like for the walking routes to be close to ‘nature’ or ‘lakes’/‘waterfall’, closer to town, and closer to other schools. Students also expressed a desire for the paths to be close to shops or for vending machines en route.

Staff respondents expressed needs for future support and resources primarily to promote the Slí routes in their schools through better signage, use of social media and promotional materials, celebrity endorsements, and fundraising events. Some respondents were also in favour of developing Slí routes as sensory spaces, especially for neurodivergent students.

*Increased signage:* Staff members made suggestions in favour of increasing the signage of the walking man, Slí na Sláinte route maps and distance measures (e.g. 500 m, 1 km, etc.), to improve visibility of the programme. Some teachers suggested that students, in particular the woodwork students and teachers, design and create the signs for the promotion of the Slí routes.

*“I wish we'd put the sign somewhere else, to be honest. Somewhere more prominent.”*

*“We’ve one sign, but it's not well advertised so I think if we had a couple more of those dotted around the school ... ”*

When probed, students suggested adding an *English translation* to the phrase and promotion through banners to make the programme more visible to everyone.

*Use of social media and promotional materials:* Respondents suggested that a relaunch of Slí na Sláinte in their schools, communities, or nation-wide could be beneficial for improving visibility of the programme. There were also suggestions to ‘jazz it up a bit’ using social media such as Instagram and TikTok. Some respondents suggested that branding and promotional materials could be distributed to the schools, which would serve as an incentive for ‘step challenges’ within the school. Teachers recommended that the promotional materials also lend a practical purpose (e.g. umbrellas with the yellow walking man logo). One staff respondent made a recommendation for a ‘Slí passport’. This would entail carrying a small booklet and receiving a different stamp for every Slí

route completed. It was not investigated further whether all schools would be in a position to fund such materials.

*Celebrity endorsements:* Teachers expressed the need for Slí routes to be promoted, especially among staff and adults, to encourage physical fitness. Some teachers suggested that (local) athletes could be involved as spokespersons for the programme and could give talks about the benefits of walking for health promotion. Celebrity endorsements or involvement could be utilised to boost interest and visibility around the Slí na Sláinte programme.

*Sensory Slí spaces:* Teachers recommended improving the routes by making them more sensory, engaging, interactive and informative. Suggestions included incorporating an educational aspect to the routes by adding stands along the paths with QR codes to interesting facts which could be linked to their curriculum (e.g. calculating distances or speed), health-related (e.g. how to measure heartbeat), or related to bio-diversity in the area (e.g. types of fungus). It was also suggested that the Slí routes could develop into safe, sensory spaces away from loud, busy corridors for students and staff who want a break or to spend some time reconnecting with nature.

*Fundraising events:* Events such as marathons or other fundraisers could be organised to boost interest and visibility around the Slí routes, as evidenced through examples shared by some respondents. The destination for the raised funds was not discussed further although schools had engaged in fundraising for the school itself or for local charities or clubs. Teachers suggested that the routes should be used for competitions and tasks with incentives to engage students and raise awareness of the routes. They added that they would welcome input on event promotion, support in structuring the use of the routes, and suggestions on how to make the best use of the routes for students and staff. Teachers could benefit from a better understanding of their role in the promotion of the Slí routes and suggested methods of support for staff in promoting the Slí routes through training and resources.

*“A little bit of a training day, how best to use it and make the best of it and see... even just see examples of initiatives done in other schools like there could be something really simple that you just wouldn't think of that would work really well here.”*

*“Maybe a bit of an information book or like even the big thing for me would be if you got a couple of case studies or you got a couple of schools to showcase how they used the Slí for promotion in our school.”*

*“We do an annual fun run or walk, so the entire school participates in it and we always collect €2.00 off the students for a charity. One of the routes of the Sli program would be part of the route that we cover.”*

*“It would have been used there early in the year to early time fundraiser and they were doing a kind of, you know, walk. X amount of 1000 steps to, I don't know, was it Paris or one of these type? So they used that to count their steps and count distance. So it does get used.”*

## Strengths and weaknesses

There are both strengths and downfalls to the research design used to understand the perceived value of the Slí@School programme. Nine schools were involved in the study, with a good mix of school size, type and length of time involved. The sample and data collection methods provided rich data that enabled the aim and objectives of the study to be reached. While a greater number of schools may have enabled analysis of contextual differences across school-type, this was not part of the objectives of the study. It was clear during recruitment and data collection that schools are under immense demands on their time and their ability to get involved in research was constrained.

## Recommendations

The findings from this study point to a need for:

### **Increasing branding and visibility**

A relaunch of Slí na Sláinte in schools could help to increase branding and visibility of the Slí@School programme by distributing practical, promotional materials to the schools and using social media in parallel to spread awareness of the Slí routes. More signage that promotes the Slí@School programme and IHF is required. Plaques demonstrating distances of routes should also be considered. Initiatives that promote discussions and debates about Slí during the school day could help to build awareness and appreciation of the routes. Maintaining the momentum that lockdown has created by enabling more movement breaks, emphasising the importance of fresh air, and the value of physical activity as a social concept in schools could help to increase branding and visibility for the Irish Heart Foundation.

### **Cross-promotion of Slí with other programmes**

There are multiple, established programmes which align with the goals and objectives of the Slí@School programme such as active flags, Gaisce, and other health promotion activities. Embedding the use of the Slí routes in these programmes would promote the health of the staff and students and their awareness of Slí na Sláinte. Curriculum-based learning in conjunction with the Slí routes could also be applied by adding facts aligned to geography, maths, and science along the routes. The routes could also be associated with fun if used during sports days, fundraising events, and fun runs. The Slí@School programme could be used as a vehicle to promote social development and mental health awareness as well as to facilitate breaks from technology and calming spaces for recharging.

### **Working with staff**

Staff would benefit from more communication with the IHF to better understanding their role in the promotion of the Slí routes. Training and resources for staff to facilitate their understanding of the programme and their role in it would be welcome. Incorporating the importance of staff wellbeing into these resources and Slí initiatives would also increase interest and implementation of the Slí routes throughout the school day by all members of the school community.

### **Improvement of the routes**

Adaptations to the routes should be considered including improving accessibility, and having more visible, bright, sensory, and interactive routes. The addition of benches could also facilitate use of the routes. Incorporating educational aspects to the programme may encourage teachers to use the routes for activities such as orienteering, art, biology and so on. The opening of school grounds to the wider school community should be considered in consultation with all members. Initiatives that enable collaboration across schools with Slí routes could be an innovative and creative way for schools to learn from each other, instill pride, and encourage use of the programme.

## Conclusion

The Slí@School programme and the overarching Slí na Sláinte initiative provide a unique opportunity to influence the lives of Irish school children and communities, building healthy habits with long-lasting benefits. The insights gathered through interviews with key staff and through participatory workshops with students illustrate the value of the programme to schools. Key barriers to the use of Slí routes and implementation of the programme in schools were reported to be low branding/visibility of the initiative, cost implications, accessibility, and weather conditions. On the other hand, school infrastructure (and supportive management), and other cross-curricular linkages and health promotion emerged as facilitating factors for the use of the Slí routes. There is potential to improve, increase and extend the programme in ways that would be beneficial to IHF, subject to funding and resource considerations, as well as to the community. However, the branding, promotion and features of the programme need to be improved to ensure continued impact and sustainability.



## Appendix

Objective 1	Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Examples
To explore structured and un-structured use of the Slí route	Structured Use	Physical Fitness Tests	<i>“Do Cooper tasks (running drills) or saying how far could you walk and different challenges, right?”</i>
		Challenges and Fundraisers	<i>“It would have been used there early in the year for a fundraiser and they were doing a kind of a walk, X amount of 1000 steps to, I don't know, was it walk to Paris? So, they use that to count their steps and count distance.”</i>
		Targeted Use of the Routes	<i>“And then also as a PE department, you know, we're aware of the fact there's [an] obesity crisis in the country sort of. 18% of teenagers are obese... “We might have identified 10 or 15 students who have that health issue [obesity]. And you know, try to have that awkward conversation with a teenager is not simple. You have to keep it tactile. You're trying to say, right, during this time you can use the routes here. You know, we want to try and get you 3 routes done in the day, but also you know you need to be looking to do this in the evening time too.”</i>
	Unstructured Use	Requests to use Slí Routes	<i>“And kids were looking, like if I was supervising the class, ‘miss, can we go for a walk?’ And that's what you're doing, is the route. Kids do request it, which is great as well.”</i>
Objective 2	Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Examples



To examine attitudes to the Slí routes and to the branding and attribution of Slí@School	Attitudes to Slí	Positive Views	<i>"It's been incredibly positive from start to finish and I would credit the coordinator of that, like there was no hiccups. There was no coming back and forth."</i>
			<i>"I think it's definitely something every school should apply for ... because as a whole it's easy to implement."</i>
	Critical Views		<i>"I think it just lost too much momentum."</i>
			<i>"(the sign) is just on the side of the building on the wall and so the girls, they don't refer to it. They don't, you know, read it that often."</i>
	Branding and Attribution	Signage and Terminology	<i>"Instead of saying we'll just go for a walk around the school. Maybe we'll, you know, change that terminology to, we'll go and do the Slí route".</i>
			<i>"Maybe people weren't aware of what they were doing. They were doing it, but they didn't have the label on it."</i>
		Accessibility and Expansion	<i>"I'd love to see, obviously, the planting in there and ... I'd love it to be completely accessible for everybody you know."</i>
			<i>"I'm sure there's a lot of other routes around that may be longer distances or even if it was further away, they could be utilized in the same way."</i>

Objective 3	Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Examples
To examine barriers and facilitators to using the Sli routes (e.g. rules about access to routes, supervision requirements).	Barriers	Guidance	<p><i>"I wish either I'd looked for more or they'd have provided a bit more guidance on ... how to get walking groups up and going. They didn't really do that enough."</i></p> <p><i>"Maybe a little bit more guidance on it would be great for me."</i></p>
		Training Completion	<i>"And if there was training, maybe I was negligent to completing it, but I guess that's my downfall."</i>
		Digital Media	<p><i>"You do see a lot more mental health problems for guys and even in a lot of ways there's so much connectivity through online stuff ... I think Sli can have so many more benefits as opposed to just a free map for the school and walk around."</i></p> <p><i>"It's trying to get that digital detox and get them to get away from the devices, get away actually from homework or the TV screen and just go for a walk"</i></p>
		Funding and Capacity	<p><i>"Even the sensory garden type of thing, it's great. But it's just to get the funding for it is, is the thing"</i></p> <p><i>"We just simply don't have space. So that's why I say it's so close to us, but it's not ours ... the downfall of the school is that we don't have enough space for our own route, but that's nothing that can be improved"</i></p>
		Maintenance and Weather	<p><i>"There was just the fact that one of them again is all grass. That's probably a bit of a challenge in using it."</i></p> <p><i>"Definitely if it was raining, staff wouldn't have been too keen to go down"</i></p>

Objective 3 (Continued)			
	Facilitators	Ownership and Access	<i>"So, we- I think it was three or four different walks on it and three of them are shared and one is individual to us. And then there's another one individual to them."</i>
		Promoting Physical Activity	<i>"We use it a little bit now for couch to 5K."</i>
			<i>"... in terms of physical activity that it's not just about the GAA."</i>
			<i>"They'd (students) be stopping the classroom definitely if it wasn't for the walkway, so 100%, they are more active because of it."</i>
			<i>"They actually made a conscious effort to go out and walk the routes."</i>
			<i>"I just know some kids like doing it because they don't like team sports"</i>
			<i>"But it's the girls who aren't involved in other activities. Umm, they're the girls that the likes of this (Slí routes) is particularly successful for."</i>
			<i>"Slí na Slainte route is part of them doing their activity week."</i>
		Cross-Curricular Use	<i>"We're looking to Strava challenges or Cooper tests."</i>
			<i>"We are working with the ... collaborating with the SPHE departments next year."</i>
			<i>"To the lads, this is the map here and even to bring in a cross-curricular link. Looking at it from an orienteering point of view. "</i>
			<i>"Geography might use it to look at the map, but normally PE and maths that use any bit of a track."</i>
		In Collaboration with Awards	<i>"Healthy well-being week. So, we incorporated it there."</i>
			<i>"The Yellow flag award for mental health ... it crosses all of those projects."</i>
			<i>"We do the President's award, we'd be conscious of doing things like the Park Run, anything at all that's not too traditional with the ball sports."</i>

Objective 4	Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Examples
To explore the future of Slí routes and the resources/supports needed as perceived by schools	Suggestions for Future of Slí Routes	Community-Based Collaboration	<p><i>"The fact is it's a community amenity. It should kind of be promoted. It doesn't matter who has applied for it or who has officially got the route, but maybe we should be kind of verbalizing that this is what it is ... there's a lot of other organizations that can use it a lot and are maybe unaware of what it actually is."</i></p> <p><i>"Introducing maybe more routes within the communities, bringing it more community based."</i></p>
		Role Models	<p><i>"Having a celebrity or somebody who's involved in sport coming into school is huge."</i></p> <p><i>"It's looking to role models and trying to follow that I suppose."</i></p>
		'Slí Passport'	<p><i>"A passport system where if they were to complete one Slí route in their town and they were to get a stamp or they were to complete a route in another town to get a stamp and something like that, might be a way of getting more people to use it or getting their Nana or granddad to do that in their town."</i></p>
			<p><i>"Having say a stake or piece of wood in the ground, where you can have like fun facts or ... some facts about maths or maths puzzles and the next week is English Shakespeare."</i></p>

Objective 4 (Continued)			
		Lack of Monitoring	<i>"It wasn't as obvious how much it was used."</i>
			<i>"Sorry, it's probably used a lot more than I even realized."</i>
			<i>"No, no, not at all. And something I'm thinking we should have done more on. Possibly looking at just seeing how many students in general use it, particularly if it was more spontaneous. Could they go for walks in their own time, like at lunchtime, like in the morning time when they come to school and just see what use of it is like? And similarly for teachers during classes off. I don't think I'd necessarily count how many times it's used for PE or wellbeing class. We think that's up to individual teacher."</i>
	Training	On-Site Health Checks	<i>"It wasn't as obvious how much it was used."</i>
			<i>"Maybe the Irish Heart Foundation could do something with blood pressure and getting students to participate in testing or something like that. Or more leaflets that we could hand out to them and to understand what it means [to have a healthy lifestyle]."</i>
		Raise Awareness of the Slí Routes	<i>"I don't know whether they know the routes are Slí routes."</i>

Objective 5	Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Examples
To understand the context of COVID-19 on the use of Slí routes	COVID-19 Effect	Positive Impact of Slí Routes (during COVID-19)	<i>"It's came at the right time. Having all that stuff in place at the right time with COVID for anybody to pre-empt it. Really and truly. In hindsight, now looking back, I don't know how you really would have managed without it."</i>
			<i>"If you were to take a silver lining out of the pandemic you couldn't have planned this part better you know, and it was just so timely and it probably did help the success of Slí because they wanted to get out for air breaks and they wanted to get the masks off. And we had an easy and narrow enough path."</i>
			<i>"Particularly with COVID, a lot of the wellbeing teachers were taking the kids out for the walk around the school."</i>
			<i>"Maybe people weren't aware of what they were doing. They were doing it but they didn't have the label on it. I understand that too because school was closed and we are literally I think, got the plate and next thing, boom."</i>
			<i>"Especially from a PE point of view we were very limited what we could do PE wise, what kind of social distance activities, because no one's telling you how it will go. And then obviously we're shut down again."</i>
			<i>"We were limited in what we could do in PE. Like at the start we were like, we didn't want to do any competitive games or stuff where people were sharing equipment, or they were in each other's space so going outside and walking to it just felt... Just felt safer, to be honest."</i>
		Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Slí Routes (during COVID)	<i>"Normally she (Tara from IHF), I'd imagined she'd come into the class, and she gets to talk to the students. She didn't have any chance to do that because of COVID we had to restrict the movements."</i>

Objective 5 (Continued)			
		Positive Impact of Slí Routes (post-COVID)	<p><i>“Most of them enjoy it and we really, really got great benefit out of it; all the walking routes over COVID when we came back to school. It was more in a recreational ... keeping their distance ... trying to keep them outside as much as possible and they were really happy with that. And it's something that has stayed now post pandemic, the routes are still there.”</i></p>



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