

Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin

Teacher Agency: Do teachers want to shake the tree?
A study of teachers' responses to agency
in the redeveloped curriculum.

Máiréad Nally

2024

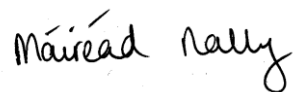
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A thesis written in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor in Education (D.Ed)

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Máiréad Nally". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent flourish at the end of the name.

Máiréad Nally

Date: 19th October 2023

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the many teachers I have had the privilege to work with, who have exemplified agency to me, before I knew of the term.

Acknowledgements

The completion of a doctorate is not the task of a single person. I have been very fortunate in the support I have been given by family, friends, colleagues, classmates, and teachers. This research would not have been possible without them.

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Summary

This dissertation reports the findings of a qualitative practitioner study into teacher agency among teachers of junior classes in one Irish primary school. Teachers engaged in an inquiry-based learning intervention and worked within a community of practice, as they reflected on their experience of and responses to teacher agency.

The last decade has seen a surge of research and policy interest in teacher agency, with teacher agency being foregrounded in the curricula of several countries (Priestley et al., 2015b). Teacher agency is often conceptualised as the ability of teachers to work as decision-makers, enacting meaningful learning experiences within their settings (Leijen et al., 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Arguably the most influential theory of teacher agency at present derives from Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological model, where it is recognised that teacher agency is always achieved in relation to contextual factors.

As teacher agency is generally presented as a factor in promoting educational reform, the study of teacher agency in an Irish context is particularly relevant to the ongoing redevelopment of primary education. The Primary Curriculum Framework (DE, 2023), which will come into effect in schools from September 2025, embeds teacher agency in the vision of the curriculum. This study emerges at a timely juncture between the publication of the curriculum and its implementation in schools. It aims to make a contribution to the literature on teacher agency by capturing the lived reality of teacher agency in the context of ongoing curriculum reform.

The study takes the form of qualitative practitioner research, conducted within my own school setting. A community of practice (CoP) was developed with six teaching colleagues from junior classes (Junior Infants to 2nd class). This CoP collaborated over the course of four months to develop their understanding of

teacher agency and inquiry-based learning (IBL). Participants attended three IBL workshops, conducted inquiry with their classes for three months, and engaged in reflection on key themes throughout the research period. Interviews, participant diaries, and visual methods were used to generate data about teachers' responses to agency and inquiry.

Findings reveal the complexity of teacher agency: a desire for agency in order to confidently enact child-led pedagogy; scepticism about the desire of other teachers for agency; distrust of management's support for agentic practice and for teachers as decision-makers rather than implementers of school plans; and appreciation of the benefits of inquiry-based learning (IBL).

The factors which influence teacher agency in this study might be thought of as "4 Cs": context, confidence, colleagues, and classroom walls. Contextual impacts on teacher agency have been theorised (Priestley et al., 2015a; Vahasantanen, 2015) and empirically described (Karimpour et al., 2023; Ashton, 2021; Poulton, 2020) in existing literature. The present study adds to the research base by capturing the context of the COVID-19 pandemic with its regulations for social distancing of school children and staff, extensive sanitation protocols, and considerable flux in school attendance caused by health guidance. Confidence emerged as an influential element of teacher agency: the aspect of agency which most significantly determined its achievement or otherwise. Teacher agency was impacted positively by peer relationships but the data reveal the consequences of distant and hierarchical relationships with school management. Classroom walls were found to have a delimiting effect on teacher agency, as participants sought agentic practice within classrooms but negated their role as agents at school level.

Overall, the findings pose challenges for the agentic professionalism envisaged in the new Primary Curriculum Framework. The study proposes an incremental model of teacher agency which encompasses the hesitant approach of these teachers towards agency and indicates some of the scaffolds which might support teacher agency. It is hoped that this model might support the transition from theory around teacher agency to embodied practices. The research provides an Irish perspective on the international study of teacher agency, and contributes the voices of practitioners in the field to the work of policy-makers as they develop the specification and supports for implementing the redeveloped curriculum in the coming years.

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List of Acronyms

AEN – Additional Educational Needs

ANA – Additional Needs Assistant

B.Ed. – Bachelor of Education

CoP – Community of Practice

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

DCU – Dublin City University

DE – Department of Education (formerly Department of Education and Skills, renamed in October 2021)

D.Ed – Doctorate of Education

DES – Department of Education and Skills (now Department of Education)

IBL – Inquiry-Based Learning

INTO – Irish National Teachers' Association

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NQT – Newly Qualified Teacher

PCF – Primary Curriculum Framework

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

PME – Professional Master of Education

PSC – Primary School Curriculum

SESE – Social, Environmental, and Scientific Education (comprising Science, Geography, and History)

SPHE – Social, Personal, and Health Education

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

TCD – Trinity College Dublin

WSE – Whole School Evaluation

Glossary of Terms

Aistear Curriculum Framework – Aistear is the play-based curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. It is used in early childhood and pre-school settings in Ireland, as well as the first two years of primary school: Junior Infants and Senior Infants.

Community of practice (CoP) – This term refers to groups of in-service professionals, who collaborate and reflect to improve practice. See sections 2.4.2 and 2.3.4 for discussion of CoPs in education.

Curriculum – This is a broad term, generally used to designate the outline of concepts and content to be taught. Assessment is often a central component of curriculum guidance. For detailed discussion, see section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) – IBL is a student-centred approach to teaching and learning which prioritises the interests and questions of students. It is most often enacted in science education, although it is suited to transdisciplinary learning. For detailed discussion, see sections 2.2 – 2.2.5.

Junior classes – This study took place among teachers of junior classes: the first 4 years of primary schooling in Ireland. These classes are named Junior Infants, Senior Infants, 1st Class, and 2nd Class. The children in these classes range from four/ five to eight/ nine years of age.

Primary school – Children in Ireland attend primary school after an optional two years of pre-schooling. Compulsory education begins at the age of six. Primary school covers eight years of education, following which children progress on to post-primary (secondary) school.

Primary School Curriculum – Primary schools in Ireland are currently using the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999), with the expectation that this will be replaced by the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (DE, 2023) from September 2025. The PCF, as a curriculum framework, offers a direction and supports the development of the redeveloped curriculum.

Teacher agency – This term refers to the capacity of teachers to make and carry out professional decisions. It is often connected with curriculum reform and innovation. See section 2.1 – 2.1.3 for conceptualisations of agency and, specifically, teacher agency.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Research

Teacher agency – the capacity and confidence of teachers to act as pedagogical decision-makers – has been prominent in both the literature and educational reform in recent years (section 2.1). Agentic practice is often conceptualised as the enactment by teachers of locally relevant learning experiences, informed by and modified from curricular guidance (section 2.1.2.1). Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a learner-centred approach wherein learner questions often guide the learning experiences. The role of the teacher in IBL is as facilitator and co-learner, developing learning engagements to meet the needs and interests of the particular learners. In this way, there is a similarity between teacher agency and IBL as teachers plan and enact curriculum and learning at the local level.

This study investigates the responses of a small group of teachers in junior classes (Junior Infants – 2nd Class) to the concepts and practice of teacher agency and IBL. The research took the form of a small-scale practitioner research in my own school, where a community of practice (CoP) supported teachers in their engagement with and planning for inquiry. The research sought to develop inquiry practices and collaboration in my school, as well as to investigate teacher agency in the context of the current curriculum (DES, 1999). Teachers experienced and implemented IBL, while considering their own agency and the factors which supported or constrained that agency. The data represent an original contribution to knowledge by investigating teacher agency among Irish primary teachers, as well as by examining teacher agency in the context of imminent curriculum reform: the approaching implementation of the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (DE, 2023). The data present some stark messages for policymakers and stakeholders in curriculum reform, as they illustrate several points of tension and challenges which will need to be addressed for the achievement of the curriculum goals in the PCF.

This chapter presents the research questions, aims and objectives, locating the impetus for the research in my own teaching experiences. The context of curriculum reform in Irish primary schools is outlined.

1.2 Rationale

Teacher agency has become a principle of curriculum reform in some countries, such as Scotland, New Zealand and Finland (Priestley et al., 2015b). It is generally envisaged in the literature that teachers working as agents make choices for the learning experiences of

their classes and enact decisions at a class and school level (Leijen et al., 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2015), although the varying degrees to which teachers achieve this level of agency are also presented in the literature (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2020). Advocates for agency claim benefits for student outcomes arising from the differentiated curriculum experiences which agentic teachers provide, as well as greater teacher satisfaction and retention (Kettle et al., 2022; Hawthorne-Kocak, 2021; Scanlon and Connelly, 2021; Stein et al., 2016; Sinnema, 2016; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

The context for this study into teacher agency, inquiry, and curriculum is the ongoing re-visioning of the primary school curriculum in Ireland. In the recently published Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (DE, 2023), due for implementation in schools from September 2025, for the first time in Irish curricula, teachers are explicitly acknowledged as 'agentic professionals' and positioned as decision-makers in the area of curriculum and learning. Previous versions of the primary curriculum could be seen as framing teachers as implementers of curriculum (Walsh, 2019). Thus, this study represents a timely investigation of teacher agency and teachers' responses to this role at a time when teacher agency has come into prominence in Ireland.

The move towards agency has arguably been occurring in Irish models of curriculum since the introduction of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). Aistear outlines the overall principles and learning outcomes for children in early years' settings and in the infant classes of primary schools, however, it affords space and freedom for educators to decide how best to achieve those outcomes. This initial step towards agency has continued within the Primary Language Curriculum documents (DES, 2019a) with the assertion that teachers' agency and professional judgements should be applied at all stages of teaching and learning. The commendation of teacher agency within these recent curricular developments renders the concept worthy of significant examination and motivated my own interest in the area. Existing research into teacher agency in the Irish educational context is quite restricted, both in relation to primary education (Ó Bréacháin, 2022; Wallen & Tormey, 2019) and post-primary education (Scanlon & Connolly, 2021; Young et al., 2017). The lack of empirical studies into the agency of Irish primary teachers represents a gap in the literature in this area and an impetus for this study.

The second major theme of this research is inquiry-based learning (IBL). Like teacher agency, IBL has become prominent in educational reform, such as in the U.S. Inquiry-based approaches are advocated in the redeveloped curriculum framework (DE, 2023). However, according to Leijen et al. (2022), there is an absence of research into the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions to support teacher agency. I contemplated the affordances which an IBL intervention might provide, in the case where teachers wanted to

achieve more agency. There is limited research into inquiry in early years' education, thus, this study of agency and inquiry among teachers in Junior Infants – 2nd Class (children of 4 – 8 years of age) is an opportunity to expand the research in this area.

COVID-19 provided a unique opportunity for developing a community of practice at a time when teacher collaboration was more difficult and limited. The restrictions posed certain challenges for my original research design, such as reducing the number of participants and necessitating creative ways to develop inquiry practices in classrooms where children are organised in pods. However, these factors also presented an opportunity to develop a community of practice at a time when the sharing of experiences and ideas might have been more valued by teachers than ever.

Thus, this research addresses several gaps in the literature: the practice of teacher agency in Irish primary schools; teachers' responses to agency in the context of curricular reform; the effectiveness of an IBL intervention to support teacher agency; the outcomes of inquiry in junior classes within Irish primary schools, and the establishment and maintenance of a community of practice during the COVID-19 period.

1.3 Research questions

This study aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on being positioned as agentic professionals in the context of the new curriculum framework. It examined in depth the lived realities of a small group of primary teachers to uncover the ways in which educational structures supported or constrained their ability to achieve agency. The following over-arching research question guided the study:

How do primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum?

The sub-questions associated with this over-arching question are:

1. How do primary teachers understand their agency in relation to curriculum?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about agency in curriculum planning and enactment?
3. How do the cultures of schools and the education system more widely impact upon teachers' perceptions of their agency?
4. How might inquiry-based learning impact on teachers' sense of their own agency?
How might teachers' sense of agency impact on their engagement with IBL?

1.4 Locating Myself as Practitioner Researcher in this Study

I have been teaching at primary level for 16 years and during this time, I have remained curious about how children learn and what they learn. I have taught the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) at every level and I have witnessed the curriculum developments of recent years: the introduction of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) which brought focus and value to play-based learning and learning through play, and the Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2019a), which aimed to support the teaching and learning of language through revitalised methodologies and an added emphasis on integration and meaningful contexts.

When I began my doctoral studies, I considered researching children's agency and IBL. However, my interest in agency migrated to the agency of teachers when I read the draft literature for the re-envisioned curriculum (NCCA, 2020) and observed the reference to teachers as 'agentic professionals' which was advanced in the documents. I began to wonder how I and other teachers felt about being agents of curriculum – whether this seemed like an empowering recognition of the shaping of curriculum which we already engage in, or whether it seemed a daunting role of developing learning progression without adequate training or resources. I observed anecdotally in the staffroom a limited interest among teachers in agency and self-directed decision-making. A significant proportion of teachers reported being overwhelmed with work and did not seem to have the capacity, motivation or context within which they would or could develop their agency.

From 2015 – 2017, I undertook a Masters in Early Childhood Education and was introduced to IBL as part of this course. I was drawn to inquiry with its emphasis on the importance of children's curiosity, the authenticity of learning, and the meaningful action which arises. My teaching practice in recent years has changed as a result of taking an inquiry stance on teaching and learning. I plan more loosely now, to allow time and space for children's questions and investigations. This contrasts with the highly-specific long-term plans I wrote in the past. My willingness to allow more flexibility into my planning and teaching has come with increased confidence and many years teaching experience. It has also come from engagement with inquiry and a recognition of the benefit to learners and teachers from adopting this stance. For me, inquiry is a way of mediating between the structures provided by curriculum, school plans and the inspectorate, and the classroom practice of teachers and children. I was interested to see whether other teachers might experience inquiry as a similarly empowering way to approach teaching or whether they would perceive it as adding to an already demanding workload and over-burdened timetable.

IBL changed my view on curriculum as I began to consider teachers' responsibility for modifying curriculum to meet the needs of the learners in their care. The role of the inquiry

teacher in developing learning from children's questions sparked my interest in the idea of teachers as curriculum-makers. Observing the skill of the Masters lecturers in developing curriculum from concepts, I was struck by the demands IBL makes of teachers to plan and sequence learning, rather than follow and implement a pre-determined curriculum path. As a teacher who strives to adopt an inquiry stance in my classroom, I regularly experience tension arising from the disconnect between the emergent curriculum which is developed in an inquiry classroom, and the pressure of the existing curriculum model. IBL propelled me into a different relationship with the national curriculum, driving me to look at the concepts behind the prescribed content. Consequently, I have endeavoured to change my approach to curriculum: understanding it less as a formula for implementation and more as a guideline for enactment. This experience has suggested a potential connection between agency and inquiry which underscores this study, whereby inquiry may benefit from teachers' agency and decision-making capacity, while teachers may develop their agentic practice through engaging with IBL and practising the role of curriculum maker at the school level. This positionality led to an interest in agency and inquiry, and a motivation to find out more about the attitudes of in-service teachers. Over time, the current study emerged from that curiosity.

1.5 Research Methods

To address the research questions above, I designed a small-scale qualitative practitioner research study into agency and inquiry within a seven-person community of practice (CoP) in my own school. The community of practice comprised teachers from the junior classes of the school (Junior Infants to 2nd Class). An intervention was conducted whereby participants were introduced to the concepts and practices of IBL over the course of three workshops. Following these workshops participants planned collaboratively and implemented IBL individually in their classrooms for a period of three months. Data were gathered in the form of participants' diaries, visual methods, and semi-structured interviews, along with a pre-intervention interview and a follow-up interview eight months after the IBL research period. Thematic analysis was used to systematically examine the data generated.

1.6 Thesis Layout

Following this introduction, the thesis presents an overview of relevant literature in the areas of (i) teacher agency, (ii) inquiry, (iii) curriculum, and (iv) communities of practice. The literature is critically discussed in order to clarify the concepts used in the study and highlights the ways in which the literature review influenced the refining of the research questions, the methodology chosen and the approach to analysis adopted.

Chapter Three presents the research decisions made at each stage of the design process. Methodological literature is used to contextualise and validate these decisions. Ethical considerations are explored, particularly in light of this study's origin in the practices of my own work and that of teaching colleagues. The findings which arose from the fieldwork are presented in Chapter Four, along with links to relevant literature and policy.

The "story" of the data emerges in Chapter Five, where the most significant findings are discussed in-depth. This discussion leads into Chapter Six, the final chapter, where the implications and recommendations suggested by the findings are presented.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the major themes of the research project: teacher agency, inquiry-based learning, curriculum, and communities of practice. As a key principle of the redeveloped curriculum framework (DE, 2023), teacher agency is particularly critical to the innovation of educational practice. Inquiry-based learning (IBL) was utilised in this study as an instrument for teachers to potentially achieve agency within the context of curriculum parameters and planning requirements, thus engaging with the over-arching research question: *How do primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum?* This exploratory engagement with IBL occurred in a community of practice, designed to support teachers as they conducted and reflected on IBL.

The literature on the themes of teacher agency, inquiry, and curriculum is critically considered in order to develop a theoretical framework for the research, and to identify relationships and overlaps between themes. For each of these themes a similar structure is used: key concepts are presented, analysed and critiqued to advance a working definition of agency, inquiry and curriculum for this study. The chapter finishes with an overview of literature on communities of practice (CoP), to inform the methodological framework for the study and to explore the connections between CoP, agency, and inquiry.

2.1 Teacher Agency

Research into teacher agency has proliferated in recent years. Cong-Lem (2021) found a 107.7% rate of increase in articles concerning teacher agency published between 2015 and 2020. It is suggested that this growing interest proceeds from awareness of teachers' influence over educational reform: "teachers have the capacity to agentively adopt, adapt or even resist newly implemented policies and programs" (Cong-Lem, 2021, p. 718). Li and Ruppert (2021) classified this research into several distinct categories: (i) personal attributes which support or constrain teacher agency; (ii) contextual factors; (iii) agency and curriculum/ educational reform; (iv) agency and challenging racial hegemony; (v) agency and professional learning; and (vi) agency and teacher identity. Inclusive education has similarly seen a surge in research regarding teacher agency (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Themane & Thobejane, 2019, Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of the term and the expansion of its research base, teacher agency has not been comprehensively conceptualised. Indeed, the word 'agency' is culturally specific (OECD, 2019a). In simple terms, agency can be described as the capacity for

autonomous social action (Calhoun, 2002) or, in more developed definitions, the capacity of actors to “critically shape their responses to problematic situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Teacher agency is often considered in the context of curriculum reform, such as Ó Breacháin’s (2023) definition of agency as the ability of teachers to critically shape their responses to change – a definition strongly influenced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). In the following sections, various theoretical perspectives and conceptualisations of agency are explored, serving to highlight its main components. This will help synthesise a working definition of teacher agency for the purposes of the study.

2.1.1 Conceptualisations of Agency

Agency has been variously defined and theorised in different fields of research. Agency is often understood in contradistinction with structure, which can be theorised as patterns of behaviour, regularities which govern social facts, systems of human relationships, or rules which determine behaviour and action (Porpora, 1989). Structure – for the purposes of this study – is understood as both cultural and material: a blend of the structure as relational approach (Elder-Vass, 2007; Porpora, 1989) and that of Giddens (1984), where structure is viewed as the rules and culture which govern behaviour.

Eteläpelto et al. (2013) present an overview of how agency has been theorised in four different research traditions, namely, social sciences, post-structuralism, socio-culturalism, and the identity and life-course approach. Their review has been instructive in shaping this literature review; however, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to comprehensively review each of these research traditions. The traditions of sociology, socio-culturalism, and life-course studies are apposite to developing an understanding of teacher agency, as explained in the following sections, and aspects which relate most closely to teacher agency have been extracted and explored.

2.1.1.1 Agency in the Sociological Tradition. Sociological literature offers a perspective for understanding teacher agency in the wider context of human structures and agency. Amid the extensive structure/agency debate, Bourdieu and Giddens are identified as central to understanding how agency has been theorised in sociological terms (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sewell, 1992). Ortner (2006) and Schatzki (1996) – who advanced, respectively, notions of agency as reflexive social activity and a phenomenon constituted by action – were originally considered, but it emerged that the ideas from Bourdieu and Giddens, with the addition of Archer, were of more value to the current study. Both Bourdieu and Giddens advanced theories which, although criticised as overly deterministic, identify space

for individual agency within the context of the structural forces. When considering teacher agency, their work reveals that it is necessary to also consider structures of schools, government policies and curriculum. A brief outline of some of their key ideas is presented below to contextualise teacher agency.

To explain the relationship between structure and agency, Bourdieu (1977) posited the notions of habitus, field and capital. Habitus consists of “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 72, emphasis in original). Habitus expressed Bourdieu’s interpretation of how individuals’ actions are produced by, and tend to reproduce, the structures from which they emerge. Bourdieu viewed individuals as positioned within and socialised by fields: social sites structured by the relations between those who occupy that field (Grenfell, 2007). Individuals compete within fields for economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. The reproductive tendency of the habitus has been seen as limiting individuals’ choices for action (McLeod, 2005; Lovell, 2000; King, 2000). However, Bourdieu (2000) himself rejected the idea that the habitus undermines the ability to achieve agency, and several writers have resisted the claim that his theory is deterministic (Barrett & Martina, 2012; Grenfell, 2007). Nevertheless, Adams (2006) contends that, despite the generative possibilities which Bourdieu posited, the habitus has the effect of severely undermining the agency of individuals. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the habitus is largely predictive of individuals’ actions, since it encompasses the potential options for human agents and defines the parameters of their action (Vandenbroek, 2010). This determinism renders Bourdieu a less useful theorist for the purposes of this study, which seeks a theory that can incorporate innovation, creativity and transformation in teachers’ practices.

Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration shares some similarities with Bourdieu in its effort to consider a space for individual autonomous action. For Bourdieu, habitus provided this space. For Giddens, the structures themselves provide agentic possibilities. Giddens remodelled the structure/agency binary as a duality which often reproduces elements of the social structures. In Giddens’ theory, structure is both constraining and enabling to agency: it provides the resources that make agency possible, as well as the rules which guide action. This ‘duality of structures’ allows space for individuals to choose between different actions, a similar space to that offered by Bourdieu’s varying strategies. Like Bourdieu, Giddens has been criticised for the view of human agency he advances: various writers have found his explanation of how structures can constrain and enable agency to be unconvincing (O’ Boyle, 2013; Reed, 2005; Healy, 1998). However, for this study, the duality of structures allows discussion of how the educational context enables and constrains teacher agency, as well as providing a potential space for innovation, as recognised by Whittington (2010).

Finally, Archer (2003) posited a model of how agents mediate structures via the internal conversation. In Archer's view, the reflexive conversation is accountable for the practices of individuals, which suggests the possibility for the internal conversation to function as the site of strategic choices. Importantly for this study, Archer (2003) insisted that structures have no innate power: for structures to inhibit or facilitate the actions of individuals, there must exist the exercise of agency in the first place. In this way, agency is positioned as intrinsic to the structure/agency relationship, rather than merely being subject to oppressive structural powers. This is instrumental to understanding teacher agency as a force always in operation to some degree within the context of schools and the educational system; a concept explored in relation to typologies of teacher agency (section 2.1.4 below).

While Bourdieu's theory of habitus was not ultimately used in this research, reviewing his theory proved a useful counterpoint to ideas presented by Giddens and Archer. As a consequence of the innovation which Giddens' concept of the duality of structures affords (Whittington, 2010), this concept is used within the theoretical framework of this research. It functions as a tool for examining how the education system may be regarded as constraining teachers but also offering them resources, such as a shared discourse, varying pedagogic choices, and social capital in the form of collegial groups. Giddens' recognition of the significance of intention and capacity for agency also informs the definition of teacher agency which underpins this study. Archer's awareness of agency as an existent phenomenon is also instructive in the data analysis that follows.

2.1.1.2 Agency in the Socio-cultural Tradition. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) contend that the conceptualisation of agency has grown in prominence within socio-cultural research in recent years. Like sociology, the socio-cultural tradition considers agency in relation to structure, but this time with an emphasis on the social and relational structures within which agents act. As Billett (2006) stated: "Human agency operates relationally within and through social structures, yet is not necessarily subjugated by them" (p. 63). Vähäsantanen (2015) acknowledges that teachers' practices are influenced by cultural norms, social circumstances, and relationships, as well as by curriculum and material resources available. This conveys a similar awareness of social structures to that of Billett (2006) above and is expanded in Biesta and Tedder's ecological model of agency, discussed next.

Biesta and Tedder (2007) recognise an interdependent relationship between action and social context. They argue that agency is a phenomenon achieved through transaction:

Agency... is not something that people *have*; it is something that people do. It denotes a 'quality' of the *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves" (p. 136, emphasis in original).

They advance an ecological approach to agency, which posits that teacher agency is always achieved because of the interplay between teachers' capacities and the material, social and cultural context within which they work. These contexts are the structures within which agency may be achieved; the structures, which Giddens acknowledges, both constrain and enable agency. The inclusion of teachers' capacities in their model recalls Giddens' inclusion of capacity and intention in his theory of agency, but their emphasis on contextual factors encourages an awareness of action as not being solely the responsibility of individuals.

Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022) concurs broadly with Biesta and Tedder's ecological model of agency. He recognised the contextual nature of agency, and strongly asserted a view of agency as related to teachers' responses and actions. Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022) argued against what he perceived as a prevailing perception of agency as a phenomenon achieved through resistance: "Rather than speak of agentic teachers, it is better to think in terms of moments of agentic practice" (p. 5). His outlook identified the difficulty of transforming teachers' practice, since that necessitates a challenge to teachers' identities. This adds an extra layer to the socio-cultural view of agency and connects to the relationship between agency and identity which is discussed in section 2.1.2.5.

The socio-cultural tradition is important for this study in identifying the ways an individual's capacity for agency is shaped and resourced by their socio-cultural contexts (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). This perspective is instructive in approaching how teacher agency may be resourced – or constrained – by the contexts in which they work, at school, policy and national level. The term "contexts-for-action", taken from Biesta and Tedder (2007) provides another piece of the theoretical model of teacher agency which informs this research, as discussed below (section 2.1.3).

2.1.1.3 Agency in the Life Course Research Tradition. Socio-cultural perspectives of agency can minimise how individuals' capacity for agency can change over time (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Life-course research offers insights in this regard, being concerned with actions which shape the agent's life trajectory. This connects with a longer temporal orientation than other types of agency such as pragmatic or existential (Hitlin & Elder, 2007).

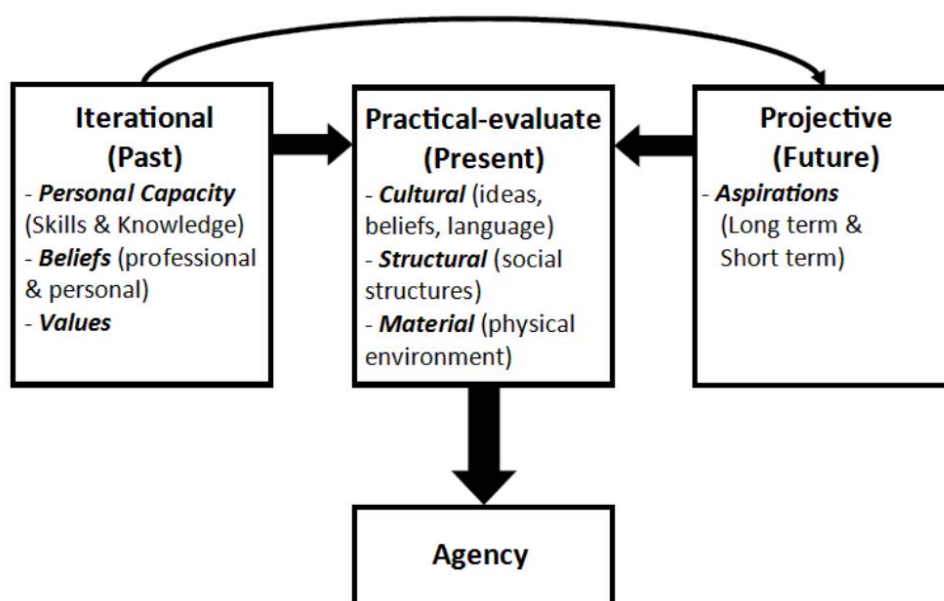
In a seminal paper, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) add a temporal dimension, arguing that agency is "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past... but also oriented towards the future... and towards the present" (p. 962). They consider that

an individual's relationship to and understanding of their past, present and future has implications for their actions. They explicitly refute the conceptualisation of agency provided by Bourdieu and Giddens, arguing that these writers fail to identify ways in which past experiences can be confronted and redefined, allowing for invention and new practice. Relating this to teacher agency, it offers possibilities for teachers in classrooms to reflect on their experiences and current practice, and innovate with new approaches.

Emirbayer and Mische's temporal dimension of agency has been influential on theorists of teacher agency. Biesta and Tedder (2007) included the temporal dimensions in their ecology of agency, while Priestley et al. (2015a) developed a graphic of the ecological model including the three aspects of temporality recognised by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). This graphic (Figure 2.1 below) illustrates how teacher agency is informed by past personal and professional experiences. The curved arrow suggests that agency is oriented towards the future with short and longer term goals. The centre of the graphic with its inward arrows illustrates how the achievement of agency occurs in a present situation, both bounded and supported by cultural, structural and material realities. Curriculum, as a key aspect of teachers' contexts-for-action, occupies space in each of the temporal dimensions: teachers' past life experiences as students engaging with curriculum; their current professional and pedagogical engagement with curriculum, and the short to longer term goals partially derived from curriculum objectives.

Figure 2.1

Teacher Agency Model (Priestley et al., 2015a)



This ecological model has become influential within the field (Cong-Lem, 2021). Since the majority of research into teacher agency explores how agency might be achieved within teaching contexts (Karimpour et al., 2023; Emam et al., 2023; Fu & Clarke, 2022), it can be discerned that the ecological model is a useful tool for practice-based studies. The ecological model has the advantage of presenting a readily-recognised framework for practitioner-researchers, such as in the case of this research, where the premise of the ecological model bears close resemblance to lived experience and classroom practice. These factors may serve to explain the dominance of the ecological model over the past several years.

The life-course tradition recognises the time-bound nature of agency and the aspirations which motivate action. Research within this tradition focuses on how agency is impacted by the present time in which it is exercised, as well as actors' past experiences. The future objectives which compel the individual's actions are also encompassed in life-course literature. Additionally, this field gives prominence to the connection between identity and agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Research into teacher professional identity and teacher agency has proliferated in recent years (Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015) and will be discussed in section 2.1.2.5 below.

Within the life-course tradition, the relationship between teacher agency, teacher autonomy, and teacher action comes into focus. There is considerable conflation of agency and autonomy in the literature (Chung, 2023; Lennert da Silva & Mølsted, 2020), leading to a lack of clarity about where agency and autonomy overlap, and what distinguishes one from the other. Agency is often regarded as the concrete manifestation of autonomy (Teng, 2019), made possible by autonomous contexts (Chung, 2023). Autonomy relates to an absence of regulation and control over teachers (Priestley et al., 2015b), within which agency may or may not be achieved (Nguyen et al., 2022). For Priestley et al. (2015b), agency is a contextually-bound capacity for action, while that is what autonomy means to Paulsrud and Wermke (2020). In the midst of this terminological muddle, it is possible to lose sight of the key message that decision-making and action are key to agency. This study aligns itself with Priestley et al. (2015a) in viewing agency as concerned with teacher action and practice, while autonomy relates to regulation and the context within which agency might be achieved.

This brief synopsis of how agency is understood in different academic traditions provides important theoretical grounding for the study. Sociological theory reveals that teacher agency is inherent within structures (Archer, 2003), while Giddens' theory of the duality of structures is particularly important for understanding structures as not merely constraining, but potentially enabling. The life-course tradition adds a temporal dimension to the view of teacher agency advanced in this study. This temporality, and its recognition of experience as a factor in agency, became increasingly significant during data generation and

analysis, as participants emphasised prior experiences in their own understanding of agency. The ecology of agency from the socio-cultural tradition is the single most significant component of this study's approach to teacher agency: providing a view of teachers' practices which is broader than the individual and their personal traits to include the many factors which shape their sense and achievement of agency.

The theoretical model of teacher agency underpinning this study is outlined in section 2.1.3, following a review of some key influential factors on teacher agency.

2.1.2 Influences on Teacher Agency

This section examines some of the prominent factors which are explored in the literature as influences on teacher agency. These include curriculum, collegial and managerial relationships, accountability measures, teacher beliefs, and teacher identity. The final sub-sections explore two components of agency particularly relevant to the current study: teacher confidence and teacher voice.

2.1.2.1 Teacher Agency and Curriculum. Many conceptualisations of teacher agency specifically make the connection to curriculum, positioning teachers as curriculum makers or curriculum developers (Priestley et al., 2022; Walsh, 2019). The concept of teacher as a curriculum maker can be traced back to Schwab's seminal discussion of curriculum planning. Schwab (1983) identified teachers as being central to planning curriculum, since they are best placed to understand what is relevant and interesting to the children in their schools (see also Madondo, 2021; Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Eisner, 2002).

For some, there is an inevitability to the agency of teachers as curriculum makers: there is inexorable mediation and translation of the curriculum as enacted in classrooms (Pieters et al., 2019; Oyler, 2012; Braun et al., 2010; Aoki, 1993, Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). Mandated curriculum content is filtered and modified by teachers according to their knowledge of students' needs: Marsh and Willis (2007) and Louden (2000) accept the necessity of teachers' modifications of the curriculum to render it more appropriate for their individual students. Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) affirm the inescapability of curriculum being developed by teachers: "Teachers are always making curriculum with their students even when they work in policy contexts that do not see them as curriculum makers" (p. 303). These viewpoints suggest teacher agency may be inherent in teachers' practices, as they make and enact pedagogical choices appropriate to their particular situation. This is a significant departure from the conception of the teaching role as an implementer of pre-determined curriculum (see section 2.3.1).

Teacher mediation of curriculum can be location-dependent, influenced by the degree of centralised control over curriculum exercised by government bodies. Literature suggests that teachers find ways in which to work as curriculum makers at the classroom level in a variety of educational systems such as the US (Schwab, 1983; Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Oyler, 2012; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Eisner, 2002), England (Braun et al., 2010), Netherlands (Pieters et al., 2019; Biesta, 2006), Australia (Louden, 2000), and Ireland (Walsh, 2019).

The above-cited literature relates to teachers as unofficial curriculum-makers, however, some argue that teachers should have a recognised role as curriculum makers (Marsh & Willis, 2007; Biesta, 2006). This role would situate teachers as proactively designing curriculum according to the needs of their students rather than implementing or delivering preordained materials. The creative role of teachers as curriculum makers was conceptualised by Green (1988, cited in Marsh & Willis, 2007) over three decades ago as involving composing, imagining and meaning-making. Walsh (2019) further emphasised this responsibility noting that “It is in the hands and through the skill of the teacher that the curriculum becomes a lived experience and embodied reality for pupils” (Slide 4, para. 3). Currently, teachers operate as official and recognised curriculum makers in Finland (section 2.3.7.3) and New Zealand (section 2.3.7.4), and were initially designated as curriculum makers in the draft documents for the redeveloped curriculum in Ireland (NCCA, 2020), although this wording has been removed from the final published framework (DE, 2023). This may suggest a degree of nervousness or uncertainty regarding embracing the full spectrum of broad and bold approaches in curriculum reform (OECD, 2015). Kirk et al. (2018) recognise that the role teachers play in curriculum making within national curriculum reform agendas remains unclear. The ‘spaces for manoeuvre’ which Priestley et al. (2012) identify as a consequence of providing opportunity for teachers to engage in curriculum making continues to be somewhat mired in the complexity of teacher agency which is subject to local and national contexts such as high stakes assessment (Priestley et al., 2015a). The desirability of teachers working officially as curriculum makers has somewhat been borne out through the strong performance of Finland and New Zealand in PISA testing (OECD, 2019b), reinforcing that teacher agency in some jurisdictions has positive outcomes. However, further research is required to determine the extent to which teacher (and pupil) agency as an approach to curriculum making is possible in practice. This lies at the heart of this research.

These views on teachers’ mediation and shaping of curriculum are directly relevant to the present study which seeks to investigate teacher agency in relation to the planning for and enactment of curriculum. As this study is taking place during the ongoing redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum, teacher agency in relation to the Irish curricular context is

explored below (section 2.3.7). Another influence on teacher agency is professional relationships, which are discussed next.

2.1.2.2 Teacher Agency and Relationships. Part of the ecology of teacher agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) consists of their working relationships with colleagues, reflecting the relational understanding of structure (section 2.1.1). The connection between teacher agency and teachers' relationships was established by Priestley et al. (2015a) who noted that: "Teachers' relationships – with other professionals as well as with people in the wider communities in which they work – have the potential to impact significantly on their professional agency" (p. 85).

Many writers similarly identify a correlation between teachers' agency and their access to supportive collegial relationships. Positive relationships with colleagues have been found to support teacher agency, innovation and risk-taking (Jenkins, 2020). Collaborative relationships are beneficial to curriculum development and reform (Poulton, 2020; Sahlberg, 2015): as Putnam and Borko (2000) argued, collaborating communities of teachers – engaged in discussions about pedagogical materials, methods and strategies – help to modify teachers' practices and promote agentic manoeuvres. Thus, the evidence points to the necessity for supportive peer relationships to promote agentic teaching and enhance locally-relevant learning experiences.

Conversely, less positive relationships may inhibit agency, as evidenced by the research of Jenkins (2020), who found that poor relationships with management resulted in passive agency: an avoidance of mandated curriculum reforms, and insistence on conserving traditional practices. This finding is echoed by Priestley et al. (2015a), who explored how hierarchical and non-reciprocal relationships can deter new ideas and new thinking. Through examples from their study of curricular reform in Scotland, they demonstrated that formal, vertical relationships inhibited the participation and agency of otherwise committed and capable teachers. Both schools included in their empirical study experienced challenges as they engaged with the new curriculum, yet teachers from the school with more collaborative and open collegial relationships overcame those challenges more easily. As a result of their findings, Priestley et al. (2015a) reiterated the importance of policymakers and school leaders taking relational contexts into consideration when devising and overseeing the implementation of new curricula which position teachers as agentic professionals. This implies that there is important work to be done within schools in building collegial communities to scaffold teacher agency. This includes the development of groups focussed on relational agency (Edwards, 2005) where individuals work together, using each other's skills and knowledge as a resource in overcoming difficulties. This study develops a community of practice within my own school,

aiming to similarly scaffold the agency of participating teachers through positive relationships in the school community.

2.1.2.3 Teacher Agency and Performativity. Performativity is a major strand in the literature on teacher agency, referring to structural contexts such as high-stakes assessment and accountability measures. These accountability measures have resulted in increased levels of scrutiny, regulation and surveillance of teachers' work (Murphy, 2019). Comparative international studies of educational outcomes (Devine et al., 2013) and the role that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) now plays in education (Baxter, 2019) are identified as partial reasons for the increasing attention given to performativity measures.

Performative features of education such as assessment, accountability, and auditing, are usually regarded as an impediment to teachers' achievement of agency (Skerritt, 2023; Priestley et al., 2022; Ro, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021; Poulton, 2020; Sahlberg, 2015; Buchanan, 2015). Highly prescriptive and accountable structures imply a lack of trust in teacher professionalism, and, perhaps echo the so-called "teacher proof" curricula of the US and UK in earlier decades (MacDonald, 2003). The implication that external accountability is required and that enforcement is needed to maintain standards disempowers teachers in their work. Priestley et al. (2012) strongly made the case that prescriptive national curricula, stringent inspection schedules and use of attainment data have all contributed to a low capacity for teacher agency in relation to planning curriculum. These authors further contended that performativity has resulted in increased paperwork and bureaucracy for schools, with consequent disempowerment and marginalisation of teachers. Menter and Hulme (2013) similarly found that a new managerialism within the public sector has resulted in forms of educational governance which are often presented as a scaffold for teacher professionalism while, in reality, increasing control of teachers and limiting their autonomy. As discussed earlier, autonomy concerns the freedom within which agency might be achieved (section 2.1.1.3), thus, if autonomy is restricted through accountability measures, teacher agency is arguably more difficult to achieve. This echoes the argument of Sullivan et al. (2021) that increased performativity has resulted in a more circumscribed judgement of teachers' work: "Professional standards, national testing and final-year examination results have reduced the ways teachers' effectiveness is judged. These external benchmarks have eroded broader understandings of what it means to be a quality teacher" (p. 399).

The language and form of curriculum can influence the performative culture of schools. Prescriptive curricula are seen to disenfranchise teachers (van Oers, 2015), potentially leading to avoidant or oppositional practices (Jenkins, 2020; Eisenbach, 2012). This view may have

consequences for the Irish context, where the outgoing Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) prescribes learning experiences in a high level of detail and documentation (see section 2.3.5). This may cause challenges for in-service teachers used to working with the high levels of prescription in the existing curriculum (DES, 1999) and its limited affordances for agency. Teachers will, in the coming years, be required to pivot to working with a curriculum framed by learning outcomes, different expectations of pupils, and offering different agentic possibilities. Priestley et al. (2015a) argue that the current trend to construct curricula in the form of learning outcomes is linked to accountability practices; a view posited on an understanding of education as an output which can be regulated (Prøitz et al., 2017; Ewell, 2009). In contrast to what is being envisaged, it may have the effect of disempowering teachers as they focus on meeting external demands rather than responding to the learning needs of their specific classes (Fox, 2020; Hayes & Cheng, 2020). This suggests potential for a conflict between the agency posited by the newly developed Irish primary school curriculum framework (DE, 2023) and the measurable outputs demanded by the education system (i.e., plans, inspections, assessment records).

Finland is often presented in the literature as a counterpoint to these disempowering accountability measures. Renowned for the absence of performative pressures on teachers, it foregoes external inspections and the reporting of external standardised tests to the public (Finland Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). The lack of inspection systems, school rankings and national testing mechanisms has received much international attention (Chung, 2023; Weale, 2019; Doherty, 2019; Hancock, 2011; Flynn, 2010). This reduction in performance measures affords space and time for Finnish teachers to take on an agentic identity, as they are less concerned with meeting external accountability markers (Sahlberg, 2012). The strategy of supporting teacher agency appears to be working, judging from the continued high performance of Finland in PISA rankings (OECD, 2019b) and the positive responses from teachers and school leaders regarding job satisfaction, low attrition rates, low levels of reported stress and high levels of teacher voice and responsibility in terms of curriculum and policy (OECD, 2020). In this way, Finland offers an alternative to the accountability-driven education systems of other countries [for detailed discussions of performativity in other countries' education systems, see Goodley & Perryman, 2022 (England); Jeffrey & Troman, 2012 (UK); Holloway & Brass, 2018 (US); Sullivan et al., 2021 (Australia)].

While Brown et al. (2020) assess the Irish education system as featuring low levels of performativity with limited accountability and a non-threatening evaluation system, others suggest that performativity has become a notable aspect of Irish schools (Fleming, 2020; Salokangas et al., 2019; Grummell & Murray, 2015; Conway, 2013; MacRuairc & Harford,

2008). The 'creeping' influence of performativity measures (Fleming, 2020) is most apparent at post-primary level, where there is an intense focus of all educational experiences on the terminal examination (see Fleming, 2019; Baird et al., 2014; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2013; MacRuairc & Harford, 2008). Junior Cycle reform has attempted to reduce some of these performance measures by introducing classroom-based assessments, and replacing the Junior Certificate with the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (DES, 2015b). Similar reforms are ongoing at senior cycle level, with plans underway for splitting the assessment marks between terminal examinations and alternative assessment tools (DE, 2022a). However, despite revisions to embed greater choice and student agency for example (Scanlon & Connolly, 2021), there is less evidence of structural and cultural changes to support teacher agency in a meaningful way. Indeed, some media commentary bemoans the post-primary curriculum reforms and the agency they purport to offer teachers in adapting learning for their particular students (Gleeson, 2022).

This 'creeping performativity' has been steadily advancing in Irish primary schools over the last two decades, with Sugrue (2009, 2011) arguing that the role of the Inspectorate has induced a similar shift towards performative-based cultures. Brady (2019) argued that the requirements of the school self-evaluation process increased teachers' performativity anxieties. Similarly, Conway and Murphy (2013) recognised a similar rise in performative cultures in Irish schools, outlining how the drop in Ireland's rankings on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 motivated an increased focus on performance measures for primary and post-primary schools. This focus on ranking continues unabated ten years later, as evidenced by frequent media and governmental reporting (O'Brien, 2019; DES, 2019b; DES, 2016a; Baird et al., 2014; Quinn, 2013). Along with the establishment of The Teaching Council of Ireland on a statutory basis in 2006, policies arising from the 2009 PISA report led to heightened regulation, standardised testing, and changes in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (Conway & Murphy, 2013). The reality of such accountability measures as manifest in inspection visits, published Whole School Evaluation (WSE) reports, and the school self-evaluation process in primary schools implies that Irish teachers may be subject to the same restricted autonomy and agency as their counterparts in other countries. The potential disconnect between the rhetoric of curriculum documents and the restrictions imposed on teachers is further explored in sections 2.3.5 and 2.3.7 below.

2.1.2.4 Teacher Agency and Teachers' Beliefs. The contingent relationship between agency and teachers' beliefs is highlighted in the literature (Sherman & Teemant, 2022; Gasinets et al., 2022; Bonner et al., 2020). Priestley et al. (2012) contend that teachers' capacity to achieve agency varies depending on the beliefs they hold and activate in their

teaching practices. As such, teachers' beliefs play a significant role in teachers' agentic manoeuvres. Thus, it is clear that any consideration of teacher agency must incorporate an investigation of teachers' beliefs.

Various terminology is applied throughout the literature to refer to teachers' thinking, philosophies and understandings (Borg, 2003; Kagan, 1992). For the purposes of this research, the term 'teachers' beliefs' is used to indicate the personal conceptualisations of teachers. Biesta et al. (2015) conceived of beliefs as "discourses that inform teachers' perceptions, judgements and decision-making and that motivate and drive teachers' action" (p. 624).

Over three decades ago, Pajares (1992) asserted that teachers' beliefs are instrumental in shaping teaching practices. This claim has been bolstered by many other writers since, who found that classroom practice is determined by teachers' beliefs (Whyte et al., 2022; Quigley, 2021; Bas & Senturk, 2019; Farrell & Guz, 2019; Rietdijk et al., 2018). The evidence is unequivocal that teachers' beliefs have considerable influence over educational change and reform efforts (Breeze et al., 2023; Brinkmann, 2019). Fullan (2001), a seminal influence in the field, stated forcefully that educational change is dependent on teachers' thinking and actions – informed by beliefs. Teachers are more likely to act as reform agents when the reform is aligned to their pre-existing beliefs (Wang et al., 2017), while they are likely to resist reforms which do not accord with their beliefs (Parra-Perez et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2009). Bonner et al. (2020) found a reciprocal relationship between agency and teachers' beliefs, noting that agency and beliefs were mutually supportive in pedagogical reform. This points to the relevance of including teachers' beliefs in any study of teacher agency.

Much of the literature emphasises the intransigence and inflexibility of teachers' beliefs and practices (Mills et al., 2019; Belo et al., 2014; Lombaerts et al., 2009), ascribing this to limited professional reflective practice, or the dominant influence of beliefs formed early in life. This rigidity may pose challenges for the achievement of agency (Priestley et al., 2015a). However, some authors suggest potential mediation of teachers' beliefs through effective professional development (Jenkins, 2020; Borg, 2011), reflection and reflexivity (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021; Hermans et al., 2008; van der Schaaf et al., 2008), and involvement in communities of practice (Pan & Chen, 2023; Ertmer, 2005). The consequences are that teachers with more learner-centred orientations may be more likely to modify their beliefs (Meirink et al., 2009). Their finding has relevance for this research study, concerning inquiry-based learning (IBL) and teachers' beliefs.

2.1.2.5 Teacher Agency and Identity. The relationship between teacher agency and teachers' identities is a prominent theme in the literature (Ishihara et al., 2018; Wray & Richmond, 2018; Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Stillman & Anderson, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Buchanan (2015) noted that both are subject to the influence of macro level discourses, suggesting that identity may be similarly shaped by structure.

Identity is positioned by some authors as a constituent element of agency (Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015). More commonly, agency and identity are considered as mutually constitutive aspects of teachers' practice: "Identity commitments motivate our actions, and we exercise agency in the very performance of those identities" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 58). This positions identity and agency as inherently related in teachers' practices. Studies have found that teachers' agentic manoeuvres align closely with their professional identities (Wray & Richmond, 2018; Tao & Gao, 2017). The literature reveals that awareness of these identities is important for the achievement of agentic practice, suggesting that reflexive examination of teacher identity might support teacher agency.

It was decided not to include teacher identity in this study's research questions, due to time and space constraints. However, examination of the professional identities of Irish primary teachers in future studies could be insightful, and timely, given the current redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum (PSC).

2.1.2.6 Teacher Agency and Confidence. Despite its importance in supporting teachers to work intentionally, the role of confidence as a component of teacher agency is notably under-researched (Nolan & Molla, 2017). The literature reveals a cluster of research areas, such as confidence in early career teachers (Campbell et al., 2020) and in particular disciplines, such as in Music (Thorn & Brasche, 2020; Baldwin & Beauchamp, 2014; Heyning, 2011), Mathematics (Hurdle, 2020; Chen et al., 2014), Physical Education (Simpson et al., 2022; Howells & Meehan, 2019) and Technology (Willis et al., 2016). However, explicit research into the relationship between teacher agency and confidence is conspicuously limited, with the exception of the work of Nolan and Molla (2017). Instead, attention is focused on how to promote teacher confidence for improved student outcomes. For example, a visual arts CPD programme over two years led to improved teacher confidence in cultural learning and creative pedagogies (Thomas, 2022), and Hennessy et al. (2020) identified three approaches to building second-level poetry teachers' confidence: (i) developing pedagogical proficiency, (ii) creative pedagogical experiences which acknowledge the significance of uncertainty, and (iii) the elevation of intellectual accountability rather than bureaucratic accountability, but agency is not discussed. The available research suggests that CPD experiences, particularly those involving CoPs which improve pedagogical strategies, deepen

subject knowledge, and build teachers' reflective and accountability practices, may lead to greater confidence (Vanderlip Taylor, 2023; Salter & Tett, 2022).

Over a decade ago, Dierking and Fox (2012) explored the relationship between teacher confidence and teacher empowerment. Recalling aspects of agency as advanced by Calhoun (2002) and Bandura (2006), their definition of empowerment is akin to agency since empowerment concerns teachers' ability to act, their sense of professional self, and their authority. They argued that as teachers increased their professional and pedagogical knowledge, they demonstrated power through confident use of their voice. They connected teacher confidence with self-efficacy beliefs, as did Nolan and Molla (2017), but others distinguish between the specificity of self-efficacy beliefs and the more global concept of confidence (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003). When analysed, this differentiation nevertheless acknowledges some similarity between self-efficacy and confidence and points towards the value of research into teacher confidence and teacher agency, comparable to the existing, albeit limited, literature on self-efficacy and agency (Polatcan et al., 2021; Creely et al., 2021; Min, 2019).

Based on the available evidence, I agree with Nolan and Molla's (2017) perspective that confidence is indispensable for the achievement of agency: "Teachers are required to have the *confidence to take risks and to try out new ideas and strategies in their pedagogic work*" (p. 11, emphasis added). It suggests an important correlation between confidence and agency and therefore, the need to consider teacher confidence when positioning teachers as agentic professionals. However, despite the recent increase in literature on teacher agency (see Cong-Lem, 2021), this aspect of agency has received little attention to date. The current study focuses on this gap in the literature by exploring teacher confidence through the voices of teachers themselves.

2.1.2.7 Teacher Agency and Voice. Dierking and Fox (2012) contend that teacher empowerment, broadly synonymous with teacher agency, is linked to knowledge, confident voices and teachers' ability to make choices. They strongly support the importance of teacher voice when discussing teacher empowerment, which implies a similar connection between voice and agency. An understanding of agency as comprising voice is supported in the literature, although this is generally in reference to student agency (Wright, 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Hall, 2019). However, research establishing a link between the voice and agency of teachers has been growing slowly but steadily. Almost 20 years ago, Batra (2005) argued forcefully for the relevance of teacher voice and teacher agency within reform of elementary education in India. More recently, Zepeda et al. (2022) positioned voice and agency as the two foundational aspects of school culture: impacting such elements of culture as teacher

autonomy, self-efficacy, empowerment and engagement. Indeed, they regarded voice as “the gateway to teacher agency, autonomy and empowerment” (para. 16) and teacher agency as “the actions stemming from voice” (para. 21). This compels analysis of voice as an aspect of teacher agency.

Overall, teacher voice is understood in the educational literature as involving the sharing of teachers’ views on educational matters, although different emphases within this definition are offered. Frost (2008) characterised teacher voice as “the views, experience, and perspective of teachers on educational policy and practice” (p. 347), while others had earlier highlighted the link between teacher voice and reform (Hargreaves, 1996). The definition offered by the Quaglia Institute (2020) in the US considers teacher voice as occurring within a respectful, collegial environment and concerning teachers’ ideas on the collective good. Quaglia and Lande (2017) similarly highlight the collaborative use of voice within a community of educators, suggesting that teacher voice should extend beyond the walls of individual classrooms to be meaningfully agentic. However, such definitions risk excluding the voices of teachers whose contributions may appear less impactful in relation to the whole school community. Hargreaves (1996) contested the belief that teacher voice must be beneficial to others, arguing that even negative and disaffected voices deserve to be valued. In acknowledging a spectrum of teacher voice both within and beyond their own classrooms, I am drawn to the definition of teacher voice offered by Gyurko (2012):

Teacher voice is the expression by teachers of knowledge or opinions pertaining to their work, shared in school or other public settings, in the discussion of contested issues that have a broad impact on the process and outcomes of education. (p. 4)

This definition encompasses the public nature of teacher voice: it is more than teachers’ vocalisations in their classrooms, and acknowledges the knowledge and expertise which teachers can share when using their voice. Gyurko’s (2012) definition has the advantage of referring to the object of teacher voice: the field of disputed policies and practices within education. At a time of curriculum reform, this seems particularly apposite. Consequently, I am taking his definition of teacher voice forwards in this study to underpin the voice component of teacher agency.

The literature demonstrates that teacher voice is impacted by contextual factors, such as the perceived culture of school management in terms of support (Lefstein & Perath, 2014; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011), and individual factors, such as teachers’ personalities and demographics (Bas & Tabancali, 2020; Jesevičiūtė-Ufartienė et al., 2020). Length of teaching experience also contributes to teachers’ willingness to exercise their voice, with early career teachers (1-5 years of teaching) exhibiting a lower level of voice than their colleagues with 16-

20 years of teaching (Çetin, 2013). The number of years working in a particular school has a similarly expansive influence on teacher voice (Çetin, 2013).

The literature most often addresses the perceived benefits arising from teacher voice (McCarthy & Keller, 2022). It is linked to effective implementation of reforms (Bangs & Frost, 2012), improved school culture (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015), collegiality and participation (Ingersoll, 2007), and improved student outcomes (Gyrko, 2012; Ingersoll, 2007). Another strong theme in the literature concerns the lack of teacher voice in educational debate (Lefstein and Perath, 2014; Mullick, 2013; Gyrko, 2012; Ingersoll, 2007). Bangs and Frost (2012) referred to teacher voice as “the ghost at the feast” (p. 1) of educational policy, a viewpoint shared by Heneveld (2007) and Hargreaves and Shirley (2011) who argue that teachers are the objects of reform rather than its subjects. This has led to low levels of agency and voice among teachers in the US, as reflected in the National School Voice Reports (Quaglia and Lande, 2017). Teachers feeling unheard is a feature of the research in this area (see Educators for Excellence, 2020; Rentner et al., 2016). In a survey of 20,000 teachers in the US, only one in 20 said their voice was being listened to at the State level and only 1 in 50 felt they had a voice at the national level (Richmond, 2014). Lefstein and Perath (2014) contended that facilitating genuine teacher voice demands more than merely affording teachers an opportunity to speak but ensuring that they can speak in their own terms, that they are heard, and that their contributions are considered.

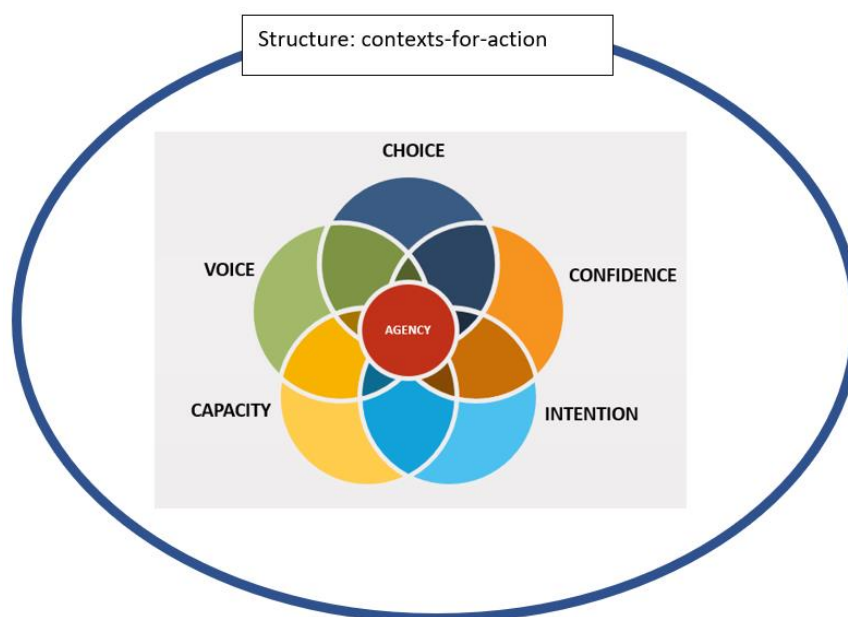
The literature on voice provides a base for understanding the opinions of teachers in this study on opportunities for and use of their own voice. It is noteworthy that there is a dearth of research into teacher voice in the context of the Irish education system. It foregrounds the relevance of the present study to the ongoing curriculum reform, incorporating teacher agency and its related components of voice, choice and confidence.

2.1.3 Working Definition of Teacher Agency

Figure 2.2 depicts my working model of teacher agency as conceptualised from the literature. It aims to show how five constituents identified as key to agency – voice, choice, confidence, capacity and intentionality – interact with the contexts-for-action (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) within which the teacher practises. I have taken the components of capacity and intentionality from Giddens (1984) (section 2.1.1.1), and while the role of confidence in agency is under-researched (section 2.1.2.6), I endorse Molla and Nolan’s (2020) classification of confidence as a fundamental element of agency. While agentic practice might be the intention of individual teachers, I contend that without the confidence to enact such practice, agency remains a latent phenomenon.

Figure 2.2

Theoretical Model of Teacher Agency Underpinning this Study (informed by Giddens, 1984; Biesta & Tedder, 2007)



Zepeda et al.'s (2022) identification of voice as central to the achievement of agency is persuasive and compels the inclusion of voice in my theoretical model. Lastly, choice is positioned at the top of the figure due to its centrality in the achievement of agency. However, this understanding of agency as including choice was problematised by literature published after the fieldwork was completed. Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022) counselled against conceptualising agency as choice, since teachers are generally presented with few choices in their classroom contexts. His argument raises interesting questions about what choices teachers perceive in their work – data on which is presented in Chapter 4 – and the degree to which the intuitive practice of teachers might represent agentic manoeuvres.

Like many other studies, I am drawn to Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological definition in developing my own understanding of teacher agency. This perspective acknowledges the impact of ecology and context on teachers' ability to act. Having worked in two different schools for many years, I experienced the impact of contrasting school management, patronage, collegial relationships, resources, and accountability measures. This revealed the contextual influences on my own sense of agency and my ability to negotiate and act in the professional sphere. It is possible that other teachers experience comparable contextual factors in their practice. In Figure 2.2, the five constituents of agency are positioned within and bounded by the contexts-for-action, demonstrating how agency is indisputably impacted by the ecology within which teachers take action. A working definition

of teacher agency as a phenomenon influenced by experiences, confidence, and ecological context is offered. This working definition might be articulated as follows:

Agency is a phenomenon – shaped by life courses and professional contexts, and supported through collegial relationships – composed of the capacity, voice, and confidence to enact informed pedagogical choices.

Taking this working definition forwards, the sections below explore the claimed benefits and challenges attributed to teacher agency.

2.1.4 Types of Teacher Agency

The literature recognises that teacher agency can take many forms. Some writers have presented typologies of the various possibilities for teacher agency or ways in which teacher agency is made manifest. For example, Oolbakkink-Marchand et al. (2022) identified three categories of contexts for teacher agency: extensive, bounded, and restricted. Teachers displaying extensive agency are characterised by ample participation and voice at school level, with considerable resources for overcoming challenges. Bounded agency reflects the experience of certain teachers who encountered specific opportunities for agency for school development, whereas restricted agency refers to limited opportunities for teachers to achieve agency. This classification of teacher agency resembles that of Jenkins (2020), who looked at the agency enacted by teachers during curriculum change and found proactive, reactive, and passive agentic practices. Jenkins' proactive agency is possibly the type of agency which is implied in most curricular and policy literature, such as the redeveloped curriculum framework in Ireland (DE, 2023):

Proactive agency was enacted by teachers when they initiated a curriculum change... The results of proactive agency were innovative, original curriculum programs that teachers believed met specific school and students' learning needs (Jenkins, 2020, p.172).

In Jenkins' typology, teachers demonstrated reactive agency to decisions that were made by senior management. Finally, passive agency refers to teachers who avoided input or implementation of reform. Similar to Archer's (2003) insistence that agency is always present, Jenkins' (2020) study is a reminder that teacher agency is inherent, even in less productive forms of practice.

Kauppinen et al. (2020) outlined four varying narratives of teacher agency arising from their study of teacher agency during an in-service teacher education programme. Their most expansive agency is termed transformative agency and surpasses Jenkins' proactive agency in depicting such transformative features as modelling and scaffolding the agency of their

peers. Kauppinen et al.'s (2020) expansive agency is most like the extensive agency (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022) and proactive agency (Jenkins, 2020) described above. They noted that teachers also demonstrate strengthened agency, which is developed during CPD programmes, and selective agency, where teachers' attempts to innovate are limited.

The various typologies of teacher agency point towards an important caveat: it is not an absolute phenomenon which is either achieved or not. Teachers achieve agency to different degrees based on the contextual factors recognised by the ecological model. The different terminology used by the authors in this section does not obscure the fact that there is a spectrum of achievement of teacher agency, which is especially relevant in reflecting the complex realities of classrooms. This reminder adds to the note from Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022) regarding 'moments of agentic practice' rather than agency as having been achieved. The discussion here reinforces that teacher agency is a complex, changing, multi-faceted phenomenon which varies considerably between different contexts, as teachers perform differently in the different zones of their professional work (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020).

2.1.5 Reported Outcomes Associated with Teacher Agency

Advocates of teacher agency claim a range of benefits, including educational reform and innovation, higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction, and better learner outcomes. The literature presents evidence that teacher agency is not inevitably directed towards supporting educational reform and change: teachers may exhibit passive agency to avoid or resist change (Jenkins, 2020), acting in opposition to reform that is counter to their ethos or beliefs (Robinson, 2012; Sannino, 2010). However, teacher agency is most often associated with positive educational change and reform (Priestley et al., 2012).

Zeichner (2019) argued that teacher agency functions to produce more equitable education systems. To illustrate this, three case studies from various parts of North America were offered, in which teachers utilised their agency to effect educational change in the direction of access and equality. In a study of Finnish vocational teachers, Vähäsantanen (2015) found that teacher agency resulted in more innovative practice (see also Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2018; Hökkä et al., 2017; van der Heijden et al., 2015). It has also been linked to improvements in professional learning (Kauppinen et al., 2020; Tao & Gao, 2017; Lai et al., 2016). However, in this regard, Vähäsantanen (2015) cautioned that strong teacher agency can also serve to complicate educational reform, and that reform measures imposed by educational authorities may be more effective than the encouragement of teacher agency. The influence of teacher agency on educational reform is particularly interesting in the context of this study, which occurs prior to a major curriculum reform.

Teacher agency is also associated with improved career experiences, such as greater job satisfaction, motivation and well-being. Vähäsantanen (2015) and Sinnema (2016) both posited increased job satisfaction as an outcome of teacher agency. As teachers perceive themselves as more effectual, their motivation is enhanced, thus leading to heightened drive and effectiveness. An additional positive outcome is suggested by Vähäsantanen (2015), who cited claims that teacher agency can benefit teacher well-being. Teachers with lower agency are deemed to experience fatigue and exhaustion as a result of their lack of agency and effectiveness, whereas agentic teachers are energised in their workplace (Salter & Tett, 2021; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020; Catling, 2013; Keogh et al., 2012).

It is claimed that teacher agency leads to improved outcomes for students, such as more meaningful learning engagements (Stein et al., 2016), increased social justice (Kettle et al., 2022; Taylor & Lelliott, 2022), higher assessment scores (Hawthorne-Kocak, 2021), and support for student agency through teacher modelling (Scanlon and Connelly, 2021). Sinnema (2016) demonstrated that teacher agency in curriculum development at the local level resulted in more locally relevant learning and more effective problem-solving. Through galvanising agentic teachers to enact inclusive practices at the local level, the learning outcomes for all students were improved, and correlated with inclusive school cultures and inclusive pedagogy (Pantić et al., 2021; Pantić, 2015). The OECD (2019a) posited that children's agency and teacher agency are mutually interdependent and supportive, in a 'co-agency' model where teachers and learners co-construct the teaching and learning process. Teachers' agentic practice not only enhances student agency, but has been shown to facilitate student ownership and choice in their learning (Robertson et al., 2020). Children's agency is a core principle of the redeveloped curriculum framework in Ireland (DE, 2023), and these positive outcomes for education systems, teachers, and learners arising from constructive teacher agency present a powerful rationale for investing in and supporting teachers to achieve agency. While much has been written to promote the agency of teachers, it is recognised that teacher agency, particularly in relation to curriculum, is not without its challenges, some of which are discussed below.

2.1.6 Challenges of Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is most often discussed in the literature in the context of teacher-as-curriculum-maker, discussed in section 2.1.2.1 above. Some advocates appear to assume that all teachers would welcome a role in creating, planning, and enacting curriculum (LeFevre et al., 2015; Eisenbach, 2012). However, Abbiss (2011) acknowledged that the permission to achieve agency can be as discomfoting as exciting. Some may feel more satisfied in a position where they are implementing a prescribed curriculum, perhaps because it is less

demanding and, potentially, they are less responsible for the outcomes (see Gleeson, 2022). For example, a high level of knowledge regarding how children learn, and the sequential development of their conceptual understanding, is needed to 'make' curriculum. When teachers are responsible for planning curriculum from an existing template, they are involved in organising and sorting information, adapting it to their local needs which differs significantly from the process of curriculum-making (Rawling, 2008). As Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) stated:

Preparing teachers as curriculum makers ... requires preparing them to be improvisational thinkers, sensitized to the many levels of nested influence on students' experiences, and informed about the many curricula resources available to themselves and students. (p. 300)

Curriculum making is time-consuming and intellectually demanding, as recognised by the Department of Education (DES, 2015a):

Having the authority to make decisions about curriculum, teaching and learning approaches and assessment practices enlarges the scope of the job of teaching. It also requires more time and energy from them and it cannot be taken for granted that all teachers will have the necessary skills or will appreciate having to take on additional responsibilities. (p. 9)

Overloaded curricula and existing time pressures within teachers' work can leave them with little time or interest to invest in considering the epistemological questions of education (Marsh & Willis, 2007). This was found by Roberts (2007) who observed that inexperienced teachers can often neglect steps in children's learning. In a review of the teacher agency which is championed in the New Zealand curriculum, Fastier (2016) recognised the difficulties encountered by New Zealand Geography teachers who had little experience in the role of curriculum maker. She suggested that teacher agency is not a simple phenomenon, and that reforms which move to position teachers as curriculum makers without requisite training and guidance may foster unsure and ineffective agents, despite the best intentions of that reform. Priestley and Philippou (2018) argued that "successful curriculum making requires skilled teachers, with a firm grounding in professional knowledge and professional dispositions, an ability to envision alternative future trajectories and a propitious context that offers affordance for agency" (p. 155).

The challenges associated with teacher agency outlined above, notably a lack of teacher confidence and competence, extensive knowledge of learning processes and sequencing, additional time required, and a lack of teacher experience in making curriculum

(see also Yuan et al., 2022; Leeman et al., 2020), are particularly important to consider in the current landscape of curriculum reform in Ireland.

This section examined key influences, definitions and understandings of teacher agency in the literature. It is acknowledged that there are other areas such as identity, gender, and location which impact teacher agency but unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore every connection to teacher agency. The chapter now moves to the second major theme of the research – inquiry-based learning (IBL). As inquiry is commonly associated with improving learner agency in the classroom, and implicated as a framework to support enactment of teacher agency and autonomy (Tondreau & Johnston, 2023; Taylor & Lelliott, 2022), the sub-sections below explore key definitions, characteristics, outcomes, and responses to inquiry to develop a working definition of IBL for this study.

2.2 Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL)

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning which has come to prominence in recent decades, particularly in the U.S., where some view it as a cornerstone of curriculum reform (Buchanan et al., 2016). Advocates claim IBL is a means of provoking deeper engagement and learning for students (Short, 2017; Murdoch, 2015). In educational literature, the main areas of research into IBL include models for planning and implementing inquiry; consequent changes in teachers' practices; the role of the learner, and the outcomes of engagement with inquiry. In society more generally, inquiry has attracted considerable attention, with strong opinions voiced in the media both in support of its adoption by educators (Rice University, 2023; Scott, 2018; Milling, 2017; Hook, 2017) and in strong criticism as an ineffective and undesirable pedagogical approach (Adams, 2021; Ashman, 2020; O' Brien, 2016; Foley, 2016).

2.2.1 Definitions of IBL

There is a notable lack of clarity surrounding the definition of IBL in the literature (Condliffe et al., 2017). Often functioning as an umbrella term (Spronken-Smith et al., 2012), IBL is applied to widely differing worldviews (Wheeler, 2000). It is variously referred to as a teaching strategy (Dewey, 1910), an approach (Murdoch, 2012), a culture (Wulf, 2019), a stance (Short, 2009), and an activity involving argumentation and investigation (Tang, 2022).

The definitions of inquiry can be grouped along a continuum. At one end lie those who regard inquiry as something akin to a teaching strategy (Dewey, 1910). These writers often emphasise the employment of inquiry in particular disciplines, notably Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) (see Lu & Wing Mui So, 2023; Barman, 2002; Edelson

et al., 1999). For example, Pierson et al. (2021) discuss how scientific modelling through inquiry provides a context for engaged meaning-making practices, and Hattie (2009) invokes the scientific method when considering IBL, describing how learners observe, pose questions, design experiments, and analyse data.

Further along the continuum, IBL is regarded as a more holistic approach to learning, based in collaboration and investigation. Here IBL is conceived as an approach to learning between and across academic disciplines, where habits of mind and metacognition are developed alongside subject knowledge and skills. As Justice et al. (2002) asserted:

Inquiry is an orientation to learning that is open and flexible, in which faculty and students are co-learners who guide and facilitate the student-driven learning experience, emphasizing the development of complex questions, critical thinking and assumption of responsibility. (p. 4)

Perhaps the most far-reaching conceptualisations of inquiry arise from those who view it as a philosophy towards lifelong learning. This viewpoint was articulated by Short (2009), who argued that inquiry is “not a particular teaching method but a stance that underlies our approach to living as learners, both within and outside of school” (p. 27). Pataray-Ching and Roberson (2002) also offered a perspective on inquiry which highlights the comprehensive reach of inquiry as a way of thinking and being in the world.

Despite wide variance in understandings and definitions of inquiry, there are some unifying elements, such as an emphasis on student agency (Aulls et al., 2015; Saunders-Stewart et al., 2015), recognition and inclusion of students’ interests (Saunders-Stewart et al., 2015), the importance of students’ questions and the process of student investigation (Jeskova et al., 2016). Inquiry is seen as a way in which students take on an apprenticeship, whereby they practise junior skills of professionals in a given field (Friesen & Scott, 2013). By means of this apprenticeship, students are enabled to investigate for themselves and challenge received truths (Carsten & Howell, 2012). This process of investigation and discovery is integral to IBL. Bacon and Matthews (2014) proposed a definition of inquiry which synthesises many of these ideas:

IBL is understood as the ways in which curious learners actively and seriously engage with the social and physical environment in a questioning and critical effort to make sense of the world, and the consequent reflection, in community, on the connections between the experiences encountered and the information gathered. (p. 352)

The terminology echoes the importance of curiosity and student interest, the centrality of questioning and investigation, and the community within which inquiry occurs. In the following section, some of the fundamental elements of IBL will be traced through the literature.

2.2.2 Key Elements of IBL

As a broad philosophical concept, based on learners' interests and curiosity, inquiry takes many forms. Some of its defining features which are most relevant to this research are synthesised and presented below.

- **Interest and Curiosity.** During IBL, children's interest is provoked with the use of driving questions, the provision of choice (Condliffe et al., 2017; Núñez & León, 2015; Evans & Boucher, 2015), and greater levels of learner autonomy (Jeskova et al., 2016). The philosophy of IBL is underpinned by a focus on curiosity which motivates genuine learning (MacKinnon & Archer-Kuhn, 2023; von Renesse & Ecke, 2017; Chiarotto, 2011; Engel, 2011).
- **Connecting to Children's Ideas.** Children's ideas are the basis for all inquiry (Farris & Purper, 2020; Short, 2009). The initial stage of inquiry often involves connecting with pupils' existing ideas (Murdoch, 2015; Stripling, 2008). As a pedagogical approach which emerges as it does from existing ideas, IBL can be perceived as valuing children's reasoning (Metcalf et al., 2018).
- **Questioning.** The role of questions in inquiry is acknowledged by all writers: questions are generally seen as the point of initiation for an inquiry (Paska, 2017). However, the need to improve conventional questioning (Liang et al., 2021) and the importance of real world questioning are recommended (Hwang & Chen, 2017).
- **Authentic Investigation.** IBL focuses on the authenticity of learning engagements which involve the exploration of meaningful, real-world problems as part of the learning process (Condliffe et al., 2017; Jeskova et al., 2016; Friesen & Scott, 2013; Duffy & Raymer, 2010). During inquiry, children use their early research skills in experiments and learning experiences which are open-ended, authentic and meaningful (Wu et al., 2021; Burgin, 2020; Krogh & Morehouse, 2008; Barell, 2007).
- **Conceptual Development.** Short (2009) insisted on the centrality of conceptual development in IBL, contending that it is the focus on concepts which differentiates inquiry from other learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning. IBL seeks to address conceptual development of 'big ideas', rather than topic-specific facts and

information (Wilcox et al., 2015; Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Wolk, 2008; Wasserman, 2007).

- **Social Learning.** The social context of inquiry learning with its shared experience and shared dialogue is recognised by writers such as Murdoch (2015), Short (2009), and Stripling (2008). Bacon and Matthews (2014) depicted a community of inquiry where learners and teachers work together and share ideas in their learning, thus placing social learning at the very centre of the inquiry process.

These key elements of IBL envision a different role for teachers in inquiry classrooms, one which has relevance for teacher agency, as it interacts with teacher practice in the classroom, and teachers' engagement with curricular guidance in shaping learning from local experiences and interests.

2.2.3 Types and Models of IBL

Different types of inquiry, with correspondingly different roles for teachers and students, allow teachers flexibility in their practice of IBL. These range from structured and guided inquiry, which feature higher levels of teacher support and guidance, through to open inquiry, which involves independent research into student-formulated questions (Spronken-Smith et al., 2012; Banchi & Bell, 2008). Students must master the earlier, more guided levels of inquiry before engaging with open inquiry (Bell et al., 2005). Other continua of types of inquiry have been offered by Martin-Hansen (2002) and Windschitl (2003). This continuum invokes the concept of teacher agency as teachers choose the type of inquiry suitable for their specific uses, rather than indiscriminately following a set curriculum. Thus, different types of inquiry may be employed at different stages in the inquiry learning process, which is described next.

Graphic models are often used to present how inquiry is planned, enacted and analysed. This often takes the form of an inquiry cycle. The cycle generally begins with the activation of prior knowledge and interest, moving through stages of investigation, presentation, construction of new understanding, reflection on learning, and the framing of new points of inquiry. Pedaste et al. (2015) undertook a meta-analysis of 32 articles describing inquiry models and derived five distinct stages: Orientation, Conceptualization, Investigation, Conclusion, and Discussion. They argued that the variation in terminology obscures the fact that the phases in different inquiry models are essentially the same.

The graphic representations of inquiry are visually distinct, and these distinctions convey ideas about the inquiry process they depict. Many theorists illustrate inquiry as a cyclical process (Murdoch, 2010; Stripling, 2008; Meyerson & Secules, 2001) and some

recognise that inquiry is an iterative process (Justice et al., 2007). Wolk (2008) argued for a disordered and idiosyncratic model, to account for the vacillating movement of learners between stages of inquiry.

It is clear from the discussion above that IBL is not a singular approach to teaching, but a spectrum from which teachers can choose an appropriate approach for their particular class. This echoes teacher agency, where teachers make choices and shape learning, rather than rigidly implementing an imposed curriculum.

2.2.4 Outcomes and Critiques of IBL

Advocates of IBL ascribe to its strong positive outcomes, both in the cognitive and dispositional realm. Buchanan et al. (2016) reported considerable positive findings for engagement and academic outcomes arising from IBL (see also Kaçar et al., 2021; Cervantes et al., 2015; Zafra-Gómez et al., 2015; Condliffe et al., 2017; Friesen & Scott, 2013). Research into the personal and social outcomes of IBL reveals improved collaborative skills and positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity (Kaldi et al., 2011), as well as positive dispositional outcomes for students with regards to motivation, creativity and student autonomy (Saunders-Stewart et al., 2015).

The majority of research on the outcomes of IBL has been carried out amongst older students and in the field of Science education. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in literature describing its impact in early years' settings, particularly with a Science focus (MacDonald et al., 2019; Bradley et al., 2019; Blank & Lynch, 2018). While some writers have conducted empirical research into pre-schoolers' engagement with IBL and play-based learning, reporting positive cognitive outcomes (Tippett & Milford, 2017; Bulunuz, 2013; Aral et al., 2010), there is a gap in the literature on inquiry with younger classes in primary schools, particularly in the Irish context, which the current study seeks to address.

It is acknowledged that the outcomes arising from IBL are not universally positive and some studies report mixed findings. Oliver et al. (2021) reviewed the PISA scores from six countries, reporting that students who experienced more IBL teaching had lower scientific literacy, as measured by the PISA assessment. Gormally et al. (2009) found a discrepancy between the acquisition of skills and the development of self-confidence in inquiry settings compared to traditional classrooms. The inquiry-based learners gained higher levels of confidence but reduced skills development, whereas students from the traditional settings had lower confidence but higher gains in skills acquisition.

Kirschner et al. (2006) argued against minimal instruction approaches such as IBL, contending that it is less effective and less time-efficient than direct instruction. In response,

Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) observed a tendency to conflate all minimally-guided approaches, pointing to the difference between IBL, which uses scaffolding to support learners' assimilation of new understandings into existing schema, and discovery learning with its open, non-guided investigations. It is contended that many of the studies which produce negative results for IBL do not investigate social-constructivist, guided inquiries, but rather, more open-discovery models (Saunders-Stewart et al., 2015).

These critiques highlight challenges regarding terminology and understanding amongst practitioners, pointing towards the need for guidance when working in an IBL (Friesen & Scott, 2013; Alfieri et al., 2011; Duffy & Raymer, 2010), a charge levelled at agency also. The discussion here suggests that inquiry is not a remedy for all challenges in education, but a complementary approach (Kaldi et al., 2011), and certainly one worth exploring in the broader context of 21st century learning and teaching.

2.2.5 Teacher Agency and IBL

The literature highlights several links between agency and IBL, including transformation in the practice of teachers, the impact of educational systems, and the supportive potential of collegial relationships.

From a review of the key elements of IBL – particularly the importance of learners' interests and ideas, authentic investigations, and the conceptual basis of inquiry – it emerges that conducting inquiry necessitates agentic practice. The inquiry teacher utilises their voice and choice in the process of planning for and conducting inquiry, which is locally appropriate, within the paradigm of their mandated curriculum. They adapt the key elements and employ different types of inquiry, as appropriate to the age group, the concept being developed, the subject discipline and the curricular paradigm. Thus, there is a strong relationship between agency and inquiry in practice. Both agency and inquiry entail adaptations in practice for many teachers, moving from teacher-centred, didactic practice and implementing curriculum guidelines, to planning learning engagements which develop from learners' interests and conceptual understandings. Teachers' conception of themselves as agentic actors is fundamental to their ability and willingness to adopt an inquiry stance. Teachers need the confidence to see themselves as capable and influential to take the risks identified by Grant and Hill (2006) of implementing a learner-centred approach: modifying their role as teacher, effecting changes in the learning environment, tolerating additional noise, movement and collaboration in the classroom.

As noted earlier (section 2.1.1.2), teachers' sense of agency is influenced by contextual factors such as national education policy and school culture. In their review of

problem-based learning, Condliffe et al. (2017) argued that these external elements can influence teachers' implementation. It is probable that similar factors would beset the implementation of IBL. As discussed earlier, the issue of curriculum breadth and high-stakes testing can prove a substantial challenge (Quigley et al., 2011) in relation to performativity and teacher agency. In this way, the context of curriculum and policy may constrain teachers' agency to enact inquiry.

Just as teachers' sense of agency can be locally encouraged and developed through workplace relationships and supportive school leadership (section 2.1.2.2), teachers' confidence to try inquiry approaches can be bolstered by the same factors (Ravitz, 2010). This evidence from the literature is relevant to the community of practice established in the current study, as a means of potential support for teachers' inquiry practice.

2.2.6 Working Definition of IBL

The review of the literature, and my own classroom experience, informed the development of a working definition of inquiry in this study, as articulated thus:

Inquiry is a stance on how children can learn by investigating questions and wonderings which spark their curiosity. It is often carried out within the context of a community of learners, as children pose questions, take action, and reflect on their inquiries, leading to thoughtful future action.

The most influential writers in the development of this definition have been Short, Murdoch, and Bacon and Matthews. I adopted the idea of inquiry-as-stance from Short (2009), while Murdoch (2015) convinced me of the importance of inquiry emerging from children's own curiosity. Murdoch (2015) also prompted the inclusion of the social dimension: the community of learners, which is central to my own practice of inquiry. I borrowed the concept of 'thoughtful action' from Bacon and Matthews (2014), as I believe it is important that there is some consequence arising from inquiry. Informed by these theorists, my working definition reflects the joyful adventure that inquiry represents, as well as its challenges.

The third significant theme which supports the conceptualisation of this study is that of curriculum, which is explored below. Its centrality to the research lies in the fact that curriculum can be understood as the site where agency is exercised and the framework within which IBL is adopted as an approach to learning.

2.3 Curriculum

This section explores definitions of curriculum, including competing understandings of the nature and purpose of curriculum. The Irish primary school curricula (Primary School Curriculum, Primary Language Curriculum and Aistear Curriculum Framework) will be examined in terms of their affordances of teacher agency and IBL learning experiences. Educational policy will also be discussed in light of the current focus on teacher agency, in both national (DE, 2023) and international educational reform (Yakavets et al., 2022; Wei & Chen, 2019; Ryder et al., 2018; Nguyen & Bui, 2016). Irish curricula are compared with curricula from other countries, in relation to agency and IBL provision.

2.3.1 Definitions of Curriculum

Despite the ubiquity of the word, 'curriculum' is a term which lacks a widely sanctioned definition within the educational literature. Definitions depend on the writers' epistemological standpoint, as well as their philosophical positions regarding the nature and function of education in individual lives, and in wider society.

Taba (1962) offered a transparent definition of curriculum as a plan for learning, which was later expanded by Walker (2003), who asserted that curriculum presents a plan for learning in which the goals and content are organised in a particular way. Eisner (1984) presented a similar definition of curriculum as "a series of events, intended to have educational consequences, often conceived as a set of plans or consequences" (p. 259). These simple descriptions omit several principles which are fundamental to designing curriculum, such as the nature of knowledge; the experiential dimension of learning; the actors involved with curriculum (curriculum developers, teachers, students); and the assessment of curriculum. Tyler (1949) prompted reflection on these issues when he argued that the core question in relation to curriculum concerns what goals and content are worth learning. This is echoed by Marsh and Willis (2007), who stated that the first question to be asked in relation to planned curriculum relates to what knowledge is of most worth.

There is a space in the definitions mooted by Taba and Eisner, a gap which recognises that curriculum proposes content or concepts which *may* be learned. The intention is proposed, but the learning cannot be assured. This space was recognised by Eisner (1984), as he differentiated between the intended curriculum and the operational curriculum. The relationship to and effect of teachers on curriculum has been widely analysed in terms of the adjustments they make to the mandated curriculum (Billett & Martin, 2018; Brown, 2009; Marsh & Willis, 2007). Curriculum is viewed as a social cultural practice, the meaning of which is developed and negotiated through the involvement of teachers, students and others

(Pieters et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019). Understood as a composite of the *planned*, the *enacted* and the *experienced* curriculum, Marsh and Willis (2007) distinguished between these elements as follows:

(Curriculum) is better understood as a composite of what is intended for the classroom (the planned curriculum), of what happens in the classrooms (the enacted curriculum), and of how what happens influences individuals (the experienced curriculum). (xiii)

This study will focus on planned and enacted curriculum, considering how each impacts on teacher agency. From the literature reviewed, the difference between planned curriculum and the lived reality of the enacted curriculum is clear. The planned curriculum might be associated with the definitions offered by theorists such as Taba, Walker, and Tyler; whereas enacted curriculum accepts the mediation of curriculum by teachers as identified in the writings of authors cited above (section 2.1.2.1). This divergence between planned and enacted curriculum informs the study by prompting the recognition that teachers have different levels of potential agency available in each element. For example, teachers have a certain level of agency in planning for learning, depending on the amount of prescription in the mandated curriculum of their setting. For the enacted curriculum, the level of teacher agency may well be reduced, according to the architecture of school management and inspection systems, as well as their own teacher confidence (sections 2.1.2.3 and 2.1.2.6). Teacher agency in terms of experienced curriculum is less relevant, as this is contingent on learners' experiences. However, the notion of experienced curriculum is useful in considering teacher's negotiation of curriculum with learners (Short, 2009).

For the purposes of this research, curriculum is understood as a social interaction between all stakeholders in curriculum design, aimed at putting curriculum innovations into practice (Pieters et al., 2019). The composite nature of curriculum – planned, enacted and experienced – is acknowledged and the dynamic nature of curriculum (Eisner, 1984) is recognised.

2.3.2 Curriculum Design – Planned Curriculum

Tyler (1949) outlined four essential questions for curriculum design that, although dated, arguably remain relevant to contemporary curriculum development. He advised curriculum designers to consider (a) what the purpose of education is, (b) how to select appropriate learning experiences, (c) how to organise learning experiences and (d) how to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning experiences. As Williamson (2013) recognised, the answers to Tyler's questions vary according to thinkers' understanding of the past and aspirations for the future. Curriculum content inevitably includes the beliefs of curriculum

designers (Shieh & Reynolds, 2021; Short, 2009), thus, when teachers work as curriculum-makers, their beliefs influence classroom practice. This recalls the connection between teacher agency and teachers' beliefs (section 2.1.2.4).

The curriculum produced as a result of answering Tyler's questions often takes the form of materials, such as curriculum documents and textbooks to guide instruction (Eisner, 1984). The traditional image of curriculum contains the sanctioned knowledge and skills, organised into separate disciplines of knowledge, or subjects. Skilbeck (1975) argued that these school disciplines present a partial and adult view of reality, which suggests that such curricula are not child-centred in their conception. Pring (1975) defended the importance of discrete disciplines, as a way of introducing learners to different modes of thinking, each with their own organising concepts, logic and connections. However, Beane (1995) disputed the value of curriculum divided into subject areas, contending that such a curriculum is disconnected, incoherent and unrepresentative of real-life learning. Others similarly advocate an integrated curriculum as a more realistic approach to learning (Drake, 2007). Fogarty and Pete (2009) offered an array of different models for integrating curriculum, including cellular, nested, sequenced, webbed, and networked curricula. In their model of curriculum, integration emerges from related ideas within disciplines which are connected by the teacher. Building on the 1971 curriculum which referenced integration, the current Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) advances a thematic approach as evident in the exemplars provided for each subject area. However, there is limited attention given to how it might be enacted in classrooms.

2.3.3 The Irish Primary School Curriculum (PSC)

The Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999) is the complete iteration of curriculum material for the 3,106 primary schools (NCCA, 2020) in Ireland. The curriculum presents "the what and how of children's learning – for children's first eight years in school" (NCCA, n.d.). This language recalls the definition of curriculum by Taba or Tyler cited above, where curriculum offers the plan for learning which teachers then implement, suggesting an instrumental view of curriculum. However, the definition of curriculum supported by the Department of Education is more comprehensive than the above quote might initially suggest, seeming to signal its involvement in the planned and enacted curriculum, as well as an investment in the experienced curriculum:

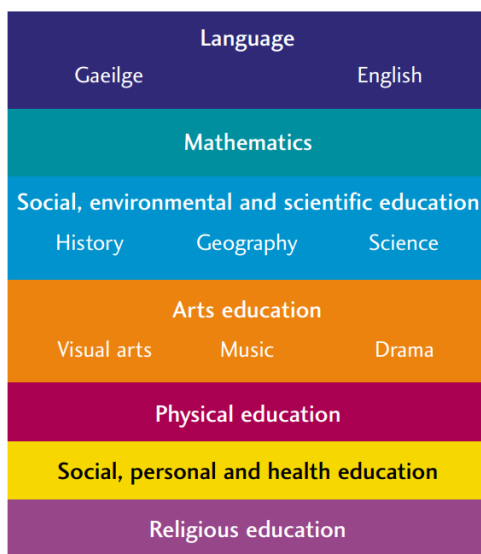
The term "curriculum" encompasses the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. It includes specific and implicit elements. The specific elements are those

concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes which children learn at school as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors that make up *the ethos and general environment of the school*. (DES, 1995, p.19, emphasis added)

The content of the curriculum is presented in six discrete curriculum areas, some of which are further sub-divided into subjects: language (English and Irish); mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education (history, geography and science); arts education (visual arts, music, drama), physical education, and social personal and health education. Teachers are also responsible for religious instruction, according to the ethos of the school patron; the curricula for religious education are not under the auspices of the Department of Education. The graphic below (Figure 2.3), taken from the introduction to the PSC, depicts the curriculum areas and subjects for all classes from Junior Infants to 6th Class.

Figure 2.3

Curriculum Areas (DES, 1999, p. 40)



Each of these subjects is presented with its own aims, objectives and content specified for each class level (Junior Infants to 6th Class). The PSC also outlined the allocated time per week for each subject. Following revision to the time allocations in 2011, languages (English and Irish) and mathematics are afforded considerably more time than other subject areas (DES, 2011). In the infant school week, English and Irish are provided with 6.5 hours of teaching time, while mathematics is given 3 hours 25 minutes. Table 2.1 compares the time allocations for English, Irish and mathematics in the infant teaching week with the time provided for other subjects.

Table 2.1*Time Allocations in Infant Classes*

Subject	Time allocation (Circular 0056/2011)	Comparison with time allocated to English & Irish	Comparison with time allocated to Mathematics
SESE	2 h 15 m	4 h 15 m less	1 h 10 m less
Arts	2 h 30 m	6.5 h 4 h less	55 m less
PE	1 h	5 h 30 m less	2 h 25 m less
SPHE	30 m	6 h less	2 h 55 m less

Since the introduction of the PSC, the Aistear Curriculum Framework (henceforth, Aistear) (NCCA, 2009) and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (DES, 2019a) have been published. The current research was conducted in the context of junior classes, where Aistear’s play-based curriculum framework operates alongside the PSC in two of those 4 class levels. Aistear is employed in Junior and Senior infants’ classes in many Irish primary schools, although it is not a statutory or inspected element of teaching (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Aistear is organised using four themes: well-being; identity and belonging; communicating; thinking and exploring. The PLC is utilised in all primary classes, presenting an integrated curriculum for English and Irish.

2.3.4 Redevelopment of the PSC

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) outlined the dual need for reform of the PSC: to address the challenges of the PSC and to supplement that curriculum with additional subject areas (NCCA, 2018). One of the prominent challenges they identified was that of curriculum overload. Their study revealed that curriculum overload is common to many countries and pointed to the physical face of the curriculum (the volume of curriculum documentation) as being a significant aspect of the problem (NCCA, 2010). Integration and teacher agency are being signposted as potential solutions to the issue of overload in the new curriculum expected to be rolled out in September 2025. This issue will be examined in section 2.3.5 below. After lengthy consultation with education partners, the redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) was published in March 2023 (DE, 2023).

The PCF emphasises the importance of children flourishing as individuals and as members of their communities. It highlights connecting to children’s experiences, children as capable individuals, teachers as agentic professionals, and the promotion of inclusive and evidence-based teaching learning and assessment (DE, 2023). It is based on eight principles of teaching and learning, and structured on key competencies and curriculum areas (see

Figures 2.3 and 2.4). The specifications for the curriculum areas will be presented in terms of learning outcomes, as with the Primary Language Curriculum. It is planned that the completed PCF with specified curriculum areas will be published in 2025 (NCCA, 2022).

Figure 2.4

Key Competencies (DE, 2023)

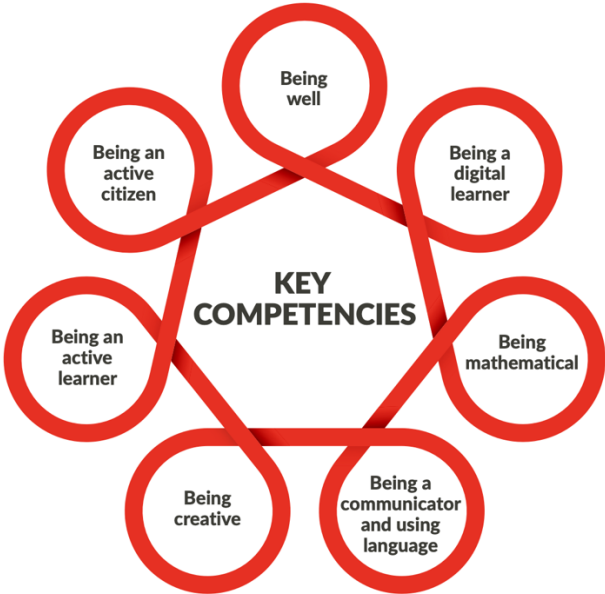
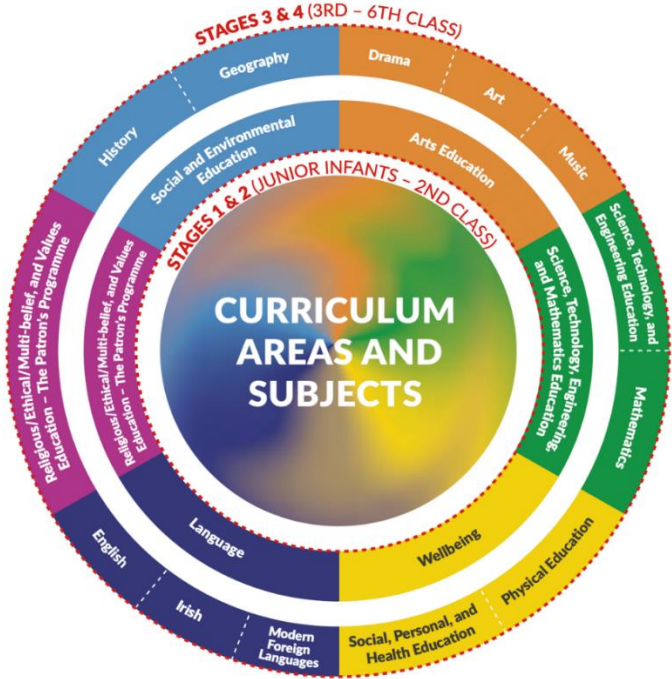


Figure 2.5

Curriculum Areas (Stages 1-2) and Curriculum Subjects (Stages 3-4) (DE, 2023)



2.3.5 Teacher Agency in the PSC and PCF

Teacher agency is closely connected to the issue of curriculum, as the prescribed curriculum constitutes a significant aspect of the ecological dimension of teachers' work (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). As discussed earlier (section 2.1.2.1), many writers advocate for the involvement of teachers in curriculum design (Walsh, 2019; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Biesta, 2006), with some positing teachers as curriculum-makers (Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Eisner, 2002; Pataray-Ching & Roberson, 2002). This section explores the extent to which teacher agency has been facilitated in the curricula currently implemented in Irish primary schools – the PSC, Aistear, and PLC – as well as the redeveloped curriculum to be implemented from 2025, the PCF.

In line with Giddens' duality of structures, the PSC can be seen to both afford and constrain opportunities for teachers to achieve agency. It asserts a flexible role for teachers and schools in planning the learning for their classes (DES, 1999, p. 10), which can be interpreted as a precursor of teacher agency. However, this promotion of teachers' decision-making is undercut by the nature and scope of the curriculum itself. The PSC presents a "detailed statement of content for each subject" (DES, 1999, p. 11) across 11 curricular areas. In addition, there has been added Aistear, numerous initiatives (such as Green Flags, Active Flags, Yellow Flag, Discover Primary Science and Mathematics, Junior Entrepreneur), resource packs, and guidelines. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) themselves recognised the consequence of such overload:

It can be argued that the physical face of the curriculum coupled with additional teacher guidelines and the range of school-based initiatives and programmes in their totality, render the child-centred nature of the curriculum questionable in practice. (NCCA, 2010, p. 34)

With such a vast array of content it is difficult for teachers to view themselves as makers of locally relevant learning as opposed to implementers of the national curriculum (Dianabasi & Ugochukwu, 2020). Teachers are frequently overwhelmed by the amount of content for which they are responsible, particularly as they have the same amount of time in which to achieve a seemingly ever-growing number of objectives (OECD, 2020; Hipp & Sulentic Dowell, 2019; NCCA, 2010; Majoni, 2017). van der Embse et al. (2017) caution against transmission modes of 'delivering' content which can arise as a consequence of curriculum overload where teacher autonomy is undermined and teachers experience a loss of agency as they struggle to manage fast-paced content delivery. The loss of teacher agency can result in a limited range of pedagogical practices, a lack of group work, creativity and limited opportunities to transfer content knowledge to everyday life (Stein et al., 2016). The extent of national guidance threatens the professional autonomy of teachers: the PSC outlines 1 goal, vision, and

purpose, alongside 2 principles, 3 aims, 8 defining features, 11 specific aims, 15 learning principles, 25 general objectives, 97 subject aims and 215 subject broad objectives, thus rendering the core of its vision unclear (Walsh, 2019; see also Chen et al., 2023).

However, Aistear and the PLC suggest greater possibilities for teacher agency. As a curriculum framework, Aistear is inherently less prescriptive of content, allowing teachers to design learning engagements which best meet the needs of the children in their settings. Teachers' pedagogical decisions are guided by the principles and themes of Aistear, and sample learning opportunities are offered under each of the 12 Aistear themes, but the specification of content seen in the PSC is absent. The PLC can also be regarded as a potentially more agentic curriculum than the PSC. The PLC curriculum documents profess support for "teacher agency in making professional judgements when planning, teaching and assessing all children" (DES, 2019a, p. 18).

The most recent curricular development, the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (DE, 2023), places explicit emphasis on teacher agency. The vision of teachers offered is of "skilful and agentic professionals (who)... enact the curriculum by making decisions about what to teach, when to teach it, and how to sequence and pace learning" (DE, 2023, p. 5). Interestingly, the language in the draft PCF (NCCA, 2020) as widely circulated offered a stronger endorsement of agency than the final iteration (DE, 2023), as it named teachers and school leaders as curriculum makers:

(Curriculum frameworks) are underpinned by the concept of teachers and school leaders as 'curriculum makers'... This role sees teachers and school leaders using broad learning outcomes in the various curriculum areas and subjects alongside the curriculum vision and principles to devise a curriculum that is tailored to, and appropriate for the children in their school community. This thinking has informed the development of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020, p. 4).

The removal of this paragraph from the final document may signal a degree of doubt regarding teachers' levels of readiness to engage as curriculum makers, or a desire to position teachers as more informal than designated curriculum makers. Whatever the reason, its omission from the PCF lessens the foregrounding of teacher agency.

2.3.6 Teachers' Views on Irish Curricula

Given the significance of teacher voice to teacher agency (Zepeda et al., 2022; Quaglia & Lande, 2017), a synopsis of teachers' views on Irish curricula is particularly relevant in this study. As noted in section 2.1.2.7 above, there is limited Irish-based research of teacher voice, and even less examining the impact and possible agency offered by the

activation of teacher voice. While voice is often understood as the exercising of one's opinions, ideas and views (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015), increasingly it is associated with action or having real influence and consequence. This influence may take the form of impact on educational policy, reform and practice (Gozali et al., 2017), or – as in the case reported by Samuel (2014) – may result in strikes and incarceration, as when teacher voice represented resistance to the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Typically, it is claimed that teachers have too little practical control over matters which they directly deal with in their classrooms (Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011; Ingersoll, 2007). A brief overview of some key messages from the available research in the Irish context is provided here to contextualise the data generated in this study surrounding teachers' opinions on curriculum and other aspects of their contexts-for-action.

Murphy (2006) gathered some compelling insights into teachers' perspectives on curriculum enactment in infant classes [approximately 4/5 to 6/7 year olds] in Irish primary schools. This research illustrates the discrepancy between curriculum ideals and teachers' practices, arguing that many teachers exhibit uncertainty and agnosticism towards the child-centred PSC. The notion of a divergence between curriculum principles and classroom practice in infant education was echoed by Gray and Ryan (2016), who contended that there is little evidence to demonstrate that the child-led ideology of Aistear revolutionised teachers' practice. Both of these studies illustrate the reality of planned curriculum compared to enacted curriculum. Other research found uniformity in teachers' opinions regarding curriculum overload, associated with curriculum content, large class sizes and growing numbers of children with special educational needs. The clear majority of teachers (91%) responded that flexibility in time allocations was required to meet curriculum objectives (INTO, 2015). This suggests that a certain degree of teacher agency – at least in the matter of time provision – would help support teachers. Curriculum overload was also found to exert detrimental effects on teachers' implementation of Aistear in infant classes (Woods et al., 2022) and commitment to the integrated STEM curriculum (Delahunty et al., 2021).

Another study of teachers' views on curricula is presented in the consultation report on the draft PCF (DE, 2022c). Teachers welcomed the recognition of agentic practice and affirmed that they had not fully understood the provision for agency in the PSC. However, clear calls were made for “exemplars of agentic practice in schools, bespoke CPD for teachers and support for professional agency” (DE, 2022c, p. 20). Teachers also strongly endorsed the need for professional development courses to support curriculum enactment and reform as well as the introduction of integrated STEM education.

Three messages emerge from the published studies on primary teachers' perspectives on curriculum in Ireland: the divergence between planned and enacted curriculum; the reality

of curriculum overload and its consequent pressure on teachers, and teachers' sense that CPD is needed to support them in realising the ideals of reformed curriculum. This latter point recalls the assertion made by Loxley et al. (2007) that curriculum reform cannot be imposed easily upon in-service teachers without negotiation and interpretation by practitioners. This bears significance for curriculum redevelopment and particularly for teachers' reception of their position as agentic professionals within the PCF.

2.3.7 Curriculum Models, Agency, and IBL

Adopting an inquiry stance on teaching and learning necessitates a particular understanding of curriculum, one which develops curriculum from concepts and big ideas (Wilcox et al., 2015; Short, 2009). Inquiry fundamentally alters the approach to learning, necessitating an appreciation of emergent curriculum rather than the traditional understanding of curriculum as a set of predetermined learning outcomes (Duffy & Raymer, 2010; Pataray-Ching & Roberson, 2002). This next section will briefly explore the influence of an inquiry stance on various curricula, from Irish to international curricula. Since possibilities for teacher agency in Irish curricula have been outlined above (section 2.3.5), the PSC, Aistear, and PLC will be explored for their inquiry possibilities, before connections between agency, inquiry, and the curricula of Scotland, Finland, New Zealand, and the Primary Years Programme are considered. These curricula were purposefully selected due to their redevelopment within approximately the last decade. The purpose of this overview is to highlight commonalities between the Irish educational system and other international structures, as well as to identify possibilities for supports of agency and IBL within the redeveloped curriculum.

2.3.7.1 Irish Curricula and IBL. There are several points of correlation between the PSC and the philosophy of IBL. The PSC positions children's curiosity about the world as the impulse for learning, stressing the necessity for children to be active agents in their learning, and noting the value of providing opportunities for active and discovery learning (DES, 1999). The concept of connecting with and building from prior knowledge is a principle of the PSC. As noted earlier (section 2.2.2), curiosity and authentic investigation are key characteristics of IBL.

The connection between inquiry and Aistear lies in the consonance between IBL and play-based learning. It has long been recognised that play can constitute an approach to inquiry (Dewey, 1933), while play and inquiry are firmly connected in early years and junior class settings (McLean et al., 2015; Fahey, 2012; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). The PLC demonstrates significant, though largely unacknowledged potential for IBL connections.

The curriculum documents mention inquiry only once: “Engaging children in inquiry in another subject gives an authentic context for development in oral language, reading and writing” (DES, 2019a, p. 48). Additional links to inquiry are suggested by the language of the PLC: learning outcomes are expressed as the consequence of “appropriately playful learning experiences”. This echoes Aistear and can be seen to share the same connection to inquiry through playful pedagogy. Furthermore, the role of the teacher within the PLC mirrors that of a teacher in inquiry: “The role of the teacher is to support and develop children’s talk during processes of exploration, discovery, and problem-solving” (DES, 2019a, p. 8).

Inquiry is most strongly validated in the PCF (DE, 2023), where playful and IBL approaches are advocated. As a curriculum framework, the PCF provides the link between inquiry theory and classroom practice which has been recognised by Short (2009). The PCF shares the learning outcomes structure of the PLC, which allows for teacher agency but which also provides space for IBL approaches in the absence of prescribed pedagogies and content.

2.3.7.2 Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland): Agency and IBL. The Curriculum for Excellence guides the education of children in Scotland from 3-18 years of age. The curriculum is centred upon four capacities, which reflect the desired life-long attributes of students (Education Scotland, 2017). The content of the Curriculum for Excellence is presented in the form of Experiences and Outcomes which contain a significant level of detail. However, Hizli Alkan and Priestley (2019) viewed the Curriculum for Excellence as less prescriptive than the earlier iteration of the curriculum. The decrease in specificity allows for greater modification by teachers and schools to meet the needs of local students. Nevertheless, the Curriculum has been subject to criticism from Hizli Alkan and Priestley (2019), who argue that it has not achieved its aim of supporting teacher agency in curriculum-making due to the continued influence of accountability practices and school cultures. The PCF would do well to be mindful of such critique as it sets about establishing the detailed specifications for each area in 2024 and 2025.

2.3.7.3 National Curriculum Framework (Finland): Agency and IBL. Finland is noted for the agency it affords to teachers and school authorities (Chung, 2023; Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020). The Finnish curriculum is based around seven competencies, while the specification of content to achieve these competencies falls under the auspices of school management and teachers (Kujala & Hakala, 2020). Teachers in Finland are entrusted with the role of curriculum maker, owing to their unique understanding of their students (Sahlberg, 2015). The high quality, motivation and agentic mindset of teachers is regularly cited as a

reason for the consistently high achievements of Finland in international comparisons of education systems (Chung, 2023; Halinen, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015). The curriculum also supports IBL as it mandates schools to afford students the opportunity to engage in multidisciplinary learning modules at least once a year. These modules are extended IBL explorations which allow learners to apply skills and knowledge in a transdisciplinary study (Halinen, 2018).

2.3.7.4 The New Zealand Curriculum: Agency and IBL. The New Zealand curriculum is based on five competencies and organised by eight subject areas, between which integration is encouraged (Ministry of Education, 2015). The curriculum positions teachers as curriculum makers: teachers adapt the national curriculum framework to provide suitable learning experiences that are responsive to their particular students (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, research revealed that teachers had low confidence in their implementation of local curriculum (Sinnema, 2011). This points to reduced confidence as one of the possible challenges for teacher agency, as explored in this study. IBL is also prominently situated within the New Zealand curriculum, with inquiry being a core value of the curriculum. Teachers are recommended to inquire into their own classroom practice, following the Teaching as Inquiry process (Ministry of Education, 2015). Situating the teacher as inquirer in this way is different to IBL (Sinnema and Aitken, 2011), although the inquiry cycle is common to both IBL and teacher-as-inquirer. Learner inquiries are not specifically mentioned, but studies cited by Boyd and Hipkins (2012) revealed that IBL is being employed by many New Zealand teachers in their design of local curriculum.

2.3.7.5 Primary Years Programme: Agency and IBL. The Primary Years Programme (PYP) is the curriculum framework within the International Baccalaureat (IB) for children aged from three to twelve years. The PYP is built around six transdisciplinary global themes. The planning and enactment of curriculum within these themes is the remit of teachers and schools. There is an implicit understanding of teachers as agentic educators and inquirers alongside their students: the teaching methods advocated by the IB are designed to allow for teacher flexibility in designing appropriate content for their classrooms (International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), 2019). The PYP is an explicitly inquiry-based curriculum framework, in which a high value is placed on student-led inquiry. Inquiry is positioned as the first attribute of an IB learner, and all IB teaching approaches – including those of the PYP – are based on a cycle of inquiry, action and reflection (IBO, 2019). In this way, inquiry is foundational to the PYP.

This select review of international curricula reveals several points of correlation with the redeveloped curriculum. The structure of the PCF as a curriculum framework is similar to the outline of the Scottish curriculum and the thematic frame of the PYP. Competencies feature in each of the curricula examined: the IB learner profile is comparable to the competencies in the Irish, Scottish, Finnish and New Zealand curricula. The value given to IBL in the PCF echoes the position in Finland and New Zealand, although it does not extend to the essential position of IBL as the foundation of the PYP. Given these similarities, it seems that curriculum redevelopment in Ireland is heavily informed by international developments. Therefore, it would be beneficial to monitor outcomes and responses to those other curricula to identify potential future challenges. In this regard, the research which emerged from Scotland about the negative impact of accountability on teacher agency (Hizli Alkan & Priestley, 2019) may be particularly instructive.

The next section addresses the fourth major theme of this study and the framework for its methodology: communities of practice (CoP). Definitions, features and outcomes of CoPs are outlined, before connections between the themes of agency, inquiry and CoP, and relevance to the present study, are explicated.

2.4 Communities of Practice (CoP)

The design of this research study is strongly informed by the concept of communities of practice (CoP). A CoP was deemed to be particularly appropriate for research into the themes of agency and inquiry, as these groups support teacher authority and efficacy, focus on student-centred learning and prioritise collaboration among teaching colleagues. My working definition of both teacher agency and IBL emphasises the centrality of collegial and supportive relationships for the achievement of agency, as well as for genuine engagement and learning. CoPs can provide a formal collaborative structure for such relationships: providing support alongside a critical and reflective space for practitioners' development.

2.4.1 Definitions of a CoP

Much like teacher agency and IBL, there is no single, accepted definition of a CoP. Some of the difficulty arises from the wide array of terms which are associated with groups of collaborating professionals (Dogan et al., 2016). Terms such as learning communities (Edwards, 2012), professional learning communities (Dogan et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008) and professional learning networks (Brown et al., 2021) are used in the literature to refer to groups of teachers—within individual schools or across a number of schools—who meet

regularly to discuss and develop their teaching practices. There are varying degrees of emphasis on the role of research and the methodology of these working groups, but there is a consistent emphasis on teacher development through participation in their own setting, rather than a top-down delivery of professional development (Wallace & Priestley, 2011; Crawford et al., 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

It is clear from the literature that terminology is conflated in most discussions of teacher-led collaborative endeavours. The contrasts in emphasis which differentiate the differently-named groupings are rarely made clear, leading to a pronounced lack of clarity in the area. This obfuscation has been recognised within the literature (Vanderlip Taylor, 2023; Edwards, 2012). Hargreaves et al. (2013) distinguished between professional learning communities and teacher learning communities by contending that the latter focus exclusively on classroom practice, rather than a broader perspective on education. However, they are one of few writers attempting to articulate a difference between terms; many others avoid explaining the terms they use. Cassidy et al. (2008) proffered the idea of “communities of educational enquiry” without explicating how this differs from CoPs or professional learning communities. In their longitudinal study of teachers’ professional learning experiences, Beauchamp et al. (2014) used professional learning community as an example of a CoP. Brodie (2019) also viewed professional learning communities as “special case(s) of communities of practice” (p. 1). This suggests that CoP may function as an umbrella term for a variety of teacher groupings.

‘Learning communities’ and ‘professional learning communities’ (Dogan et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008) are widely-used terms within the literature for assemblies of teachers who operate collectively to interrogate and improve their practice, with a focus on student outcomes (Townley, 2020; Brodie, 2019; Edwards, 2012). The features and characteristics of CoP are outlined in more detail below, but it is clear that methodical analysis of practice, innovation, and the improvement of student learning are key factors in professional learning communities and CoPs.

‘Communities of practice’ is a term associated with Lave and Wenger (1991) and further developed by Wenger et al. (2002), who defined these communities as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). The CoP model has been used in a wide variety of organisational settings, from business to healthcare. Relating it specifically to education, Edwards (2012) highlighted the ways in which the members of a school CoP engage in “critically interrogating their practice, working together with a focus on growth and learning, reflecting on their own performance with a focus on

improving outcomes for students and being willing to take risks for the sake of improvement” (p. 26).

I have chosen to use the term ‘community of practice’ for this study as it functions as an umbrella term for other teacher collaborative groups. This affords the research group the space within which to focus exclusively on classroom affairs rather than wider educational reform (Hargreaves et al., 2013), while invoking the importance of practice. I am drawn to the term ‘community of practice’ as I appreciate the link to ‘community of inquiry’, a term which arose in the work of C.S. Pierce (Pardales & Girod, 2006) and has been applied to the nature of the classroom collaboration during IBL (Bacon & Matthews, 2014). I also consider the term ‘community of practice’ to be particularly appropriate to this research into my own teaching practices and those of some of my teaching colleagues, as we established an informal collegial group, exploring and reflecting on our practice while attempting innovation and change in practice.

2.4.2 Features of a CoP

Despite the lack of a unified definition for CoP, there is broad consensus in the literature about several key features of such communities: teachers as developers of professional knowledge, the role of reflective dialogue, the centrality of student learning, and the importance of collaboration within the CoP. These features will be discussed, along with consideration of other features which various authors emphasise as typifying CoPs: the application of rigorous inquiry, the value of collegial relationships, and the benefit of shared vision and values within the community. Some of this literature refers to professional learning communities which, as discussed above, are closely linked to, if not synonymous with CoPs.

The work of teachers lies at the heart of CoPs. Descriptions in the literature customarily locate their origins in the lived experiences of teachers: “Through collaborative inquiry, teachers explore new ideas, current practice, and evidence of student learning using processes that respect them as the experts on what is needed to improve their own practice and increase student learning” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 89). In a CoP approach, knowledge is understood as a body of learning which is built through experiential learning, meaning-making and reflection on practice (Kirkby et al., 2019; Brown, 2017; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Many writers emphasise the role of reflective dialogue or learning conversations in the effectiveness of a CoP (Johnson, 2023; Spear et al., 2023; Edwards, 2012; Buysse et al., 2003). Teachers are encouraged to discuss and reflect upon their classroom experiences, as a means of extending learning, finding solutions and transforming teaching practices (Brown, 2017). Ng and Tan (2009) cautioned that, rather than genuinely reflecting, teachers working

in communities of practice often engage in 'sense-making': the practice of seeking pragmatic solutions to immediate situations, which results in low levels of reflectivity and self-examination. Sense-making can function as a powerful learning tool, but it is not a transformative mode of learning (Ng & Tan, 2009). This indicates the need for teachers' development of reflective dispositions in order to deepen the potential learning within a CoP.

CoPs are inherently focussed on the improvement of student outcomes (Lieberman, 2009; Stoll et al., 2006; DuFour, 2004). The literature indicates that CoPs are more than vehicles for collegial support, but also aim to transform and innovate classroom practices. Collaboration among teachers and school leaders is paramount in discussions of CoPs in the literature (Brown et al., 2021; Dogan et al., 2016; Edwards, 2012; Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Vescio et al., 2008; DuFour, 2004). This collaboration is considered to be the key factor in the work of the CoP and the means of improving teaching practices (Stoll et al., 2006). It is clear from this literature, then, that collaborative skills are vitally important for teachers participating in CoPs. However, the literature on collaborative skills is almost universally directed towards the teaching of such skills to students, rather than teachers' own development of a collaborative disposition. This suggests that there is limited research into how teachers become collaborators and whether they have the skills necessary to effect the goals of CoPs.

Brodie (2019) emphasised the need for CoPs to engage in rigorous inquiry over time, a view supported by Katz et al. (2009). Similarly, Stoll et al. (2006) named reflective professional inquiry as one of five key characteristics of CoP. Thus, there is a connection between inquiry and the use of CoP within the methodology. Another feature of CoPs identified in the literature is the role of relationships (Spear et al., 2023). Brodie (2019) recognised the importance of trusting relationships to the success of a CoP, since transformation of practice requires openness and genuine collegiality. The role which positive relationships play in supporting the achievements of the CoP was also accepted by Patton and Parker (2017). This echoes the connection between teacher agency and relationships, where supportive relationships bolster teachers' voice, choice, and confidence (see section 2.1.2.2). Finally, shared vision and values are key to the effectiveness of a CoP (Stoll et al., 2006). This feature seems intuitive, as goals would undoubtedly be more likely to be achieved when shared rather than a diverse range of opinions. It also links to the need for and value of supportive and collegial relationships.

2.4.3 Outcomes of a CoP

Advocates of CoP posit a range of beneficial outcomes for teachers and students arising from the work of the CoP. Interestingly for an approach which focuses on improving

student outcomes, the majority of the literature concerns the benefits which accrue to teachers from engagement with CoPs. It appears that an assumption is made in much of the writing that improved knowledge, efficacy, and practice of teachers will produce related improvements in student learning. This was confirmed by Stoll et al. (2006), who stated that the intention of CoPs is to enhance teacher effectiveness with the ultimate goal of improving students' outcomes.

The potential for CoPs to support and improve teacher knowledge and skills has been widely recognised. This benefit is found across CoPs working with different groups in education. CoPs can support principals to build their capacity for leadership (Drago-Severson, 2012) or classroom teachers to enhance their professional capacity (Andrews & Lewis, 2007). Growth in teachers' understanding and knowledge through shared dialogue and reflective discussions has been reported (Kirkby et al., 2019; Ambler, 2016; Snow-Gerono, 2005). There appears to be an inherent value in teachers and educators having time and space for reflection and professional discourse, particularly considering how isolated teachers in classrooms can be at times (Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016; Heider, 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005).

Another benefit which emerges in the literature is the impact of CoP on teachers' classroom practices. Dogan et al. (2016) reviewed 14 empirical studies of science teachers and found that engagement in CoP collaboration led to changes in practices, a move towards more IBL approaches and an increase in teacher knowledge. Transformation in teacher practices arising from involvement with CoPs has also been noted by Marques et al. (2016). Stoll and Seashore Louis (2007) also offered examples of how CoPs in Australian schools achieved transformation of school practices. These are lofty claims to make and the literature on transformation and change of teachers' practices suggests that such practices are often firmly entrenched and difficult to modify (Dole et al., 2016; Richardson, 1990). However, it appears that CoPs can play a role in altering practices and supporting innovation.

The third area where CoPs provide alleged benefits to teachers lies in what might be termed socio-emotional aspects of teaching. In addition to improvements in teacher knowledge, CoPs have been claimed to promote increased teacher self-efficacy, peer support and relationships. Mintzes et al. (2013) reported a positive influence on the self-efficacy of elementary science teachers following sustained involvement in CoP. Similarly, Beauchamp et al. (2014) noted positive impacts on the self-efficacy and collective efficacy of Canadian elementary and secondary teachers. CoPs provide a space for peer support and the building of positive collegial relationships (Osmond-Johnson & Fuhrmann, 2022; Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012). Finally, positive outcomes for teachers' confidence (Cordingley et al., 2003),

sense of belonging (Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012) and identity (Kirkby et al., 2019) have been linked to involvement in CoPs.

A smaller proportion of the literature concerns the positive student outcomes arising from teachers' involvement with CoP. Much of the data on student improvements takes the form of assessment scores. For example, Sigurðardóttir (2010) reported higher scores on national assessments, particularly in mathematics and Icelandic, which she linked to the CoPs in the three participating schools. Williams (2013) noted statistically significant improvements in reading achievement within 76 participating schools, ranging from elementary to high school. Further notable improvements in student assessment scores are linked to teacher CoPs (Berry et al., 2005; Bolam et al., 2005; Hollins et al., 2004; Phillips, 2003, Strahan, 2003). This literature on the teacher and student outcomes provides a strong rationale for investigating CoP in the context of curriculum redevelopment, where time and space for teacher engagement with the curriculum reform is needed and valuable.

The positive outcomes arising from communities of practice are not achieved without challenges, however. Hu's (2023) experience of working with teachers in two K-8 classrooms in New York suggests that structural conditions such as the school size, available time, space, resources, and leadership support posed considerable challenges to implementing communities of practice. Irwin (2014) had earlier generated similar outcomes in a US primary school when trying to implement formative assessment and differentiated instruction. She found that positive results emerged by encouraging teacher agency via strong leadership support, risk taking, a greater focus on collaboration, and opportunities for teachers to share their learning. However, time needed to embed these approaches was found to be the greatest challenge to implementing new instructional methods through a COP (Irwin, 2014).

2.4.4 Agency, IBL, and CoP

It is my intention to incorporate teacher agency into the methodology, to ensure that the teachers in this study experience agency in the process of their participation. Thus, notwithstanding the challenges identified above, community of practice – as an approach which honours teacher knowledge and capacity – was deemed to be particularly apposite. Community of practice was chosen as a suitable research component due to its connection to two of the major themes of the study: agency and inquiry, as outlined below.

The literature reveals strong connections between CoP and agency. Osmond-Johnson and Fuhrmann (2022) reported benefits to student teachers' social capital through involvement in a CoP. The increase in social capital has consequential benefits for these teacher candidates' human and decisional capital, thus supporting their agency and openness

to new approaches. In her longitudinal study of home economics teachers in Australia, Jenkins (2020) found that engagement in peer mentoring and professional development with colleagues helped moved participants to more constructive and proactive agentic practices. Lieberman (2009) contended that CoP could promote teacher agency by demonstrating to teachers that they can exert some control over their practice, rather than simply comply with rules and regulations. These studies recognise the ways in which a CoP can provide support for teacher agency. However, Brodie's (2019) research into the effect of CoPs on teacher agency offered a mixed depiction of the impact of collegial collaboration on agency. She identified differing levels of agency among the participants in the CoP, finding that teachers who engaged with the CoP discovered meaningful connections with and influence on their classroom practice. Alternatively, teachers who declined to engage with the CoP – or rejected it for various reasons – reported more challenges within their learning and, ultimately, exited the CoPs.

The connection between inquiry and CoP also rendered this approach suitable. The value accorded to social learning within the members of the CoP echoes that of IBL, with its emphasis on shared dialogue and the development of shared understandings (see section 2.2.2). The role of reflection in meaning-making is central to both IBL (Bacon & Matthews, 2014) and CoP (Brown, 2017; Edwards, 2012). Dogan et al. (2016) found that involvement in CoP may lead science teachers from traditional, didactic pedagogies towards more inquiry-based approaches. Vescio et al. (2008) discovered that teachers' practices become more student-centred as a result of participating in CoP. These findings, along with the theoretical compatibility of inquiry and CoPs, further endorsed my decision to use CoP within the methodological framework for this research.

The literature also reveals another value in this research: the majority of literature concerning CoPs relates to second-level and higher education. A small number of studies examine CoPs within the early childhood education sector (Sack et al., 2022; Kirkby et al., 2019; Christ & Wang, 2013) and primary school level (King & Logan, 2022; Mandrikas et al., 2021; Mintzes et al., 2013). However, it is clear that more research is needed into the operation and effect of CoPs among primary school teachers. The current study seeks to contribute to this gap in the literature particularly in the Irish context.

Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to establish both the conceptual framework underpinning the proposed research and the rationale for undertaking it. The curricular context for this research into teacher agency is framed by the ongoing reform of the PSC. This

review served to refine that context by exposing such issues as teacher confidence, teacher voice, and contexts-for-action which will necessitate policy development in the future to support and scaffold teacher agency in the PCF. This timely study of teacher agency in one particular community of practice seeks to offer empirical data on concepts and theories explored in the literature.

Additional rationale for undertaking this research arises from Buchanan et al.'s (2016) contention that there is limited research on inquiry involving younger learners and in subject areas other than science. In recent years, the literature on inquiry approaches with pre-school and young primary school classes has increased (Ramanathan et al., 2021; MacDonald et al., 2019; Bradley et al., 2019; McCormick & Twitchell, 2017). Consequently, this study hopes to add to the research base, contributing to the limited research into IBL and teacher agency in the Irish educational context, and space to explore the impact of IBL on teachers' sense of their own agency. The following chapter presents the research design employed in this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework which informed decisions taken about the research design. The selected methods are described, along with a detailed consideration of methodological, analytical and ethical implications associated with their use.

This research addresses the foregrounding of teachers as agentic professionals which can be found in many recent educational reforms, including the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (DE, 2023). Teacher agency is explored in relation to inquiry-based learning (IBL) and communities of practice (CoP). After an iterative process, the following overarching research question was formulated to guide the study:

How do primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum?

The auxiliary questions supporting the research are as follows:

1. What are primary school junior class teachers' beliefs about agency in curriculum planning and enactment?
2. How do teachers understand their agency in relation to curriculum?
3. How do school cultures and the wider education system impact teachers' perceptions of their agency?
4. Can inquiry-based learning impact teachers' sense of their own agency? How might teachers' sense of their own agency impact their engagement with inquiry-based learning?

These questions were amended following the literature review, as the question about beliefs was not originally included but emerged as significant from the educational literature. Question 3 was framed in such a way as to allow for a potential duality of structures to be reported – the ways in which the structures of school and the educational system might both enable and constrain agency.

3.1 Design of the Research

The theoretical perspective, methodology and research methods used in this study are discussed in the following sections.

3.1.1 Theoretical Perspective

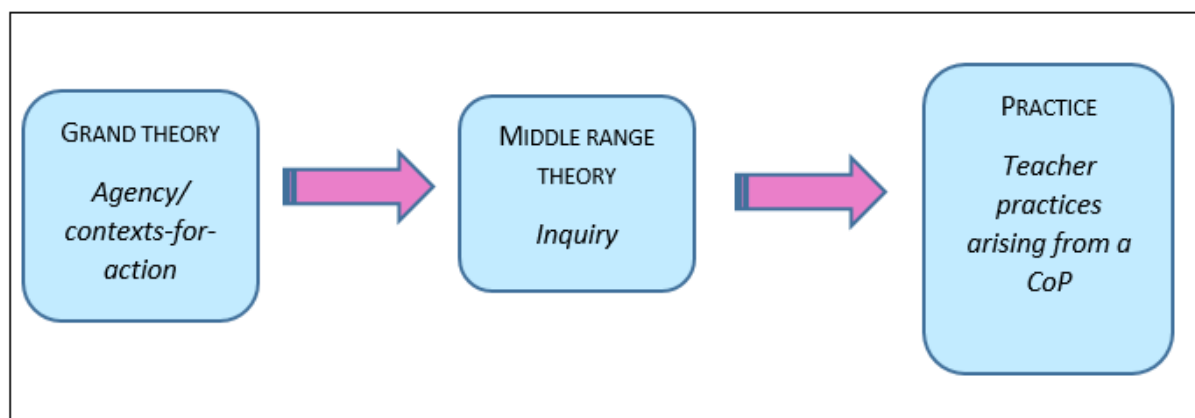
Theoretical frameworks give structure and context to research: identifying a suitable theoretical perspective can illuminate and explicate the data gathered. However, Thomas (2002) cautioned against an over-dependence on theory, particularly in qualitative research, as it may result in theoretical incompatibilities. His suggestion that researchers should engage with theory as a ‘thinking tool’ to frame their understanding of key concepts—rather than reach towards universalising theories—informed my own approach to the theoretical framework of this research. Thus the theoretical lens provided by concepts from Giddens, Archer, and the ecological model of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) was used as a framework rather than a universal explanation of the data which emerged.

In developing a suitable theoretical perspective for this research, I am influenced by Merton’s (1968) concept of middle range theories. Middle range theories operate as reciprocal connectors between grand and practice theory. It seemed appropriate to use middle range theories as a way of moving from the highly theoretical level of Giddens, Archer, and life course research, to the lived realities of my participants. I aimed to construct a middle range theory which would provide a language for discussing with other teachers how they think about and experience agency. For the purposes of this study, I identified inquiry as a middle range theory, one which originates in empirical observations of how people learn and develop their conceptual understandings. This level of theory is not concerned with discovering the essential nature of social structures and processes (Boudon, 1991). Inquiry is employed as a theory to move between the over-arching theory of agency/ structure and classroom practice.

The grand theory level for this research used aspects from sociological and life histories’ conceptualisations of agency, as described in the researcher’s theoretical model of teacher agency (section 2.1.3). As outlined, teacher agency – comprising voice, choice, confidence, capacity, and intention – was explored within the structure of teachers’ contexts-for-action. This framework (see Figure 3.1) was chosen to inform the fieldwork in relation to the contextual nature of agency, as well as the key components of that agency in action. Inquiry was employed in this research as a middle range theory, which offers the potential for agentic manoeuvres in teaching and learning. I considered that through engagement with inquiry, teachers might develop their skills and self-confidence in relation to cultivating curriculum from the children’s questions in their classroom. At the practice level, teachers within a community of practice (CoP) reflected on their teaching and collaborated on planning. Using CoP as the organisational frame for this research was appropriate to the themes of agency and inquiry, as such communities endorse teacher efficacy, encourage teacher voice, and prioritise child-centred learning (Brown, 2017; Edwards, 2012; Vescio et al., 2008).

Figure 3.1

Theoretical Framework for the Research



3.1.2 Methodology

This research was necessarily qualitative, as the aim was to generate teachers' accounts of their experiences, hence respecting agency and voice within the methodological choices. Qualitative research generally validates the interpretations and meanings that actors assign to their lived realities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Flick, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described qualitative research as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3). This corresponded to my position as insider, since the research was conducted within my own school.

3.1.2.1 Practitioner Research. The research adopted a practitioner research approach, as I engaged with my colleagues within a community of practice. Practitioner research is strongly associated with action research (Rutten, 2021; Cohen et al., 2018; Menter et al., 2011; Drake & Heath, 2011). Initially I considered an action research design, since my research was founded in the desire to investigate and influence praxis. I was drawn to action research as this approach involves the democratic participation of situated practitioners, identifying and exploring issues in their own work practices (Adelman, 1993). However, it became apparent that action research was not the methodology that would best serve this study. Action research involves developmental cycles of planning, implementation, observing and reflecting (Cohen et al., 2018), in which an intervention is applied during each cycle (Denscombe, 2017). This ongoing intervention did not suit my intention to incorporate participant agency into the research design. I did not want to establish pre-determined interventions, as this may serve to limit the affordance of agency to participants.

Thus, the broader term 'practitioner research' is used to describe the approach I adopted. Practitioner research has been defined by Menter et al. (2011) as "systematic enquiry in an educational setting carried out by someone working in that setting" (p. 3). Practitioner research involves teachers in planning, implementation and reflection, which seeks to effect educational change (Allen, 2016). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) asserted that understanding the practitioner as an agent for educational change is a key component of practitioner research. Thus, practitioner research can be seen as an empowering approach, which affords agency to teachers by promoting their voices in educational debates (Menter et al., 2011).

I decided to use CoP as an organisational frame within the practitioner research approach, as CoPs involve members engaging in critical reflection and collaboration in order to improve learning opportunities for students (section 2.4.2). Practitioner research is linked to professional learning (Allen, 2016), which is closely identified with CoP activity (section 2.4.1). Therefore, it can be posited that CoPs support practitioner research, as well as promoting the main themes of this research: teacher agency (Christ & Wang, 2013; Lieberman, 2009) and inquiry (Dogan et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions provided an additional impetus for establishing a CoP. The highly limited interactions among school colleagues reduced opportunities for shared thinking, reflection and collaboration. This context posed certain challenges to the development of a CoP, in terms of facilitating meetings, as well as constraining inquiry engagements within classrooms. However, the absence of alternative channels for collaboration resulted in a general receptiveness to this research, as an opportunity to discuss our practices and experiences. This is discussed further in section 3.2.3 below.

3.2 Sample, Recruitment and Participant Profiles

3.2.1 School Profile

The sample of early years and junior class teachers is taken from a large primary school with a diverse student population and a high incidence of children with additional educational needs. The school staff is relatively large including 27 class teachers, 20 Additional Educational Needs (AEN) teachers and 28 Additional Needs Assistants (ANAs). The participating sample comprised 6 teaching colleagues and myself, collaborating within a CoP. In order to capture data relevant to the theme of curriculum and planning, I limited the sample to teachers of mainstream classes. As a convenience sample within a small study, the principle of generalisability does not apply (Cohen et al., 2018). The value of the research

lies in the rich data, the 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) which emerged. At this time of curriculum reform, where curricular redevelopments are moving in the direction of teacher agency, it is important to develop research which explores the Irish educational system, alongside existing research into teacher agency in countries such as Scotland (Priestley et al., 2015a), Finland (Kujala & Hakala, 2020) and New Zealand (Sinnema, 2011).

The school has a three stream intake at each grade level and, generally, teachers plan in class groups. Group planning occurs after school hours and is usually practice-oriented: plans are developed and resources gathered, with little time for reflection on practice. Some teachers choose to opt out and plan individually for their class. The staff as a whole meet twice a term for staff meetings but following COVID-19 restrictions, staff meetings were held online. One face-to-face meeting occurred in December 2020, with small groups of staff working in separate rooms adhering to public health guidance. Prior to full school closure, social distancing protocols resulted in limited access to the staffroom. As a result, there were very few and restricted opportunities for staff to meet, formally or informally.

In terms of contextualising my own professional practices, I have been adopting IBL practices within the school over the past 5 years and held an inquiry workshop for infant teachers in 2018. I have also spoken to teachers in my school informally in recent years about inquiry. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of inquiry practices occurring throughout the school, but inquiry as a well-understood stance is not yet developed within this school community.

3.2.2 *Insider Research*

My position as an insider in the research setting generated important ethical and methodological considerations. As a colleague of the participants, I was concerned about the potential blurring of boundaries between research engagement and ongoing collegial relationships. Mercer (2007) recognised that the insider position can produce a lack of boundaries between the research and the researcher's continuing teaching practice. Sikes and Potts (2008) pointed to the difficulty for insider researchers in adopting an objective approach. The insider status may also inhibit or distort how participants engage: at times, unwilling to share too much for fear of judgement (Shah, 2004) or influenced in what they say by their pre-conceptions of the researcher (Mercer, 2007). An additional issue for this research lies in my position as an advocate for and part-time lecturer in IBL in a teacher education college, as is known by the participants. I was aware that this may have had an impact on participants' responses to my questions and their engagement with IBL and took steps to address it where possible.

I used member-checking to moderate the influence of bias and reciprocity on data, as well as to give voice and agency to participants. However, I acknowledge the limitations of member-checking. Hallett (2013) cautioned that member-checking often fails to consider the participants' experience of reviewing transcripts and researchers' analysis, while Buchbinder (2011) noted the power differential between researcher and participant which can affect the member-checking process. Additionally, member-checking may not be genuinely agentic, since it is a power *given to* participants by the researcher, rather than *taken by* them (Trinh, 1991). However, despite this circumspection, in the end, none of the participants requested any changes made to the transcripts I shared with them, and only one teacher acknowledged having read the transcripts. I believe this limited interest in the transcripts derives from the busy nature of teaching, which is discussed in detail in Chapters Four and Five. This could suggest that member-checking as a method of limiting bias has lower efficacy in contexts where time constraints on participants exist.

Since the member-checking did not appear fully effective in identifying bias within the data, I was particularly scrupulous in discussing my ideas and my analysis with my supervisors regularly. This afforded me the opportunity to verify the precision of my readings and to monitor any creeping influence of bias arising from my prior and personal acquaintance with the participants, and my interest in IBL. My researcher's diary (see Appendix B for sample entry) was also useful in this aspect of the study, and I used it as a space within which to be open-minded towards the data and sceptical of my own readings. These efforts, however, cannot wholly remove the influence of my identity and opinions from the analysis, thus I acknowledge that this study represents one possible reading of the data. Were the study conducted by a different researcher, particularly an outside researcher, it is likely that they would have emphasised different perspectives in their analysis and, perhaps, have reached somewhat different conclusions. Nonetheless, the study reported here presents a critically reflective insider perspective which it is hoped makes its own unique contribution to the literature.

3.2.3 Recruitment

After securing ethical approval from TCD Ethics Committee (see Appendix A for confirmation), I approached the Principal and Board of Management for permission to conduct the research (see Appendices C and D for consent forms). Having gained consent, I spoke to the whole staff in December 2020 to introduce the study. To follow up, I approached all mainstream classroom teachers individually. This gave each teacher a chance to express interest or disinclination in participating. It was of particular importance to ensure my colleagues felt no pressure to take part in research which might prove time-consuming, at a

stage when people were already under societal and work strains due to COVID-19 regulations.

Out of 23 mainstream class teachers, 13 teachers expressed enthusiastic willingness to be involved. It appeared that the opportunity for collaboration was particularly attractive as our working practices had become disconnected due to COVID-19 restrictions. Several colleagues also articulated their interest in inquiry, having seen some evidence of inquiry in children’s work samples that I had shared over previous years within the school community. The number of interested colleagues was greater than could be facilitated safely in accordance with COVID-19 restrictions. I developed several possibilities for how to refine the sample and outlined a rationale for each. I decided to design the research as a study of agency and inquiry within the junior classes (Junior Infants – 2nd Class). This allowed me to form a group of seven, including myself, which I deemed to be an appropriate size for discussions and collaboration. My experiences of using inquiry in junior classes and teaching an inquiry module to Masters’ students in Early Childhood Education would also enrich the junior school configuration. Significantly, this design also addresses a gap within the literature, where research into inquiry in junior classes is still in its early stages (Buchanan et al., 2016). Appendix E presents the information letter and consent form provided to participating teachers.

3.2.4 Participant Profiles

A SurveyMonkey© instrument (Appendix F) was used to gather demographic information about participants. This was done in the interest of time, and to avoid the exchange of personal remarks which may impact on the subsequent interview process. A summary of the participants’ profiles is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Current class level	Years of teaching experience	Countries worked in as a teacher
Hannah	Junior Infants	3	Ireland
Meabh	Senior Infants	8	Ireland
Claire	Senior Infants	2	Ireland
Laura	1 st Class	12	Ireland, UK
Sharon	1 st Class	13	Ireland, UK
Alan	2 nd Class	25	Ireland, UK, Germany
Researcher	1 st Class	14	Ireland

3.3 Intervention and Research Methods

The intervention for this research took the form of introducing participants to inquiry through a workshop approach and then, working as a CoP, to plan for, implement and reflect on inquiry practice in our classrooms. The planning for and development of this intervention is outlined below.

A researcher’s journal was written throughout the research journey, beginning in November 2019 and continued until the end of the writing process (August 2023). A timeline for the research methods is presented below in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Research Methods Timeline

	February 2021	March 2021	April 2021	May 2021	June 2021	Jul 2021 – Jan 2022	February 2022	Mar 2022 – Dec 2022	Jan 2023 – Sept 2023
Interviews									
Inquiry workshops									
Participants’ diaries									
Collaborative planning meetings									
Visual methods									
Researcher’s diary									

3.3.1 Processes of the Community of Practice (CoP)

From March – June 2021, the CoP operated at the practice level of this research design (see Figure 3.1), where teachers reflected on their teaching practices and collaborated on planning. In order to establish a shared understanding of IBL for the purposes of the research, the CoP participated in the inquiry workshops, where an emphasis was placed on shared discourse. The focus of the workshops, and the functioning of the CoP, was to develop and refine teachers’ understanding of pupil inquiry as a classroom practice, rather than engage in teacher inquiry in itself. Sinnema & Aitken (2011) discuss teacher inquiry – or teaching as inquiry – in the context of the New Zealand curriculum, presenting it as a reflective practice whereby teachers interrogate their own pedagogical approaches. In contrast, in this study, the CoP was used to develop understanding of, plan for, and reflect on the process of pupil inquiry, termed inquiry-based learning (IBL) throughout this study.

Following the workshops, the CoP met four times: three times to plan collaboratively for classroom-based IBL with their respective classes, and a final time to reflect on the experience of working within the CoP. Over the four months of the CoP's operation, participants kept a diary and gathered up to 10 visual instances of their experience of agency.

3.3.2 Inquiry Workshops

Following Interview 1 (section 3.4.1.1), three workshops were held, in which I led participants through a series of learning engagements, discussions and thinking routines, modelling practices and ways of approaching teaching through an inquiry stance. The aim of these workshops was to begin developing a shared understanding of inquiry within the research group, as well as to experience inquiry as a learner. Learning engagements were active, hands-on and transdisciplinary, allowing teachers to witness how inquiry permeates subject boundaries. This was planned to counter any misapprehensions that inquiry is an approach typically used for teaching STEM subjects (Hattie, 2009; Barman, 2002). Thinking routines (Project Zero, n.d.) were used throughout the inquiry workshops to model discourse practices that promote reflection, shared thinking and metacognition. The outline of engagements in the inquiry workshops is included as Appendix G.

Due to COVID-19 protocols, these workshops were held online, after school hours which limited the duration possible. Each workshop lasted 1.5 hours and was audio-recorded. These recordings were used to develop the content for the next workshop, rather than to be used as data. Participants were given prompts during each workshop to promote and stimulate reflective diary entries (section 3.4.2).

3.3.3 Collaborative Planning Meetings

After the third inquiry workshop, the research group met on three occasions (April, May and June 2021) to plan collaboratively for and reflect on inquiry in their individual classrooms. The meetings aimed to consolidate our CoP, facilitate group planning and allow for sharing of ideas and resources. The planning meetings lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded to provide data about teachers' thinking about inquiry and agency, and in order to refine subsequent diary prompts. Between the first and second of these collaborative planning meetings, I had an individual phonecall with each participant, as a means of providing support to participants, since I was not working at the school site, as originally planned in the research design. These phonecall conversations were recorded, transcribed, and included as data under the reference 'debrief' (see Table 4.1).

A final group meeting was held at the end of the research period (June 2021) to facilitate group feedback and reflection. This meeting also featured the sharing of photographs taken by participants as visual evidence of their agency/ inquiry (section 3.4.3). Some of these photographs are featured in the findings of Chapter Four.

3.4 Research Methods

This study used a number of research methods to allow for triangulation of data and different perspectives to be identified. The research methods – interviews, participant diaries, visual methods, and a researcher’s journal – were chosen to meet the requirements of the research questions, as outlined in Table 3.3 below. The rationale and design of each of these methods is outlined in the sections below.

Table 3.3

Mapping Research Methods to Research Questions

Question	Research tool	Duration/ Dates
<i>How do primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum?</i>	Interview 1, 2, 3	Approximately 1-hour duration for each. Feb 2022 – June 2022 – Feb 2023.
	Participant diaries	Length varied from 15 to 69 A5 pages. Mar – June 2022.
	Visual methods	10 photographs per participant. Gathered Apr – June 2022.
What are primary school junior class teachers’ beliefs about agency in curriculum planning and enactment?	Interview 1 and 2	Approximately 1-hour duration for each. Feb 2022 – June 2022.
How do teachers understand their agency in relation to curriculum?	Interview 1, 2, 3	As above
	Participant diaries	As above
	Visual methods	As above
How do school cultures and the wider education system impact teachers’ perceptions of their agency?	Interview 1, 2, 3	As above
	Participant diaries	As above
	Visual methods	As above
Can IBL impact teachers’ sense of their own agency? How might teachers’ sense of their own agency impact their engagement with IBL?	Interview 1, 2, 3	As above
	Participant diaries	As above
	Visual methods	As above

3.4.1 Interviews

I decided to use interviews to place participants’ interpretations and experiences at the centre of the research. Since this is a study of teacher agency, of which voice is a significant

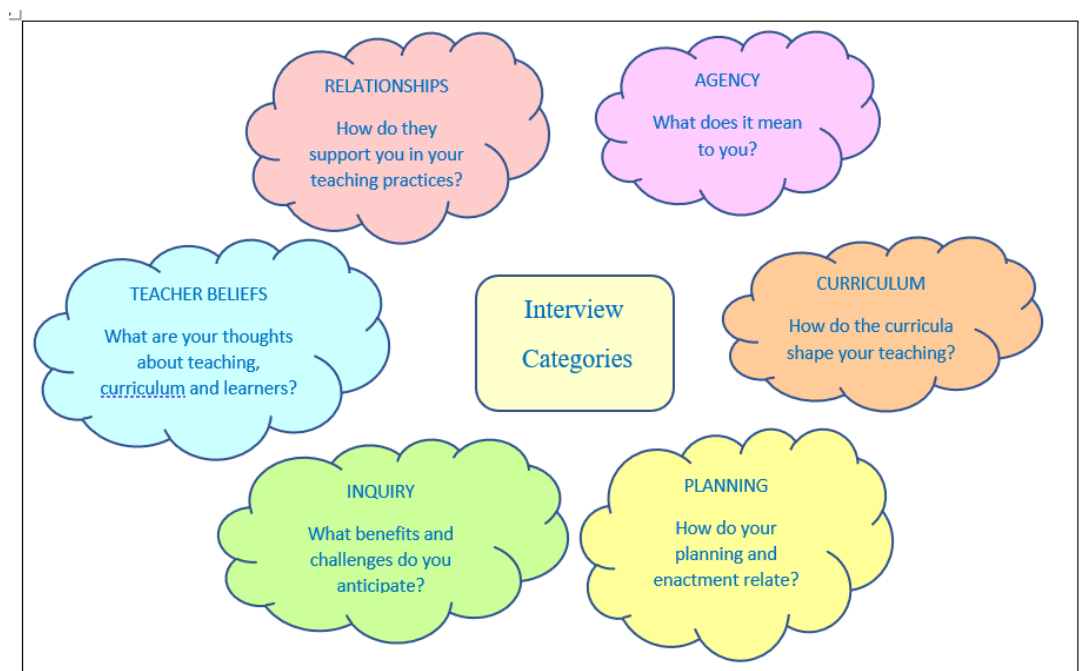
component (section 2.1.2.7), interviews seemed an appropriate research tool. Interviews are a widely used research method (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Denzin, 2001), considered valuable for the access they afford to the interiority of participants. It has been argued that interviews allow the researcher to engage with the 'life-worlds' of interviewees (Cohen et al., 2018; Warren, 2012; Kvale, 1996). Warren (2012) positioned interviewees as meaning-makers, which demonstrates the importance of their voice. Thus, interviews can be interpreted as providing agency to respondents, which is a compelling rationale for their inclusion in this research.

For this study, each participant was interviewed three times: initially in February 2021, to establish their baseline understandings and opinions, and secondly in June 2021, to reflect on the in-class research period. The final interview took place in February 2022, to facilitate a follow-up discussion. These individual interviews sought to explore participants' opinions on agency, inquiry and curriculum, and how these concepts relate to daily work practices and beliefs about teaching. These interviews allowed me to identify and explore similarities and divergences between participants' opinions and the literature. Interviewing the participants on three separate occasions aimed to provide the opportunity to examine any changes in thinking which may have occurred over the course of their engagement with the CoP.

3.4.1.1 Interview 1. Challenges of planning, conducting and analysing research interviews are manifold. These range from the difficulties of avoiding subjectivity and bias within questions, the inter-personal communication and analysis of data, the impact of recording devices on respondents (Warren, 2012), and uncertainty regarding appropriate length of response (Hammersley, 2017). These difficulties were considered as the schedule for Interview 1 was developed. I drew up a framework of main areas for discussion – Agency, Inquiry, Curriculum, Planning, Relationships, and Beliefs – and identified a central question for each. These six interview areas were derived from the three main themes underpinning the research (Agency, Inquiry, Curriculum), and some of the major threads which emerged from the literature review: Performativity (Planning), Relationships and Teachers' Beliefs. The thematic map for interviews is presented in Figure 3.2 below. The main question for each category was subsequently sub-divided into key questions which aimed to use natural and familiar language with respondents (Kvale, 1996). Potential prompts and probe questions were developed, with an awareness that prompts may lead to potential influencing of the data (Fowler, 2009).

Figure 3.2

Thematic Map for Interview Schedules



An agency scale was added to the interview schedule, to reflect the emergence of quantitative studies of agency in recent years. Teacher agency is most often explored through qualitative studies. However, some researchers have developed scales to measure specific traits which they identify as analogous or constitutive of agency – such as self-efficacy or self-direction (Welzel & Inglehart, 2005; Chirkov et al., 2003). These scales measure agency, rather than teacher agency specifically. Reeve (2013) created a scale for student agentic behaviour, while Hadar and Benish-Weisman (2019) adapted several values, behaviour and agency scales to explore the area of teacher agency and its consequences for teaching practices. The scale used in this study was adapted from Reeve (2013), and Hadar and Benish-Weisman (2019) and can be found in Appendix H. The scale was also used in Interview 2, however, the data that were generated from this were inconclusive and revealed little change between agency before and after the research intervention, as discussed in section 4.3.

The schedule for Interview 1 was piloted with three primary teachers who were not part of the participant group. The pilots sought to identify unhelpful or obsolete questions, to reduce data overload, and to improve the flow and coherence of questions. The first pilot was conducted with an infant teacher who was engaging in postgraduate research in education. The second pilot involved an infant teacher with a Masters qualification, and an infant teacher from my school participated in the third. The pilot interviews were effective in the lengthy

nature of the draft interview schedule: pilot interviews took between 60 and 75 minutes. After the pilots, questions which had proved less insightful were removed to allow for an interview length of approximately 50 minutes. An example of a question removed was “What are your thoughts on the IPS/ Aistear curriculum framework?” This was found to be redundant as the opinions arose naturally while responding to other questions. The pilot participants also identified the ambiguous wording of a question about teachers’ beliefs (“What is your image of the child?”), which was subsequently rephrased for clarity. The pilot interviews also allowed me to develop my interviewing skills, including active listening and flexible responding (Warren, 2012), and being conscious to delimit and exclude my own opinions and attitudes (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020).

The first interviews were carried out in February 2021 via Microsoft Teams, using the MS recording function with an audio recorder as a back-up. Each participant was invited to their interview using the Microsoft Bookings platform. Prior to the interview, the schedule (Appendix H) and some information concerning the 2020 Draft Curriculum Framework (Appendix I) were shared with participants.

3.4.1.2 Interview 2. Following the workshops, a 3-month period of inquiry engagement in classrooms and participation in the online CoP, each participant was interviewed again. The interview schedule was developed around the six main areas, as identified in Figure 3.2 above, and was piloted with two teaching colleagues, neither of whom participated in the research. The pilot interviews identified unclear and repetitive questions and helped to condense the length of the schedule. Following feedback, I decided to send out a summary of the interview schedule rather than the full list of questions, which was deemed unhelpful. The summary and the full schedule are included as Appendices J and K.

3.4.1.3 Interview 3. The third and final interview was conducted 8 months after the research concluded, in February 2022. This interview aimed to identify if and how the themes of agency and inquiry resonated with teachers at a remove from the research, and to identify any aspects of their practice that might have been affected by the experience of participating in the study.

The schedule for this interview was developed around three of the previous six areas for discussion: Agency, Inquiry and Teacher Beliefs. These areas were chosen to get a sense of how teachers’ thinking about agency and inquiry might have changed over the course of the research period. Beliefs were included as it had emerged from the generated data that teachers’ beliefs about agency and inquiry varied significantly within the group, and this area

required further investigation. Differentiated questions were added for each teacher, according to issues which had arisen in their previous interviews. The schedule was piloted for length with another two teaching colleagues. All questions were approved, with the recommendation that some contextualisation might help participants recall the research experience, considering the intervening time. As a result, I gave a brief synopsis of the research timeline at the beginning of each interview. The interview schedule for participant Claire is included as a sample in Appendix L.

The series of interviews were found to produce rich data on each theme, as participants responded thoughtfully and engaged generously with the questions. The data from interviews forms the bulk of the data overall, as these individual and prolonged conversations afforded rich insight into the practices, responses and beliefs of these six teachers.

3.4.2 Diaries – Participants’ Diaries and Researcher’s Journal

Diaries have been described as “a type of report and commentary upon events, experiences, thoughts and feelings” (Hewitt, 2017, p. 347). Diaries are characterised by a framework established by the researcher (Denscombe, 2017), with repeated entries (Iida et al., 2012; Alaszewski, 2006). Diaries present some methodological advantages which are particularly significant here. They allow for the empowerment of participants by giving them space to voice their experiences (Hewitt, 2017; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Meth, 2003). This empowerment resonates with the theme of agency, as does the potential of diaries to foster democratic participation (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). Diaries also have the potential to nurture relationships within the field (Hewitt, 2017), which connects to the CoP in this study.

Technology has created new opportunities for diaries, resulting in email diaries, audio diaries, blogs and video reports (Hewitt, 2017). I provided my participants with their choice of diary format, as a way to honour their voice, choice and agency. Duke (2012) and Jacelon and Imperio (2005) similarly offered a choice of diary format. Each format presents its own particular considerations regarding prompts, technology, collection and storage: I planned to address these issues as that stage of fieldwork began. I considered that the variety in diary format might have consequences for the data, in terms of analysis. Day and Thatcher (2009) recognised that more intimate reflection tends to emerge from written diaries, as compared with in-person interview diaries, while Jacelon and Imperio (2005) found that diaries conducted via phone-call yielded less reflective data. However, five participants opted to write a paper-and-pen diary, while only one chose an email diary. This lessened concerns about the analysis of different diary formats.

Participants were given a paper-and-pen diary at the first inquiry workshop, and began their diary in this, with the option to change format after the workshops if they wished. At each of the three inquiry workshops, they were prompted to write short reflective entries on their current understandings of inquiry. During the inquiry period (April-June 2021), diary entries were requested each day that their class engaged in inquiry, and on the occasions of our planning meetings. They were also encouraged to use the diary to reflect on agency, inquiry, CoP, and curriculum at other moments. The diary prompts are included as Appendix M.

It was found that teachers engaged reluctantly with the diary writing and articulated difficulty finding time and enthusiasm to write. Most of the participants engaged sporadically with the diary prompts and simply described the inquiry engagements carried out, rather than investigating their own responses. There were some useful insights across the diaries as a whole, but overall, the perfunctory approach to the diaries proved to be mostly unsuccessful as a method of data generation in this study.

Throughout the research process, I continued my own researcher journal, which functioned as an archive of my thoughts about the research, questions which arose, observations of my own agency, as well as reflections on the CoP. This journal served as a useful record of changing ideas and questions, marking points at which the research was adjusted and the reasons for those modifications.

3.4.3 Visual Methods

The decision to include visual methods as a research method was based on the reasoning that visual methods give voice to participants and encourage them to reflect on their practice in a different medium. Visual methods use various types of images – photographic, filmic, drawn images – in order to answer research questions (Rose, 2012). Visual methods are employed for a variety of purposes, such as the inclusion of different perspectives in the research (Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Frith et al., 2005) or the manifestation of phenomena which are difficult to articulate (O'Connell, 2013). Advocates claim many benefits for visual methods. Milne and Muir (2012) for example, argue that they bring participants' voices into the research, provide access to different types of knowledge and experience, and work as a catalyst for social change. Visual methods may also have a positive effect on relationships between individuals, communities, researchers and policy-makers (Milne & Muir, 2012). Prosser and Loxley (2008) valued visual data for their capacity to expand the boundaries of social research, encourage deeper reflection, and empower participants.

Photo elicitation was the visual method chosen for this research, as a way of empowering participants (Rose, 2012), in line with the theme of teacher agency. However, I

acknowledged that the potential for empowerment is limited by the fact that the parameters for the research were established by my research questions (Milne & Muir, 2012; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Photo elicitation involves participants taking photographs which are discussed at a subsequent interview, stimulating a potentially deeper discussion (Richard & Lahman, 2015). The guidelines for photo elicitation were given at the first planning meeting: participants were asked to take 10 photographs over the research period, reflecting their experiences of agency/ inquiry. No children/ staff/ identifiable school locations were to be included. The exclusion of all people from the photographs aimed to address the warnings offered by Milne and Muir (2012), who argued that visual data is vulnerable to issues of confidentiality. At our final meeting, I displayed each participants' photographs in the form of a Powerpoint presentation, due to the virtual nature of the meeting. This gave participants an opportunity to view, reflect, comment on and discuss their own and each other's images.

Teachers subsequently reported being overwhelmed by an additional task in the research process and all teachers captured their 10 photographs in the week before the final meeting. The process of sharing the photographs, however, provided an opportunity for teachers to visualise the practice and experiences in other classrooms, and to celebrate the outcomes of their participation. The atmosphere in this meeting was noticeably more positive and engaged than in previous planning meetings. This may have been a result of the impending summer holidays, but teachers also vocalised their appreciation of the visual opportunity to see what others were doing in their classroom inquiries. The majority of photographs depicted children's outputs during inquiry and captured little about agency, however, there were a small number of photographs which illustrated aspects of overload, and of enjoyment, which pertained to teacher agency and transformative practice. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

The diffident engagement of teachers with diaries and visual methods seems to indicate that, despite the advantages that multiple research tools provide – in terms of data sources and triangulation of perspectives – they may also present additional burdens to research participants. Despite my efforts to keep research tasks to a minimum, by the end of June 2021, the exhaustion of participants was apparent, as was their readiness to finish the research project. My cognisance of their busy workloads caused me significant concern throughout the research, which I documented in my researcher's diary.

3.5 Data Management

Interviews were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams® for recording and initial transcription. Inquiry workshops and planning meetings were recorded using audio recorders

(2 x Evistr Digital Voice Recorder L157). All recordings, transcripts, photographs, and scanned copies of diaries are stored in Microsoft OneDrive®, as advised by TCD Information Technology Services (via email, 18th March 2020). Data was also backed up on an encrypted USB drive, using BitLocker to Go®. Audio data will be deleted 13 months after completion of the thesis; visual and documentary (diaries, transcripts, meeting notes) data will be stored securely in perpetuity, to allow for the publication of future articles. Only my supervisors and I had access to the data. Participants were clearly informed of the data storage protocol before they consented to involvement.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Informed Consent

The issue of informed consent is the most central ethical principle in the field of educational research (Howe & Moses, 1999). Affording participants informed consent involves the clear explanation of the purpose of the research, however, Warren (2012) cautioned that participants' and researchers' understandings may not fully correspond. The sample for my research is a non-vulnerable group: adults capable of giving consent without feeling coerced (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Crow et al. (2006) favoured informed consent as a means of improving the relations between researcher and participants, and thus, positively influencing data. As I was researching with my teaching colleagues, I placed a high value on maintaining collegial relationships. Therefore, I went to considerable lengths to outline the purpose, constitution and timeframe of my research to colleagues. The information and consent form for teachers are attached as Appendix E.

3.6.2 Confidentiality and Trustworthiness

Due to the small sample size involved, anonymity could not be guaranteed. The confidentiality of participants is protected by the use of pseudonyms, and the careful handling of the data, as outlined in section 3.5. Protection of participants was offered through carefully worded, non-invasive interview questions, and member-checking of interview transcripts, to allow participants remove any statements they did not wish to have included. Guidance was given in relation to the diaries and visual methods, to remind participants not to include any identifying information or images. I personally transcribed the recordings, to limit the number of people viewing the data.

Rigour and trustworthiness were considered throughout the research design stage, in order to establish confidence in the reliability and validity of the findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This took the form of acknowledging and presenting my own biases and assumptions

in the study (Nowell et al., 2017), and adopting certain protocols within the methodology to protect the trustworthiness of the study: data triangulation, member-checking, and prolonged engagement (Stahl & King, 2020).

3.6.3 Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is the practice of reflection and self-critique through which researchers acknowledge their bias and the value judgements which inform their research. Gerwitz and Cribb (2006) identified the multiple points at which researchers make value judgements, including the questions they ask, the data they gather, and the analysis they perform. I fully acknowledge that my own values inform this research throughout. My research questions arose from my own experience and are prompted by a keen interest in and commitment to refining my practice. My advocacy of IBL and my belief in the importance of enabling teacher agency undoubtedly influences my observations and interactions, as well as data analysis. I used self-reflexive methods, including keeping a researcher's journal, as a means of giving prominence to the value judgements which shape the research. However, I accept Pillow's (2003) reminder about the impossibility of complete self-awareness, given the shifting, unknowable nature of our selves. I remained conscious and keenly alert to bias throughout and conducted weekly reviews and critical examination of emerging comments and themes from the data as related to the contextual factors informing the research (Trommsdorff, 2023). These were shared with my supervisors and further interrogated/challenged during routine supervision meetings.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process by which researchers move from the data to an explanation and interpretation of the phenomena revealed (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010, cited in Cohen et al., 2018). Patton (2015) noted that there is no single procedure for this analysis, while Cohen et al. (2018) asserted that the method chosen for data analysis must be methodologically suited to the research.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was initially considered for inclusion as a data analysis method due to the centrality it gives to participants' voice (Noon, 2018), which is consistent with this research into agency. However, I noted Braun and Clarke's (2021) caution that IPA is a theoretically informed approach to analysis, whereas thematic analysis is atheoretical or theoretically fluid. My approach to data analysis was rooted in discussion and interaction with teachers, in their words and perspectives, rather than in the application of a theoretical lens. This aligns with the approach taken by Swedish researchers Westerholm and

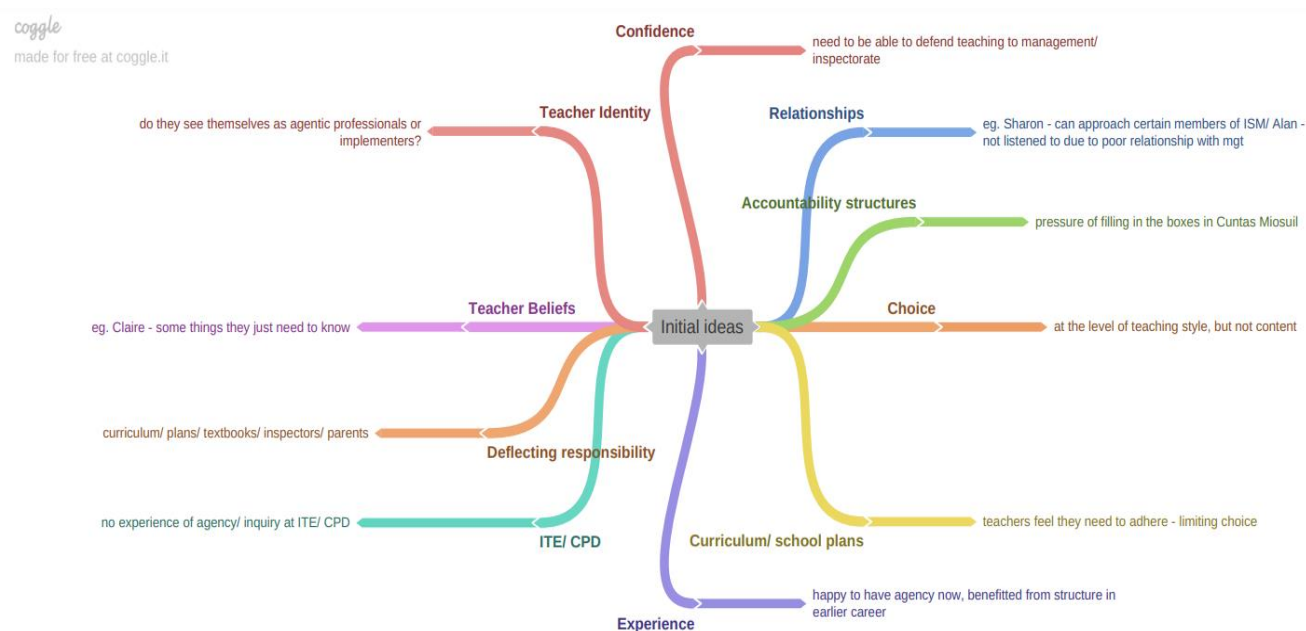
Lindqvist (2023) who used thematic analysis in their study of teacher agency when responding to professional dilemmas in the identification of children with special educational needs. Cong-Lem (2021) similarly adopted a thematic approach in his systematic review of 104 papers discussing teacher agency. Therefore, thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for use in this research. One advantage of thematic analysis, identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), is its suitability in research where participants are collaborators. This aspect rendered it appealing to afford agency to my teacher collaborators within the community of practice. Thematic analysis was also selected owing to the depth of analysis it offers smaller and more diverse data sets (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This facilitated its use with interview transcripts as well as the email diaries and visual methods.

My analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) recursive six phases, and enriched by the use of thematic maps to review and refine analysis. I used Coggle™ mind maps (www.coggle.it) to create thematic maps, as presented in Figures 3.3 to 3.5 below.

Phase 1 involved transcribing the interviews, CoP meetings and workshops as a method of familiarising myself with the data, while noting initial ideas. I used Otter™ Transcription (www.otter.ai) as a digital tool for preliminary transcription, to make the process more time-efficient. I then read each transcript rendered by Otter™ while listening to the interview and making corrections where needed. Following transcription, I listened to the data several more times to capture any pauses, tone of voice and other vocal mannerisms that might inform the meaning of the transcribed material. I re-read the transcripts regularly over the following months while noting my initial ideas, which are presented in Figure 3.3. A sample transcript with coding is included in Appendix N.

Figure 3.3

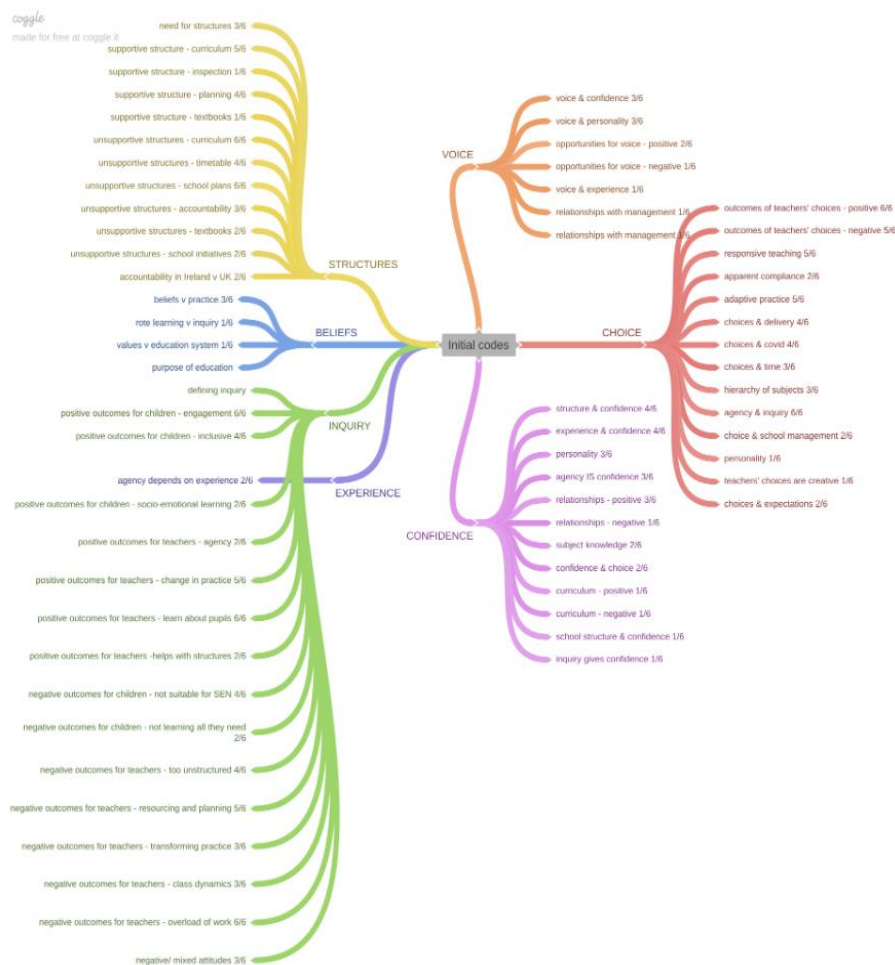
Initial Ideas (Phase 1)



Braun and Clarke (2006) describe Phase 2 as the generation of initial codes. For this, I assigned a code to each small chunk of participant dialogue in the transcripts, initially using pen-and-paper on printed transcripts. For subsequent coding – each transcript was coded twice or three times – I used different colour text in a MS Word document. I endeavoured to be as open as possible to various potential directions and messages in the data: this produced a large number of initial codes, as illustrated in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Map of Initial Codes (Phase 2)



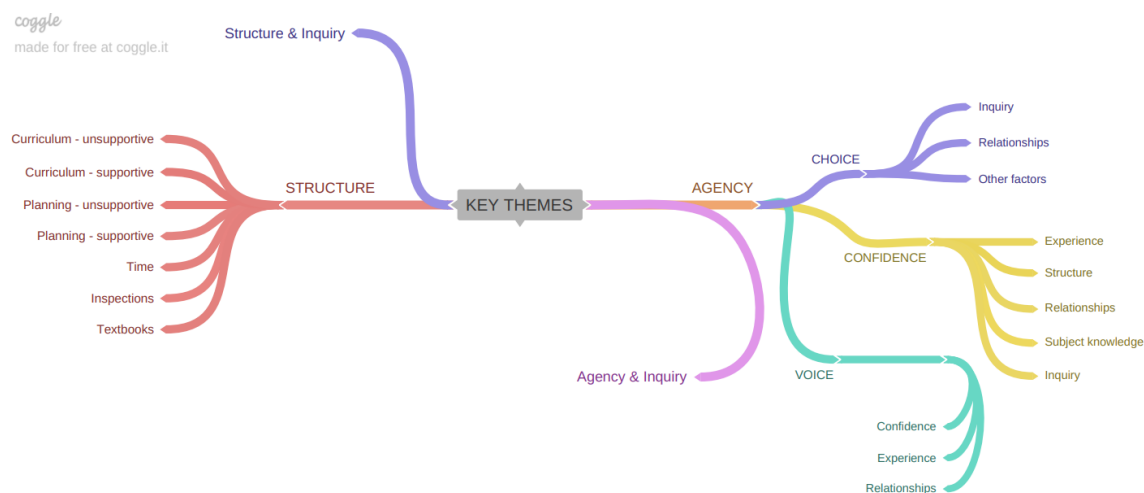
At the beginning of Phase 3, I collapsed the initial codes from Figure 3.4 and calculated the number of participants who made reference to each code. This allowed me to consider their relative importance, thereby gradually coalescing and refining codes. Themes began to emerge at that stage also. The fourth phase of analysis involved further reading and refining the thematic map. Part of this process was achieved through writing up the findings as a way of interrogating the validity and coherence of themes and codes. I found that writing allowed me to determine how significant a particular code or theme proved to be for participants. Through this process I eliminated the theme of inquiry, incorporating it into Agency and Structure. I also deleted Teacher Beliefs, finding insufficient evidence to support it. The maps developed during Phases 3 and 4 of data analysis are included in Appendix O.

The final phase of data analysis involved returning to Phases 3 and 4 in order to thoroughly examine the codes and themes. I considered reinstating Inquiry as a theme and positioning Structure within the theme of Agency, in order to present my data under the two

main themes underpinning this research: Agency and Inquiry. However, the reiterative practice of thematic analysis allowed me to arrive again at the decision made at Stage 4, which was validated by and reflective of the data. Inquiry, in the data from this study, emerged as a vehicle for potential agentic manoeuvres rather than a prominent factor in teachers' experiences of agency within the educational system. Consequently, a section for Agency & Inquiry, and Structure & Inquiry was added. Overall, the thematic map for Phase 5 features only minor adjustments of the Phase 4 map, with the supportive and unsupportive aspects of curriculum and planning were added to the Structure sub-themes. The final thematic map is presented below.

Figure 3.5

Final Thematic Map (Phase 5)



Conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the methodological framework adopted in the study, along with attention to the philosophical underpinnings and ethical considerations of the methodology selected. COVID-19 had an impact on the design and implementation of the study, but decisions taken at that time to ensure the validity of the approach in robustly addressing the research questions, created opportunity for the mining of rich and thick data. In the following chapter, these data are presented and appraised.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter reports the findings from this study, presented in two major sections: (i) Agency and (ii) Structure. Inquiry functions in this research at the practice level, as a vehicle through which teachers might be enabled to achieve agency. Consequently, data on inquiry are incorporated into the Agency and Structure sections as appropriate, revealing how inquiry served to support or problematise agentic practice in this study.

One of the main findings to emerge was that participating teachers desired more agency than they currently have. Nevertheless, they expressed doubt regarding a desire for agency amongst teachers more generally. They viewed agency as the ability to make, enact and defend choices around facilitating child-led learning, such as incorporating children's interests, adjusting timeframes, and moving away from textbooks. The notions of choice and confidence featured strongly in these teachers' definitions of agency. Voice was a less prevalent aspect in the data and was regularly conflated with teacher talk.

Through the experience of enacting IBL in their classrooms, these teachers reached an understanding of inquiry as a child-led pedagogy which empowers teachers as agents. A muddled conception of inquiry emerged, where inquiry was so closely aligned with agency as to obscure the boundaries. IBL supported these teachers' agentic practice but the link between IBL and the achievement of agency is not a straightforward one. It emerged that teachers' responses to inquiry were strongly influenced by their beliefs about teaching and learning. IBL was viewed as supportive of teacher agency but not always deemed the best approach, depending on class level and subject area.

Teachers expressed mixed views about the ways in which the structures of the education system influenced their agency. Most structures – such as curriculum, planning requirements and textbooks – were recognised as both a support to and constraint of teacher agency. Teachers appreciated the need for structure and consistency but acknowledged the ways in which structures impinged on their choices and confidence. They were critical of content overload, unnecessary and extensive paperwork, pressure from curricular time allocations, and unrealistic expectations of inspectors. At various points, teacher articulations about agency revealed partial understanding of the concept of agency, as distinct from autonomy. Teachers regularly confounded autonomy – the freedom from control, the space within which agency might be achieved – with agency, the possibility for action. Thus, the data echoes a similar conflation in the literature (see section 2.1.1.3).

These findings are elaborated on in detail below, illustrated through accompanying data and contextualised, where appropriate, by reference to the educational literature. As

outlined in Chapter 3, most data were generated through interviews and this is reflected in the data cited here. Occasional reference is made to participants' diaries and visual methods. Direct quotations are italicised, and the number of teachers supporting a particular point is highlighted as whole numbers in brackets, where relevant. Table 4.1 outlines the acronyms used to identify the data sources cited in this chapter.

Table 4.1

Reference System for Data Sources

Sample reference	Data source
Meabh 1 L239-242	Interview 1 with Meabh, transcript line 239–242
Hannah 2 L188-192	Interview 2 with Hannah, transcript line 188– 92
Sharon D L82-87	Debrief with Sharon, transcript line 82–87
Laura's Diary, p.64	Diary written by Laura, page 64
VM L669-675: Claire	Visual methods meeting, Claire, transcript line 669–675

4.1 Agency

During the fieldwork, agency was concisely defined to participants as the “voice, choice and confidence of teachers to enact pedagogical decisions.” This definition was used for ease of communication, as I felt it succinctly conveyed some of the most pertinent aspects of teacher agency without unduly burdening the participants with the complexities of teacher agency as presented in the literature. Teachers' overall responses to agency are presented first, followed by data regarding these three aspects of agency – voice, choice and confidence. Of these three, teachers articulated their awareness of and opinions about choice most strongly. Thus, the data around choice are presented first, followed by confidence which was the next most prominent in the data, and finally voice, about which teachers demonstrated some uncertainty.

4.1.1 Responses to Agency

The majority of participants (5) expressed strong interest in having agency, or more agency than they currently believe they possessed. Teachers responded positively to a vision of agency which allows for responsive teaching rather than instrumentally following a prescribed curriculum. Some of the comments reflected that positivity:

I have complete and utter faith that (with an agentic teacher) ... children are going to love learning in the classroom, and they're going to learn a lot. (Alan 3 L299-305)

I think there's huge progress for the kids within the class. I think a teacher is going to deliver content a lot better, because they have an interest in it and they have put the effort into deciding the agency. So I think that the kids are going to be a lot more engaged. (Claire 3 L671-675)

I guess the teachers know the kids best. So you know their interests, you know their ability level and you can tailor your lessons. (Sharon 3 L301-303)

These quotes demonstrate that teachers regarded agency as primarily benefitting children's learning, which matches their commitment to child-led learning (section 4.1.2.1), and suggests that these teachers are already aligned with key elements of the PCF.

However, despite an overall affirmation of teacher agency, undercurrents in the interview transcripts suggested a less fulsome embrace. Doubts about the desirability of agency became apparent as comments made by five teachers suggested a more chequered response. Interestingly, many of these comments concerned reservations expressed on behalf of other teachers:

It'd be difficult for certain professionals to accept that they're in charge. I think some people like to stand by what's down on paper. (Laura 3 L364-369)

Laura indicates that, from her observations of her colleagues, some do not want responsibility for designing learning. Claire supported this by asserting her opinion that not all teachers want "*complete free-for-all*" (Claire 3 L678), a phrase which captures the confusion about autonomy and agency, where agency is seen as complete freedom, rather than a capacity for action. Alan also expressed a general doubt about teachers' interest in agency:

I think there's a limited number of teachers with the thirst to have agency. I don't feel like there would be platform or a demand. (Alan 1 L337-339)

This implies that, from Alan's experience, colleagues do not want to take on the responsibilities which agency entails. He identified the time required after hours, and the work of designing bespoke learning. Alan related this to teachers' motivation to leave quickly after school hours and to rely on textbooks for teaching and planning. Teacher agency was reported as potentially being uncomfortable, difficult, and demanding (section 2.1.6). These demands will be discussed more fully below, but comments from Laura, Claire and Alan – and support for such opinions in the literature, indicates that the process of affording agency to in-service teachers may require complex engagement.

More reservations about whether agency is an unalloyed benefit for teachers and schools were expressed by Meabh and Hannah. They imagined the difficulties that agency might cause for management or teachers with lower levels of confidence. Meabh hypothesised that agency might create issues for principals in managing the differing practices and products of agentic teaching, as opposed to the homogeneous outputs from standardised planning templates and textbooks (Meabh 3 L242-245). Hannah pondered whether agency would be desired by a new or less confident teacher (Hannah 3 L505-510).

In addition to doubting the desire of others for teacher agency, the data reveals hesitance and contradiction in Claire's stance on agency. She identified a wish for agency around planning and in arts subjects, but explicitly rejected agency beyond the classroom (see section 4.1.4.2) and preferred a much greater level of specificity in the curriculum for most subjects. For example, she critiqued the language curriculum as '*airy-fairy*' (Claire 1 L354) and outlined the level of detail she would prefer, including specifics on when children in infant classes should move from using crayons to writing with triangular pencils (Claire 3 L784-788). For Claire, the curriculum should be a document that '*aliens from outer space would be able to do*' (Claire 1 L355). The level of prescription she described may suggest a lack of interest in teacher agency. Indeed, by our final interview, Claire recognised that she would like less agency and choice in certain subject areas, namely English and Maths:

I think that agency is good in some things and not in others... I would be a big fan of structure in literacy and maths. (Claire 3 L739-741)

It seems, from the context of her other comments, that this connects with her sense of subject hierarchy (section 4.1.2.2.2 below) and lack of confidence in her own ability to design curriculum for core subjects which would provide children with key skills (Claire 1 L432-439). These comments underline the centrality of teacher confidence to teacher agency: without the belief that they can design engagements which adequately meet the needs of learners, teachers may continue to seek prescriptive content.

4.1.2 Choice

The six participating teachers readily connected with the idea of agency as choice. While the interview discussions did not make mention of theoretical constructions of agency, their responses recall elements of certain theoretical approaches, particularly Giddens' duality of structures (section 2.1.1.1) and Biesta and Tedder's ecological model (section 2.1.1.3). Teachers clearly articulated their awareness and understanding of their own choices, and the factors which support and limit those choices. One finding which emerged strongly was the way in which inquiry influenced teachers' choices and agency (section 4.1.2.2.1).

4.1.2.1 Teachers' Choices. This section reports the data on teachers' attitudes to choice, their identification of choices they currently make, and those they would like to have the capacity to enact. Most teachers (5) posited an understanding of choice as determining content and teaching approach. The majority (4) compared that to the choices they are currently enabled to make, all of which involve lesson delivery rather than content selection (Alan 1 L191-196).

Teachers identified the choices they would like to make but are not empowered to make. For five, these choices related to designing learning which meets the needs of children in their classrooms. This connects to Giddens' identification of the role of intention in agency (section 2.1.1.1). The majority of teachers intended to facilitate authentic and child-led learning, for example, Sharon expressed the desire for agency to decide how to *'teach an objective based on the interests and needs of the kids in my class, not just following something from the book'* (Sharon 3 L43-48). Similar sentiments were expressed by four others, who indicated strong interest in making learning *'more approachable and more meaningful'* (Hannah 1 L14-17). These five participants associated choice with adapting curriculum guidance to meet the needs in their classrooms, echoing the literature which reveals that agentic teachers mould curriculum to meet the needs of students (Pieters et al., 2019; Babino and Stewart, 2018; Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Braun et al., 2010). A similar position was expressed by Meabh:

Every class is different and we have to adapt our teaching to suit the different levels and the interests of the children in the class and their experiences... We're agents in learning as we go along, teaching and adapting to the needs of our classes. (Meabh 1 L27-33)

Alan named this adaptive, agentic practice of shaping curriculum to meet the needs of a particular class as responsive teaching: *"(Agency) might mean having a structure, but then to go in there and be responsive, just be responsive, responsive, responsive every day"* (Alan 3 L848-856). This comment echoed the words of Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022), who argued that responsive classroom practice lay at the heart of agentic teaching. Identifying agency as responsive practice moves the discussion from the nature and composition of teacher agency to its consequences and what it might look like in practice. However, it must also be recognised that equating agency with responsiveness is only one view of agency in action. Teacher agency might be more easily recognised when it results in teachers carrying out progressive, creative and child-led pedagogy, however, teachers also exercise agency when they decide to follow curriculum and textbooks prescriptively. Toom et al. (2015) contend that although agency is more readily identified when teachers are resisting prevailing norms, teacher agency also resides in compliant action, a point accepted by Aspbury-Miyaniishi

(2022), who acknowledges that the emphasis on agency-as-resistance can discount the work practices of the majority of teachers.

The emphasis these teachers place on responsive teaching recalls Jenkins' (2020) typology of reactions to curriculum change (section 2.1.4). While these teachers were discussing ideal practice or the introduction of IBL, the behaviours they discussed resembled Jenkins' proactive agency. In this classification, teachers institute change to meet learners' needs, rather than to fulfil an outside mandate.

However, despite their wish for agency and their intention towards responsive practice, these teachers doubt their capacity to conduct child-led learning in their current situation, as this quote from Laura demonstrates:

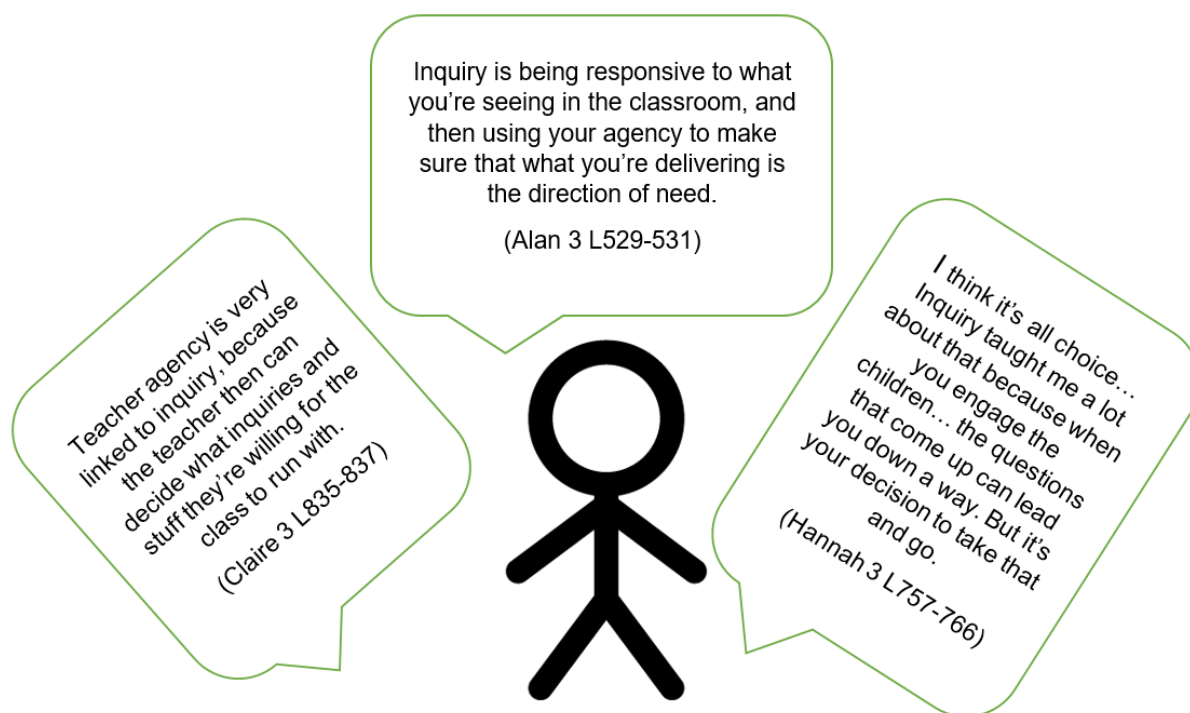
I stand up here and say child-centred learning's so important to me. And then I sit here and think, well, is it? Is that what I really do? (Laura 1 L850-852)

Laura was one of three teachers who articulated a disjuncture between beliefs and practice. Sharon shared a similar awareness of how the learning engagements she provides do not correspond to learners' needs: this consciousness emerged from seeing the children's interest in space as a topic and not having the time to engage with it (Sharon 1 L94-102). These data demonstrate an understanding of agency as the ability to teach in the way teachers deem best in their own school context, a message also advanced by Buchanan (2015), where teachers asserted agency to reject policies which did not serve the interests of their students or school. However, in this study, my participants did not consider themselves sufficiently agentic to defy the curricular requirements and routines with which they disagreed.

Synthesis of the data demonstrate that these teachers want agency to decide on content, and the pedagogical approach they wish to take, with child-led learning and inquiry being to the forefront for the majority of teachers (5).

4.1.2.2 Factors which Influence Teachers' Choices. Participants distinguished between factors which support and those which limit their decision-making. Factors which were considered supportive of teacher agency as choice included IBL and positive relationships with school management. Teachers' ability or willingness to enact choices were negatively influenced by bureaucratic relationships with management, time constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expectations of parents, other teachers, school management and the inspectorate.

4.1.2.2.1 Inquiry and Choice. IBL was the most prominent component identified as assisting teachers' choices. Having experienced and conducted inquiry during the research, all six teachers asserted the belief that inquiry facilitated greater levels of choice and agency. The following quotes illustrate the various ways in which this relationship between inquiry and agency as choice was articulated:



For Alan, Hannah and Claire, their choices were influenced by the knowledge, experiences, needs and interests of the children in their classes. They used inquiry as a way of uncovering this prior knowledge, experiences and interests. Inquiry empowers teachers as decision-makers and curriculum-makers as they establish a framework to scaffold children's learning (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Krajcik & Shin, 2014). The PSC also identifies activating learners' existing schema as the inception of the learning process (DES, 1999), however, these teachers perceived that the way they made connections to children's knowledge and interests through inquiry during the research study was substantially different to their previous practices.

Laura also reported that inquiry empowered her choices. By allowing the children some control over the learning, she was enabled to adopt the teaching role she wanted, as facilitator of child-led learning:

We talked about letting go and actually having the confidence to give the children a bit more free rein... That has definitely changed for me, and that's something I will continue. (Laura 2 L343-353)

This is an example of proactive agency (Jenkins, 2020) in action, where Laura's decisions are shaped by learners' needs. These comments reveal that, through inquiry, teachers adopted some of the practices for which they articulated a desire in early interviews; specifically, the ability to respond to children's interests and needs and the freedom to follow child-led pedagogy. This suggests that inquiry functioned as a vehicle for them to achieve some level of agency in their practice.

4.1.2.2 Hierarchical Attitudes towards Subject Areas. It emerged that, for a majority of teachers (4), certain subjects take precedence in their teaching. They habitually referred to English, Irish and Mathematics as 'core subjects' and lent them greater significance. The ranking of subjects has significant consequences for classroom practice and for teachers' responses to agency and inquiry.

The relative importance of English, Irish and Mathematics could be inferred from a graphic presented in the Introduction to the PSC, where Language and Mathematics are positioned at the top of a stack of subject areas, perhaps denoting their significance (see Figure 2.3). If the visual was not enough, the time allocations are a further indication that these subjects are dominant: they are afforded considerably more time than other subject areas (see Table 2.1). The NCCA (2018) acknowledged that time allocations may result in teachers developing a hierarchical approach towards disciplines. An additional status may be accorded to English, Irish and Mathematics due to their importance in state examinations in post-primary level: all three subjects are mandatory for the Junior Certificate examination, while they often function as subject requirements for entry to third-level courses (Citizens' Information, 2023).

The hierarchy of subjects has distinct consequences for teachers' choices and classroom practice, as the data reveal. Three teachers discussed inquiry as being more suitable in non-core subjects: Laura explained how she usually taught the core subjects before she engaged in inquiry (Laura 2 L392-394), while Hannah expressed greater willingness to use inquiry in non-core subjects:

I feel that if you mess up in SESE and SPHE a little bit, it's not too detrimental, whereas you go with what you know when you're teaching the cores.... In the other subjects, you're not as worried if they haven't nailed something at the end of it as you are if they haven't nailed the strands and strand units in maths. (Hannah 2 L723-736)

The Cambridge Primary Review (University of Cambridge, 2009) found a similar attitude among primary teachers in England, who prioritised instructional time in the 'basic' subjects. Elsewhere in the data, Meabh echoed the view that core subjects are more significant than

other subjects (Meabh D L297-301). The quotes from Laura and Hannah hinted at their opinion that inquiry is appropriate in some subjects, but not in English and maths. Thus, a conflict emerged between teachers' acceptance of inquiry as beneficial and their attitude towards achievement in core subjects. This conflict presents challenges for the DE in promoting a curriculum which values all subjects, and which promotes inquiry across the disciplines. Teachers' hierarchical attitudes reduce the likelihood that IBL – and perhaps other innovations – will be used in teaching core subjects.

The strongest statement of a hierarchical attitude towards subjects was offered by Claire in her critique of the curriculum for different subjects:

I would completely get rid of the arts curriculum. I just think it's a waste of time ... The objectives should be: enjoy the arts and find your own imaginative voice. (Claire 2 L494-519)

Claire went on to state that maths requires detailed objectives and content in the curriculum, however, visual arts do not merit specification. In Claire's judgement, visual arts are an enjoyable activity without discrete pedagogical and disciplinary purposes. It is clear that Claire believed that more specific curricular guidance acts as a hindrance to teachers' creativity and risk-taking, which is reminiscent of literature on the limitation of teacher agency by scripted curriculum (section 2.1.2.3). While she dislikes prescription when teaching art, she accepts it as necessary and desirable for maths.

It is apparent that such hierarchical thinking affects pedagogical decisions: it impacts the timing of teaching and the willingness to try new approaches. The choices that Laura, Hannah, Meabh and Claire make – and the degree to which they achieve agency in these subject areas – is thus determined by their perception of a hierarchy of knowledge and disciplines. Such hierarchical attitudes may have consequences for the redevelopment of the curriculum as it moves towards a more integrated curriculum (NCCA, 2019; DE, 2023).

4.1.2.2.3 Time and Teachers' Choices. Time constraints featured in three teachers' discussions of their choices, as they recognised the limited time available during the teaching day, the variety of additional activities to be undertaken, and the time required for planning and enacting choices:

I didn't sometimes put the thought into the choices I wanted to make because there was so much other stuff going on that I didn't actually sit down to think "What are the choices that I want to make?" (Claire 2 L108-110)

Here, Claire acknowledged that achieving agency in the form of enacting pedagogical decisions is demanding, as confirmed by Priestley and Philippou (2018), who acknowledge

the skill required for teachers to function as makers of curriculum, considering the multiple demands made on them and inadequate time for sustained critical reflection. Claire was aware of the need to consider her choices, but also of the insufficient time for that reflective practice. This suggests that the educational system in Ireland, despite its interest in supporting teacher reflective practice – evidenced through such measures as the Cosán Framework and Céim Standards (The Teaching Council, 2016, 2020) – may have overloaded the curriculum and increased external accountability measures (Walsh, 2019). According to Walsh, in an overloaded curriculum, teachers are only facilitated to function instrumentally and deliver top-down curriculum content.

Half of the teachers in this study (Claire, Meabh and Alan) felt that they did not have sufficient time to achieve agency. This is illustrated by Meabh’s discussion of inquiry: an approach she wanted to take but which required too much engagement outside of teaching hours:

Figure 4.1

Inquiry is Time-Consuming



You wouldn't have the time (inquiry) needs. You'd have to be bringing it home at night-time and reading it in bed. (Meabh 1 L324-326)

Similarly, Alan recalled the intense time demands he experienced when working in England (section 4.2.5). The difficulty posed by time has been recognised by the Department of Education itself (section 2.1.6). O’Sullivan-Dwyer (2010) strongly made the case that time is a major obstacle to innovation and change in Irish schools, since there is no time within teachers’ contracted hours for collaboration:

(Time) is often the elephant in the room when looking at school improvement in that teachers' contracted hours correspond with pupil contact time. The need to develop collaborative practices among teachers is negated by the simple fact that there is no time assigned for such collaboration in the school year. (p. 22)

The data concur with this viewpoint, revealing time as a significant obstacle for the achievement of teacher agency. The next chapter further explores these considerations.

4.1.2.2.4 Other Factors Which Influence Teachers' Choices. Teachers identified COVID-19 protocols, and the expectations of parents and teaching colleagues as factors which circumscribe their ability to enact their choices.

The protocols and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic featured prominently on teachers' lists of unsupportive factors. Four teachers related ways in which COVID-19 denied them opportunities for choice, including being restricted to classrooms, limited access to support teachers, and the pressure to catch up on work as a result of school closures:

Some of your choices are taken away because you're restricted to the classroom, you can't mingle, everything is timetabled, you can't go outside at certain times because someone else is outside. (Sharon 2 L99-103)

Considerable teaching time was spent on following protocols, with negative results for teacher choice. As a result of reduced teaching time, alongside sudden class closures (Laura 2 L838-839), pressure mounted on teachers to complete curricular work:

There's a massive portion of my time gone on sanitising, hand-washing, eating. And then we have missed so much class time, we are under some pressure to cover topics. (Claire D L173-176)

Hannah indicated that deep and significant learning was negatively impacted by COVID-19:

(This year) you stuck to what you had to do and you got on. Especially with all the closures and things like that. It was very much tick-the-box. It was, get that maths book done, get that page done quick. (Hannah 2 L188-192)

Hannah's tone of voice as she made this point revealed her awareness of and dissatisfaction with the limited learning which resulted from the focus on curriculum and textbook coverage.

Another negative outcome of COVID-19 protocols was the difficulty for the CoP to assemble, except via organised online meetings. Regular, informal conversations, which may have strengthened the collaboration, were proscribed by the embargo on meetings of staff members within the school building:

COVID-19 is definitely impacting (the CoP) as well, because we're not sitting down, we can't loiter, we're told not to go and spend time with each other. So we're grabbing a quick one-minute catch up or chat over the kettle, before we have to return to our rooms. (Laura D L216-221)

As a result of COVID-19 and my own health situation at the time [I was pregnant], I was not on the school site for the entirety of the research period. Most teachers (4) noted that my absence was a negative outcome for their engagement with IBL, as they had envisaged being able to visit my classroom and observe IBL in practice, or discuss IBL plans and engagements after teaching hours (Alan D L437-444; Hannah D L416-421; Sharon D 249-255; Meabh D L236-239). COVID-19 was, unfortunately, part of the contexts-for-action of teachers in this study and it had a significant impact on their ability to achieve agency, as well as their morale during the research period, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Two teachers identified expectations as a factor which negatively impacted their choices. For Hannah, parents' expectations limited her choices, as she feared they might unfavourably compare the teaching and learning in her classroom to that of other colleagues teaching the same year group (Hannah 1 L100-103). Laura was also concerned about parental reactions to her decision to carry out inquiry in her class:

I do think that parents would have come through a completely different system. They're not in education themselves, they don't know any different. And so they could think "well, what's going on in that classroom?" (Laura 1 L863-870)

Hannah was also concerned with meeting the expectations of teaching colleagues who would teach the class the following year and might criticise her teaching. These concerns may indicate a lack of confidence on Laura and Hannah's part concerning teaching and learning through inquiry. The data on confidence and inquiry will be presented in section 4.1.3.4 below and the implications for practice will be discussed in the following chapter. Along with inspectors (section 4.2.4), parents appear as 'bogeypeople' in the data: their perceived expectations – that all classes of the same level should work on the same topics at the same time; that textbooks should be finished by the end of the school year – influence teachers' decisions and practice. Whether these inspectorate and parental expectations are real or imagined is an interesting question which is outside the scope of this research. It is sufficient to state at this point that, whether real or imagined, the perceived expectations of other stakeholders in education impacts – and generally reduces – teachers' sense of agency. It is difficult to envisage how teachers might achieve agency without trusting in the support and understanding of management and inspectors.

In summary, agency is clearly felt by teachers as being associated with pedagogical choices within the classroom. Teachers reported a desire to make and enact more choices about the approach they take to teaching and learning. IBL was considered to promote teacher agency, in terms of bolstering teacher choice. Concerns were expressed about the demands that agency as choice places on teachers and about the expectation and response of other teachers, as well as parents, school management, and inspectors. These data

contribute to the literature by offering compelling evidence of the consequences of limited time for collaboration and planning agentic practice. The findings also contribute to existing knowledge on teachers' interest in student-led pedagogy (Lai et al., 2016) by outlining the Irish context for teacher agency.

Confidence emerged as another element of agency which is significant for teachers in a variety of ways and is discussed in the following section.

4.1.3 Confidence

Confidence as an element of teacher agency resonated strongly with the participating teachers. Confidence was understood as the ability to implement pedagogical decisions and to defend such choices to colleagues, parents, school management and inspectors. For three teachers, agency was particularly closely related to confidence: they identified that it is confidence which allows teachers to enact and defend their choices. Sharon viewed confidence as the singular element that enables teacher agency:

I feel like I have the confidence to do things my way or explore other avenues... Just having the confidence to have agency. (Sharon 3 L395/528)

Similarly, Hannah acknowledged that confidence was central to achieving agency:

Any way that you're going to have agency, it's going to revert back to having the confidence to actually do it. (Hannah 3 L536-538).

Teachers viewed agency as intrinsically related to confidence: making links from confidence to teaching experience, educational structures, relationships, and individual personality. These data are presented below.

4.1.3.1 Confidence and Experience. Most teachers (5) associated confidence with experience gained across their teaching career. Claire and Laura compared their current classroom practice with that of their earlier days, realising how their confidence has grown and, with it, the ability to make decisions and be responsive to learners. In this way, confidence and agency can develop alongside teaching experience. Claire reported that she followed plans diligently in the early stage of her teaching career, to the disadvantage of the learners:

I used to be obsessed with the plan and getting so stressed that I wasn't getting everything done. When I first qualified, it was nearly to the detriment of them knowing something. (Claire 1 L563-566)

Similarly, Laura admitted that, in her early career, she '*ploughed on*' with lessons regardless of children's learning, in an effort to follow curriculum and school plans (Laura 1 L510-513). These two comments reveal that Claire and Laura associate rigidly adhering to curriculum with potentially missing opportunities for deeper learning and engagement. This implies that experience impacts on teachers' confidence in modifying curriculum to meet learners' needs. The literature on confidence and experience is mixed: some report higher agency among experienced teachers (Espeland et al., 2020) whereas others note that confidence and agency do not develop for all teachers, despite experience (Liyuan et al., 2022). These writers suggest that agency may not develop alongside experience in a linear fashion, implying that teachers' achievement of agency is not an inevitable outcome of professional experience.

The link drawn by teachers between agency and experience may infer challenges for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), since they have a diminished range of teaching experience and professional engagement from which to draw. The extended school placement of 20 weeks for primary level student teachers under the Céim Standards (The Teaching Council, 2020) may provide experiences which function as building blocks for agency. Indeed, the Céim Standards specifically reference the fostering of teacher agency as an aim of initial teacher education programmes.

Each of the six participants identified an absence of exposure to IBL approaches in their initial teacher education. However, recent studies confirm that IBL is embedded in ITE programmes (Pike et al., 2023; Greenwood et al., 2022). Mary Immaculate College confirms that IBL is "a fundamental part of the curricular studies modules throughout the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Professional Master of Education (PME) programmes (and) features very strongly in STEM and SESE modules in particular" (Education Office, personal communication, March 28, 2023). Marino Institute of Education also offers two modules with specific IBL-related titles (SESE Department, personal communication, March 28, 2023), while DCU features IBL in Digital Learning, Mathematics and Science modules for first-year students, Science for second-years and Literacy for fourth year (Dublin City University, n/d). This approach affords students multiple opportunities to experience and engage with IBL, but – with the exception of the literacy module in DCU – it sustains the perception that IBL is more appropriate in SESE subjects than other disciplines. This perception is supported by the approach in Froebel, where undergraduate students learn about IBL within mathematics and science for the first three years of their ITE programme (Maynooth University, n/d). Pike et al. (2023) acknowledge that student teachers are expected to engage with IBL on school placement, while they do not experience IBL being modelling by their teacher educators to a

significant extent. This limited use of IBL across their ITE experience may account somewhat for the lack of recall of IBL in their teacher education by the teachers in this study.

As regards the teacher agency and IBL experience of in-service teachers, it might be assumed that this is to be developed through individual teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) engagement. CPD courses are offered by a wide array of providers, most notably the Education Centres. A review of their available courses from October 2023 to the end of June 2024 reveals that no course on either teacher agency or IBL is available (Education Support Centres Ireland, n/d: see Appendix P). The implications of the agency/experience connection in relation to ITE and CPD will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Hannah and Meabh expanded upon the connection between experience and confidence by recognising that the confidence which results from experience is deepened by repeatedly teaching the same level. Thus, familiarity with the syllabus for a particular level promotes teacher confidence. Meabh acknowledged that her own level of comfort and confidence derived from having taught senior infants for three consecutive years (Meabh 2 L144-147). Hannah agreed, querying how confident she would feel and how much agency she would want if she were placed in a different class:

This is... the fourth time I've had infants. I teach them SESE without anything at this stage, because (I'm) so used to it... But if I went into sixth class now, would I want the same level of agency? I don't know. (Hannah 3 L453-461)

While teachers overall indicated a desire for the agency, comments like this cast doubt – or at least, circumscribe – the type and amount of autonomy and freedom from regulation teachers want. This evokes the literature on the challenge that teacher agency can pose (section 2.1.6). Hannah's comment seems to exemplify the argument that not all teachers would welcome the additional time and engagement required for agency (DES, 2015a).

For Hannah and Meabh, agency is connected to a sense of comfort and confidence with the curriculum and class level taught. This presents a conflict between their experiences of agency in different situations and provokes an interesting consideration of experience as non-linear and not wholly cumulative, but rather an element which depends on other contextual factors. This recalls Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecology of agency, which incorporates variations in the agency of individuals over time, according to the different situations in which they find themselves. Thus, Hannah may perceive herself as highly agentic in junior classes but may experience a decrease in her agency with a move to a more senior class. The reasons for and outcomes of such fluctuations in agency in different settings will be discussed in the next chapter.

The promotion of agency through repeatedly teaching a class draws attention to teacher placement: considering whether teachers should be placed in specific classes for several years to build confidence and experience, in an effort to support agency. The literature on teacher permanence at a particular class level offers some consideration of the effect on teachers of repeatedly teaching the same level: Ost and Schiman (2015) report a beneficial impact on teacher retention as a consequence of not switching between class levels. The Irish National Teachers' Union (INTO) detailed teachers' advocacy for repeated teaching of the same class level to develop curriculum content knowledge (INTO, 2015). Nevertheless, a gap remains in the literature concerning the specific impact on teacher agency of remaining at a class level for a number of years.

The data generated about confidence and experience raise interesting questions about the nature of teacher agency. Some literature suggests a model of agency as a capacity which social actors achieve outright (Pieters et al., 2019; Calhoun, 2002). However, this does not account for the agency of individual teachers, as experienced or understood by this group of teachers. It is clear from the data that all six teachers regard agency as an incremental attribute, which is developed over time with experience and confidence. This is evidenced by Hannah and Meabh's assertion that their agency developed as they repeatedly taught a year group, Laura's comparison of her practice earlier in her teaching career, and Alan and Claire's avowal of the value of structured lessons and 'recipes' (section 4.2.1.2 and 4.2.2.2) in their early careers. Thus, the data suggest that a flexible conception of agency is required to account for teachers' practice in Irish classrooms. Mutlu (2017) posited three trajectories for agency: contested agency, gradual growth of agency over time, and failure to achieve agency. It appears that the teachers in my study regard themselves as experiencing the gradual growth of agency over time. Based on this, it appears that the agency experienced by teachers in Irish primary school classrooms may be an incremental phenomenon, developed with experience and confidence, and which needs to be facilitated and supported. The implications of this finding for ITE and CPD will be explored in the next chapter.

4.1.3.2 Confidence and Relationships. Literature on teacher agency demonstrates that positive relationships support teachers' agentic practice (section 2.1.2.2). This study reflects the literature, as data generated in interviews revealed that relationships bolstered agency as confidence. Most teachers (5) perceived their pedagogical confidence as being positively affected by good relationships with colleagues and school management. This was particularly evident in their reflections on the effect of the community of practice. Teachers revealed that they found comfort in sharing classroom experiences in the group. Meabh used the term '*strength in numbers*' (Meabh 2 L410-413) and this sense of solidarity was echoed by

others. Sharon revealed how the supportive relationships within the research group increased her confidence:

It was nice knowing that everyone was on the same page and we all had the same problems and restraints. (Sharon 2 L165-168)

In her diary, Laura agreed that she was reassured by discussions in the research group. However, she concluded that, although the community of practice was a 'lovely and supportive' group, there were difficulties for her participation. These included the COVID-19 protocols, which prevented teachers meeting in person and significantly reduced informal interaction. For personal reasons, Laura was not able to stay after school, which might have provided more opportunities for discussion of the research experience (Laura's Diary, p. 64). This diary entry reveals that, while relationships can enhance confidence and reassure teachers, they require time, which is not always available.

Relationships with management have a particularly distinct influence on agency and confidence, as confirmed in literature (Poulton, 2020; Jenkins, 2020) and the data from this study. Claire identified the positive and negative influence that relationships with management can have on teacher confidence as she compared her experience working in two schools (Claire 1 L711-739). The positive experience she described involved senior management maintaining a distance from her classroom, offering encouraging affirmations when she was teaching a challenging class group, and giving her a sense of being trusted. Supportive relationships with management had a motivating effect on her teaching, allowing her space to develop her classroom practice independently:

I think that management in our school are very good for not being in your face, which I think is really helpful when you're trying to find your own feet. You don't feel like every five minutes there's going to be someone in the classroom disrupting your flow. (Claire 1 L735-739)

Claire believed that finding the 'flow' of her teaching style connected to her sense of agency. Conversely, in a previous school, adverse relationships and a sense of surveillance from management resulted in lower confidence:

The first school I was in was not a supportive environment... I think your teaching really suffers for it because I spent so much of the time wondering what management thought of me as opposed to actually teaching.... I think that then you've no confidence to think "Look, I'm going to try this." (Claire 1 L711-715/ 722-724)

This comment reveals the unequivocal impact that Claire's relationship with school management had on her confidence and agency, where unfavourable relationships left her

unwilling to try out things in her classroom practice. Priestley et al. (2015a) agree that hierarchical and unequal relationships in schools inhibit new ideas and innovation.

Hannah discussed how positive relationships with management personnel afforded her greater confidence within the school community:

Our management is so approachable... In some schools you wouldn't dream of saying these things to your principal or going to your principal with these things. (Hannah 1 L464-469)

It is apparent that Hannah enjoyed a comfortable, relaxed relationship with the members of school management, echoed by Claire (Claire 1 L757-759). As evidenced earlier, agency for Hannah is a matter of comfort and confidence (see section 4.1.3.1, p.140). It can be surmised then, that comfortable relationships increase Hannah's confidence and agency and she may, therefore, be more willing to attempt innovative practices, as noted by Claire earlier.

The educational literature supports the viewpoints expressed here by Sharon, Hannah and Claire. Positive relationships can support innovation and agency (Jenkins, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015a). The significance of relationships to teacher agency provokes questions about how positive relationships can be cultivated, and how less positive relationships can be regenerated, in order to support agency and innovation.

4.1.3.3 Confidence and Subject Knowledge. Two teachers expressed the opinion that their confidence was impacted by their proficiency in particular subjects. Claire's competency in Irish allowed her the confidence to adopt a flexible approach (Claire 1 L319-323), however, she noted that in science, she would be much more rigid (Claire 1 L85-87). Laura admitted to a similar lack of confidence in teaching science:

I do think that in areas that I wouldn't be so confident myself, it does definitely impact the way you're going to teach them. If I'm trying to think about teaching something scientific, and I'm not good at it, I don't understand it myself, I'm just trying to teach what I have stored in my brain. (Laura 1 L491-498)

The lack of confidence that Claire and Laura recognise in their science teaching is likely to impact the degree of agency they exercise in this subject area, as has been shown in earlier sections relating to teacher confidence (see sections 4.1.3.1 and 4.1.3.3).

This link between confidence and subject area – expressed by a third of the research group – indicates the potential influence of subject knowledge on teacher agency. This is not a topic which is given much consideration in the literature on teacher agency, thus it represents an original contribution to the study of teacher agency. Primary teachers are

generalist educators, responsible for 12 subject areas. The expectation that primary teachers have the skills and knowledge to teach all areas is an issue in primary education internationally (Russo et al., 2022; Clohessy et al, 2020; Hourigan & O'Donoghue, 2013; Ofsted, 2008). Laura and Claire's concern over their science understanding recalls the lower confidence of primary teachers across the UK regarding science (Murphy et al., 2007), while similar findings have been reported about teacher confidence in respect of creativity (Beghetto, 2021), arts education (Hunter-Doniger & Herring, 2017; Buck & Snook, 2016; Russell-Bowie, 2012; Alter et al., 2009) and music education (Hennessy, 2017; Battersby & Cave, 2014; Holden & Button, 2006).

In summary, agency as confidence emerged clearly from participating teachers. They recognised confidence as being influenced by experience, context, structure, relationships and subject area. Experience is a particularly significant constituent of confidence as it allows teachers to become flexible and responsive, rather than limited to following plans. This prompts consideration of how best to support newly qualified and early-career teachers who lack the experience necessary to develop confidence.

4.1.3.4 Inquiry and Confidence. Teachers' reactions to beginning inquiry revealed a noticeable decline in their confidence. Since confidence is key to the achievement of agency (section 2.1.2.6), this decrease deserves consideration. Three teachers compared the experience of beginning inquiry with that of beginning to teach as a newly qualified teacher:

I nearly felt uncomfortable doing it at the start, because I felt like I was making a fool of myself. (Hannah 3 L1042)

Sharon and Meabh requested some structure and guidance from the community of practice to initiate their classroom inquiries, hinting at their lack of confidence with inquiry at this point (Sharon D L891; Meabh 2 L102-104). This indicates that the adoption of new practice diminishes confidence, at least initially, as teachers struggle to adapt their routines. Laura noted that her discomfort with inquiry reduced through experience, linking back to the discussion of confidence and experience (section 4.1.3.1):

I didn't think I'd ever become more relaxed and more comfortable. I thought there isn't enough time for me to change my ways, but there certainly was. I surprised myself in some ways, that I was able to give it a try. (Laura 2 L865-872)

Similarly, Hannah reported a growth in her confidence with inquiry through repeated practice (Hannah 3 L1047-1049). Thus it appears that inquiry is not initially supportive of agency as confidence, since it reverses the forward momentum of experience, positioning teachers as novices once more. This indicates that while inquiry develops agency as choice, it weakens

agency as confidence during the early stages of its practice in classroom. The importance of teachers having agency to enact inquiry is noted (Chapman, 2013; Grant and Hill, 2006), thus it appears that more time may be needed to support and ingrain teacher agency in order to make possible the IBL advocated by the PCF (DE, 2023).

The data on confidence offers further insight into teachers' understanding of agency as an attribute that is achieved gradually with time, experience and supportive structures. This conception of agency has implications for curriculum development, ITE, CPD, and school management.

4.1.4 Voice

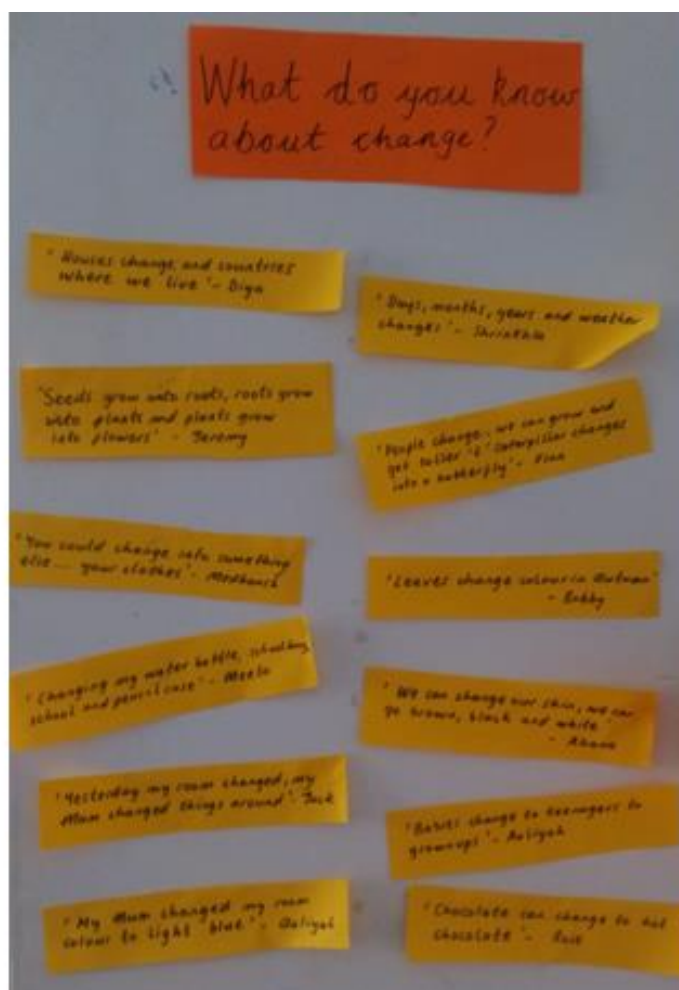
Of the three elements presented in the fieldwork definition of teacher agency, voice appeared to resonate least strongly. Analysis of a database of relevant quotes from interview transcripts revealed that teachers mentioned choice 62 times, confidence 40 times and voice only 26 times. Voice was often conflated with teacher talk as teachers analysed their discourse routines in the classroom more than their capacity or desire to articulate their opinions and ideas. An example of this is presented below:

I felt that I used my voice less in the class and let (the children) share more. I documented what they were doing, taking photos and videos and writing down their inputs. So I allowed them to have a bit more of a voice. (Meabh 2 L251-254)

Meabh wanted to document children's ideas during IBL to afford them voice: to this end, she noted their questions and ideas and displayed them in the classroom as a centrepiece for further discussions with the children. Part of Meabh's display is presented in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2

Documenting Children's Ideas



This limited awareness of teacher voice was particularly interesting considering the prominence of voice in the literature on teacher agency (section 2.1.2.7), suggesting a divergence from Zepeda et al.'s (2022) understanding of voice as the gateway to agency and participation at school level. The next chapter discusses in detail the variation between agency in the literature as a school-wide phenomenon, and the agency conceived by these teachers, which concerns classroom practice only.

When explicitly redirected from teacher talk to teacher voice, teachers linked voice with confidence, personality, opportunity and relationships with management. The data concerning voice are presented below.

4.1.4.1 Voice and Confidence. Three teachers noted that a lack of confidence reduces their willingness to use their voice. These observations arose when discussing their

participation in the research group, where inquiry was a new experience for all of them. Both Laura and Sharon identified their own tendency to avoid participating, feeling uncertain about the validity of their ideas and concerns.

You don't want to just go on a rant. And I don't want to take up people's time if it's not something that's going to be beneficial to the group but might just be more specific to me. (Laura D L194-197)

Laura was reluctant to contribute in meetings because she doubted the value of her comments and questions. Sharon stated a similar hesitancy in stronger terms, saying that she withheld her observations because she didn't want to 'come across as stupid.' (Sharon D L145-148).

Alan noted that the impediments he experienced during the research period – he was appointed to a new leadership role in another school and was consequently occupied with that pending transition – resulted in lower confidence for him within the research group, inhibiting his exercise of voice in the group. During a mid-point conversation, Alan acknowledged that he didn't feel as if his confidence would allow him to contribute to the plans for inquiry (Alan D L235). He reflected on the reasons why he chose not to use his voice:

I did feel that I was holding back to listen more, perhaps feeling like I wanted to hear what other people were saying, to learn from their experiences. (Alan 2 L32-36)

This comment reflects the ways in which lower confidence and limited experience can lessen teacher voice. However, it also points to Alan's exercise of agency in choosing not to speak so as to afford himself greater learning opportunities. This is another reminder of the different forms that agency takes (section 2.1.4).

From the data, it appears that agency as voice was closely related to agency as confidence for this cohort of teachers. Without confidence, teacher voice is unlikely to be exercised, pointing, again, to the need to support teacher confidence as a foundation for agency.

4.1.4.2 Voice and Personality. An interesting data point arose in relation to Claire's voice as she described a restrained use of voice at the school level and positioned it as a positive choice for her, which she felt reflects her personality:

It's not because I feel like I can't, it's just it's not my thing really, to be in a big group of adults and say it. (Claire 1 L198-202)

Claire's lack of participation at school level may appear to indicate low agency, but she clearly felt that she was exercising agency in choosing not to speak. Claire's particular form of

agency resembles the selective narrative of agency identified by Kauppinen et al. (2020) (see section 2.1.4). Her decision to suppress her voice may be connected to the role that teachers often ascribe to themselves: as being more knowledgeable about their classroom than whole-school policy making. In fact, in her second interview, Claire expanded on this to explain that she did not speak at school level because her classroom is her focus, rather than wider school issues (Claire 2 L52-56). This comment interweaves several strands of the literature on teacher agency: the finding that novice teachers can feel overwhelmed by classroom responsibilities (Eteläpelto et al., 2015), the connection between teacher agency and teacher identity (section 2.1.2.5), and research into the situational nature of teacher agency (Nguyen et al., 2022). Claire appears to perceive that teacher agency in the classroom is unperturbed by school-level issues, but agency which is confined to individual practice results in limited shared learning and little innovation of curriculum (Kauppinen et al., 2020). The implications of this will be considered in the next chapter.

Quaglia and Lande (2017) asserted the importance of teacher voice beyond the classroom, while Calvert's (2016) definition of teacher agency involved teacher action to contribute in the collegial space of their school. However, Laura and Sharon (section 4.1.3.1), along with Claire's comment above, reveal that their conception of teacher agency does not include acting as agents within the wider school community. The evidence from these three teachers suggests that – although they ascribe their restrained use of voice to confidence and personality traits – their voice is linked closely to confidence and contextual factors. These teachers assume personal responsibility and, indeed, blame, for not using their voice at school level. However, it can be recognised that the ecology of agency – the contexts of relationships and management style – affects their agency and voice in varying ways at various times. Claire's prioritisation of her role as class teacher over her contribution at school level suggests a restricted conception of agency and raises interesting questions about where teacher agency is enacted, which is discussed in the next chapter (section 5.1.1).

4.1.4.3 Voice and Relationships. Teachers reflected on how relationships with colleagues and management influence their willingness to exercise their voice. Meabh and Hannah cited aspects of school life in which they feel empowered to speak and present their ideas, as well as areas which appear closed to discussion. Meabh noted a variety of methods used by school management to gather teachers' opinions, including discussions at staff meetings, surveys, and co-planning meetings. She concluded that: '*We can give our opinions on different issues in the school*' (Meabh 1 L92-99). Hannah concurred with this, however, noted that COVID-19 had seriously restricted the platforms by which teachers could express their voice (Hannah 2 L74-76).

Hannah also noted that working relationships can impact on teachers' opportunities to voice their ideas. She described her experience of working with colleagues who did not share her ideas about teaching and learning for specific children in the class:

Sometimes there are things that you would like to say but you just don't have the freedom to express those things... I've wanted to say something... and then you're like "It's not even worth it." (Hannah 2 L36-44/48-50)

The impact of working relationships on teacher voice is also recognised by Sharon and Alan. For Sharon, her positive relationships with individual management figures afforded her the confidence to speak out when needed (Sharon 1 L159-162). The implication that Sharon manoeuvred within her relationships with school management to find a particular person to speak to points towards a significant role for training for school management in terms of nurturing and facilitating voice and agency. Alan also conveyed awareness that his relationships with management affected his agency, creating difficulties for his use of voice:

I have observed that when (some) people say things, it's not welcomed, it's taken in a certain way. And then I've experienced a couple of months later somebody else makes the same suggestion and it's like, "Oh yeah, delightful, that's fantastic." I think certain people are given acceptance to have their voice listened to. (Alan 1 L246-254)

Alan's comment reveals the gap that may exist between teachers' exercise of agency as voice and that voice being receptively heard or making a substantial difference. While Alan was personally empowered to exercise his voice, he felt that it effected little change at school level.

These comments from Hannah, Sharon and Alan highlight the influence of teachers' relationships on their exercise of agency as voice. This is in line with existing literature on the impact of relationships on agency more generally (section 2.1.2.2). It is evident that relationships can exert both empowering and limiting force over teacher voice, depending on the context and nature of those relationships. This again illustrates the ecological nature of teacher agency. Although voice was a less prominent feature of teachers' engagement with the concept of agency, the data present some interesting and compelling findings. The significance of confidence is again apparent when considering how, when and where teachers exercise voice. The fluctuations in teachers' willingness to speak out in different contexts illustrates once more that a flexible notion of teacher agency is required in order to account for how agency is experienced in schools and classrooms.

4.1.5 Agency and Inquiry: Changing Practice?

The literature review revealed some links between teacher agency and IBL, including the activation of voice and choice in conducting IBL, the adaptation of curriculum guidelines to

develop locally appropriate learning, and the transformation of teachers' practices (section 2.2.5). In this study, inquiry had a positive transformative effect on some aspects of teachers' practice, which opened up agentic possibilities such as changes in listening routines, habits around displaying children's work, and the promotion of children's agency. However, teachers also identified difficulties in changing practice to adopt IBL: logistical difficulties (time, planning structures, class dynamics); relinquishing learned behaviour; foregoing the security of curriculum adherence, and modifying personal expectations.

It emerged from the data that one benefit of inquiry lay in positioning teachers as observers and documentarians of learning. Three teachers expressed surprise about the richness of what they saw and heard from children during inquiry. Claire articulated this very strongly:

I was never so in tune with the conversations that are going on among the children themselves. It has really opened my eyes to that. I was listening to the way children speak together without any adult control. I think it really brought up how much learning can happen from those spontaneous moments and how much learning can happen from starting from the children's points. (Claire 2 L926-933)

Laura recognised that inquiry allowed her time and space to listen and observe because she wasn't so busy controlling the learning (Laura 2 L647-651). These comments suggest that teachers can become preoccupied with the teaching side of the teaching and learning equation and lose sight of the learners. This was recognised by Meabh:

We forget – when we're trying to get through our timetable and get through our plans and this and that – to actually take the time to listen to them. (Meabh 1 L604-606)

IBL allows teacher to observe and assess children's learning and to respond to the needs and interests they witness. This connects back to teachers' desire for agency to enact responsive teaching (see section 4.1.2.1), an embodiment of the proactive agency recognised by Jenkins (2020). This finding reinforces the inquiry-agency connection which runs through the data.

Most teachers (5) reported that one notable benefit of inquiry was the opportunity it gave them to learn about the children in their classes. This finding was not dominant in the literature, which largely considers the outcomes of IBL from the students' perspectives (section 2.2.4). For Alan, insight into his pupils differentiated inquiry from other teaching approaches:

You will learn a lot more about your children and about their learning needs by doing inquiry-based learning than you would otherwise. (Alan 2 L656-658)

Sharon agreed with this, noting the unexpected questions which children asked and which gave her an insight into their thinking (Sharon 2 L637-641). Inquiry provided valuable insights

into quieter children in Meabh and Alan’s classes (Meabh 2 L541-545; Alan 2 L704-708). Laura noted that inquiry gave her a different view of the children than habitual practice:

It was nice to take a step back and see who the natural leaders were, who had much more confidence or knowledge in a certain area that they wouldn’t have gotten to share with the class if we didn’t have these inquiry sessions. (Laura 2 L654-661)

These comments suggest that with a more didactic approach, teachers are so busy with the performance of teaching that they miss the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the different learners in their classrooms.

Claire and Hannah identified that their practice of displaying children’s work changed over the research period. They both mounted displays which more accurately reflected children’s engagement than their usual display style. The visual arts display in Claire’s room was less uniform and ordered than her typical displays, evidencing a more process-based approach to children’s learning. This approach to creativity, inquiry and the arts features prominently in the PCF (DE, 2023). This display featured invented planets which children created during a colour mixing inquiry, along with an explanation from the child about their planet (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Inquiry Art Display



Claire stated that she found the display lovely to look at because it demonstrated the different approaches the children took to the activity (Claire 2 L422) and allowed her an opportunity to observe their thinking. She admitted:

This isn't something I would normally really put up, to be honest... but a lot of the time what looks like a pure mess has a reason to it... So it did tune me into their work and their voice. (VM L730-737: Claire)

This comment reflects the conflict for Claire in adapting her practice around displays – accepting the “pure mess” and both recognising and valuing the learning that it illustrates. Hannah confessed to a similar difficulty regarding the inquiry artwork in her classroom:

I got some very, very interesting looking daffodils... so they're not going up outside anyway, that's for sure. I'd say there's a select 15 that can go up outside and the rest, I think I'll put them in their schoolbags. (Hannah D L204-219)

Here, Hannah reflected on her dilemma in displaying children’s work outside her classroom. She was willing to display the daffodils that looked ‘correct’, but planned to send the others home without displaying them. During our final group meeting, she presented some examples of these paintings with the commentary “*And that’s more of the same rubbish*” (VM L448: Hannah).

Figure 4.4

“More of the same rubbish.”



This photograph captures children's colour mixing investigation and their invented colours. It seems that part of Hannah's criticism of the children's art emerged from a concern that her teaching would be judged negatively by colleagues looking at the display (Hannah D L269). This worry undermined Hannah's confidence and agency, as well as suggesting that the positive relationships she reported earlier (see section 4.1.3.2) only sustained her agency to a certain extent. However, Hannah also worried about the expectations of parents (Hannah 1 L100-103) and colleagues (Hannah 1 L835-842) elsewhere in the data, so her reaction to the children's art inquiries might be reflective of her teaching identity more broadly.

Another positive outcome of IBL related to its promotion of children's agency, which was recognised by half (3) of the teachers. Each of these three spoke of inquiry as placing the voice and choice of children at the centre of the learning:

I like that (inquiry) is giving students a voice and more choice in how they're going to learn. (Laura 1 L254-257)

Inquiry based learning would mean that we're giving the children an opportunity to share their voice and together almost come up with a spark of interest. It would be our responsibility to then pick them from where they are with this particular question and lead them, or go on that journey with them to finding their answers. (Alan 2 L624-630)

I think that is a big thing (about inquiry) ... : the child voice. (Claire 2 L645)

These data reveal teachers' awareness of the possibility for children's agency within IBL: as children pose questions which intrigue them, and teachers shape learning experiences to investigate those questions, children's choices take prominence in the curriculum at classroom-level. The provision of genuine voice and audience is another element of children's agency which emerged strongly from the data. This echoes the connection made in the literature between teacher agency and student agency (section 2.1.5, p. 43): teachers' agentic practice models agency for students. Similarly, in this study, teachers' use of IBL – a potentially agentic practice – stimulates children's agency: in particular, their voice and choice.

Despite the positive outcomes of IBL on agency, most teachers (5) recognised challenges in changing existing practices to facilitate inquiry. Three identified the transformation of their teaching role and the ceding of some classroom control as a significant change for them to make:

It will be challenging for me to let go. But that's me. I've always taken that leadership role within the classroom, and so it's stepping back and letting them lead. (Laura 1 L271-275)

Moss's (2002) quadrants of teacher directiveness enable us to envisage the different role which Laura is assuming during inquiry, moving from teacher as director towards teacher as

facilitator of child-led learning. Hannah described the difficulty of making a similar journey in her teaching practice:

I'm an absolute control freak at the best of times... When they were asking me how to make different colours, I wasn't telling them... That was hard, I was biting my tongue.
(Hannah 1 L167-171)

Here, Hannah demonstrated how she had to modify her own personal traits in order to implement more innovative pedagogy. Sharon expressed a similar difficulty, where she struggled with giving less instruction and allowing the children to engage in self-directed investigations (VM L541: Sharon).

Teachers' familiarity with the curriculum provides another challenge to overcome for IBL and agentic teaching: there is a comfort and security offered by an extensive curriculum:

I would probably feel that the strands and strand units might be a little bit of a safety blanket. (Laura 1 L61-63)

Literature reveals that transforming teachers' practices is difficult. Gray and Ryan (2016) found that Aistear has not transformed classroom practice in the years since its introduction in 2009. It might be feared that the PCF – with its emphasis on teacher agency, IBL, school autonomy in time allocations, and other innovations – may experience a similar fate.

Another discomfiting effect of agency was noted by Hannah who recognised a sharp contrast between the responsive, child-led nature of IBL and agentic teaching, compared with her habitual teaching practice:

You know how it works. You introduce the topic, you expand the learning a little bit, you have some activities, you recap on the learning and then expand on it slightly further the next day and slightly further the next day. By Friday, everyone knows exactly what they're supposed to know. Whereas with (inquiry), I feel you could absolutely go off on a completely different road. If you have an outcome that you want to achieve by Friday, you're not going to have it. (Hannah 2 L450-464)

Hannah conveys her expectation that there should be an identifiable goal for the learning that can be achieved by all learners by the end of the week, giving the teacher a reassuring sense of completion. This view was only articulated by one teacher, but it is worth considering the potential impact if such a perspective is shared by other teachers.

At the end of the research period, Alan reflected on the challenge of changing teaching practices:

Going from the way we're used to teaching to doing something like inquiry-based learning – it's difficult, that transition period. No matter how old you are, how many

years' experience you've got, that transition can be difficult. As you've seen with us, it's cloudy, it's foggy, just trying to navigate your way through. And it can take a long time, it can take a couple of years to fully embed it. (Alan 3 L618-626)

This comment provides insight into the difficulties for a very experienced and confident teacher in modifying his practice to enact a pedagogy in which he believed and which he valued. Alan recognised that significant change takes significant time, a point confirmed by the literature (Eriksson et al., 2017; Guskey, 2003; Garet et al., 2001). It cannot be expected that once-off or short-term interventions on inquiry, such as the workshops in this research, will enact the change regarding inquiry and agency which is recommended in the PCF (DE, 2023). Therefore, longer and more comprehensive assistance is needed to develop teachers' confidence with inquiry. As Laura noted, *'It's retraining the way I teach, the way I think'* (Laura 1 L278-281).

Agency emerges from the data as a disruptive force, interrupting classroom practices and effecting change at school level. A powerful image of the disruptive potentials of agency is presented in the comment from Alan which provides the title of this thesis:

Figure 4.5

Shaking the Tree...



I feel like I am shaking the tree and that doesn't want to be shook and that my voicing my opinion is not welcomed. That's the environment that I experience. (Alan 1 L236-238)

This image of a tree resisting the force that is being applied speaks eloquently of the difficulties which agency can effect. Becoming agentic necessitates changes in practice and culture which can be uncomfortable for individuals, but agency – and the autonomy which bolsters it – may also be uncomfortable for management and stakeholders in schools. Alan's comment was made in relation to using his voice in the context of in-school management meetings. Welcoming a disruptive force which queries current practice and affords voice to a wider group of staff can be a challenging prospect for management.

4.1.6 Summary of Agency

The findings reveal mixed attitudes towards agency: strong interest in achieving agency and belief in the benefits of agency, alongside clear awareness of the challenges presented by an agentic role. Data reveal a muddled understanding of agency as distinct from autonomy, which results in some configurations of agency as an absence of regulation, rather than a capacity for action. It is apparent that some teachers are more comfortable with agency within the classroom, rather than engaging with wider school development. This is a significant finding in relation to the ongoing curriculum reform in Ireland.

Teachers want more choice, particularly regarding content, child-led teaching, and the time allocated to topics and subject areas. Confidence is at the heart of teachers' capacity to achieve agency, in line with literature on confidence and agency (Nolan & Molla, 2017; Dierking & Fox, 2012). Voice is currently the element of agency with which teachers are least connected. These data suggest a revised model of teacher agency, which varies with professional experience, contextual scaffolds and collegial support. An incremental model of teacher agency and its implications for practice and reform is discussed in the next chapter.

Teachers' views on educational structures, as they relate to teacher agency, are presented next.

4.2 Structure

This section addresses the data relating to structures within the educational system. As teacher agency can only be understood and achieved within the context of structures and systems (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), curriculum and planning as structural contexts for agency were discussed alongside other aspects of their structural environment: timetables, time allocations, inspections, and textbooks. These factors operate as part of the context and environment which makes up the ecology of these teachers' agency. In line with Giddens' (1984) recognition of structures as both constraining and enabling agency, this terminology will be applied to the data reported below.

The data are presented in order of the most dominant and frequently mentioned categories first.

4.2.1 Curriculum

For these teachers, curriculum was reported as one of the most prominent elements of educational structure. Curriculum affects planning and teaching in a variety of ways and teachers expressed divergent ideas about it. For example, all six noted ways in which

curriculum constrains their agency and limits their ability to make choices, yet five also identified positive, supportive aspects of curriculum in terms of agency.

4.2.1.1 Curriculum as Constraining Teacher Agency. All teachers identified constraints which the curriculum places on their achievement of agency. The factors which rendered curriculum unsupportive ranged from inflexibility of curriculum to content overload to discerning a lack of creative possibility in the prescriptive curriculum.

For three teachers, their perception of curriculum as an inflexible apparatus to which they must conform limited their agency. An example of this attitude was expressed by Laura:

I don't decide on the subjects, that's been decided for me. It's very broken down into subject areas. There is guidance there that we are expected to follow... But I just feel it is very much me guiding, not facilitating. (Laura 1 L137-147)

Curriculum may exert an oppressive force on teachers, as evidenced by Laura's response to the concept of teacher agency. Our first discussion of agency as choice began as follows:

RESEARCHER: What choices do you feel you do get to make?

LAURA: When I read this question, it depressed me a little bit, after I'd read up on this agency teaching. It's like, "Oh God, I'm working within a curriculum, so..." (Laura 1 L80-82)

Here, Laura voiced her feeling of disjuncture between the ideal of teacher agency and her own situation, where she perceived limited potential for choice. The phrase "*working within a curriculum*" suggests a sense of entrapment within a constraining structure. There is little evidence here of the empowerment which Giddens' (1984) perceived in the model of structural duality: Laura's perception of her agency seems wholly defined by curriculum as structure. This perception appears to have significant consequences for her classroom practice, as it positions her as a guide through curriculum content rather than a facilitator of child-led learning. The curriculum itself positions a teacher as a "caring facilitator and guide who interprets the child's learning needs and responds to them" (DES, 1999, p. 20). This conception of teacher encompasses both roles to which Laura referred: the guide she feels herself to be and the facilitator she would like to become (Laura 1 L151-152). It is interesting to note that the identification of teacher as facilitator in curriculum documents does not afford Laura the security to enact her desired practice. Discussion of the implications arising from this perception will be shared in the next chapter.

Hannah viewed the curriculum as similarly inflexible, expressing the opinion that there is no potential for teacher choice in the mandated curriculum:

I feel the (1999) curriculum is very rigid. This is what you do, this is how you do it and that's kind of that. There's no room for scope, there's no wiggle room. (Hannah 1 L289-293)

Hannah's perspective on curriculum was of a series of tasks that need to be completed, recalling the literature's identification of scripted curricula as disempowering to teachers (section 2.1.2.3). Such a conception stymies teachers' choice and the adaptation of teaching to meet local learning needs. It is interesting to consider where Hannah developed this belief in the curriculum as a rigid protocol: whether it arose from her own experiences as a learner or through the presentation of curriculum during ITE or from the classroom and collegial experiences of her early career. The literature on teacher beliefs suggests a multiplicity of origin points for beliefs (Abdi & Asadi, 2015; Li, 2012; Richardson, 1996), thus it is difficult to identify one single provenance; indeed, it is likely a combination of experiences. This suggests a challenge for the redeveloped curriculum in addressing such attitudes and redirecting them towards a more agentic conception of curriculum, where teachers can identify "wiggle room" (Hannah) and space for agentic, responsive pedagogy.

For two of the six teachers, the curriculum is perceived as unsupportive due to its size and scope. Sharon and Meabh both spoke of the overload of curriculum content and the feeling of pressure that ensues:

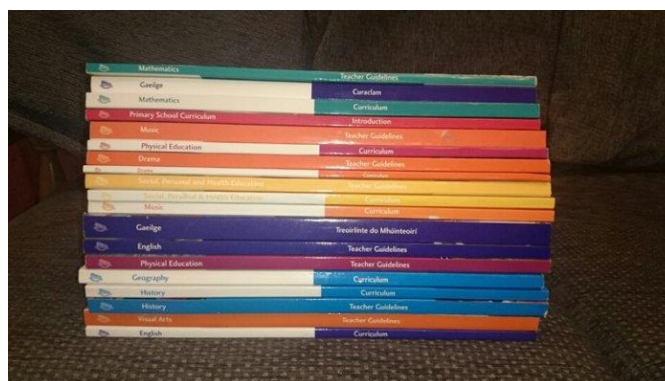
It always feels like there's too much to do it properly. (Sharon 1 L120-121)

There's so much content to be covered. There's so much paperwork and all the planning and assessment. The list goes on and on. (Meabh 3 L655-659)

This sense of curriculum as overwhelming is recognised in the literature as a considerable restraint on teachers' ability to achieve agency in their pedagogical practice (Walsh, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015a; NCCA, 2010).

Figure 4.6

Curriculum Books of 1999 PSC



Teachers function as instruments of curriculum in systems with high levels of specification, with limited potential for agency, as Pieters et al. (2019) recognised in relation to the Dutch education system. Sharon and Meabh indicated a sense of curriculum as something to be ‘covered’, which, according to Anderson (2002), limits teachers’ willingness to engage with IBL. This argument is supported by the data here which convey how often teachers deprioritised IBL plans – despite their interest in enacting that approach – due to time constraints and curriculum objectives to be completed (VM L493: Sharon; Claire 2 L862-865; Hannah 2 L188-207). These data suggest that the planned curricula in Ireland afford restricted autonomy to teachers and, thus, limited potential for the achievement of teacher agency.

Alan’s reflection on how the curriculum limits his agency took the form of comparing his experience of curriculum in Ireland and England, where he previously taught. He identified more potential for teacher agency in Ireland, due to the nature of the curriculum and accountability structures here (Alan 1 L145-148). He recalled the high level of prescribed detail in the English curriculum and lesson guidelines, which lead to inertia among teachers and resulted in uninspired teaching directly from mandated folders of content. This view is supported by several theorists of teacher agency who promote lower levels of curricular guidance (Priestley et al., 2012; Eisenbach, 2012). Alan noted that the lack of teacher agency possible in England was a result of the prescribed lessons and the “*intense*” level of assessment paperwork demanded by school management. He compared the Irish system favourably by acknowledging the possibility for agency afforded by the Aistear curriculum framework, as well as lower levels of assessment data to be analysed in the Irish context (Alan 3 L92-95).

The following section presents teachers' opinions regarding other ways in which Irish curricula support teacher agency.

4.2.1.2 Curriculum as Enabling Teacher Agency. As outlined above, all six teachers highlighted ways in which the existing curricula limit their agency. However, the majority of teachers (4) were also able to identify aspects of the curriculum which bolster their agency. These factors include the support of structures, the opportunities inherent in Aistear, the helpfulness of the consistency provided by curriculum, and the security of working within guidelines. These data are not considered to contradict the messages above about curriculum constraining agency, since Giddens' duality of structures recognises that structures can both constrain and enable agency as they provide both rules and resources (section 2.1.1.1).

Alan and Claire defended the need for curriculum structures to support teachers' practices. Although Alan was highly critical of the heavily prescriptive practices in England, the tight guidelines there helped him in the early stage of his career:

Figure 4.7

Developing Agency Through Following a Recipe



That's the way I learn. Sometimes do it according to a recipe and then I can find agency through that and be a lot more creative. (Alan 1 L100-106)

This recalls the notion of agency as comfort and familiarity with content, which was introduced by Hannah and Meabh (section 4.1.3.1, p.139-140). For his first year of teaching in England, Alan was given a mandated lesson plan for every lesson, along with a prescribed assessment of learning. The following year, the prescribed lesson plans were relinquished. Alan reflected on the difference this level of curriculum structure made to him:

(The first year) I felt like I wasn't missing out on anything because I was doing what I was told to do... I appreciated having all of that structure... So then I had to start creating my own lessons and I felt lost. (Alan 1 L 127-134)

The statement “*I felt lost*” suggests that absence of structure could disempower teachers, which seems to counteract the idea of autonomy as facilitating teacher agency (section 2.1.1.3). Alan’s contribution here indicates that structure may be supportive for teachers in order to achieve agency, particularly during their early career, as echoed by Claire’s discussion of set lessons in her first years of teaching (section 4.2.2.2).

Claire judged that curriculum structures are necessary to ensure learning is pedagogically-sound, seeming to doubt that teachers could make appropriate choices themselves:

It can't just be something you feel like doing with the class because it's something you have an interest in. It has to have some sort of grounding to it. (Claire 3 L38-47)

It appears that, for Claire, the curriculum acts as a security against the effects of too much agency. She critiqued a theoretical absence of guidance, which might replace the curriculum in a move towards teacher agency. Meabh also doubted the pedagogical validity of a curriculum with complete autonomy, limited guidance, and extensive possibilities for teacher agency (Meabh 3 L755-762). These quotes suggest that Claire and Meabh might lack some confidence in their teaching decisions and rely on curriculum for guidance on developmentally appropriate progression steps for learners. Sharon similarly reported concern about the potential for repetition of content and concepts if curricular guidance were reduced (Sharon 3 L317). The educational literature would indicate similar disapproval of unlimited teacher agency. Priestley et al. (2015a) are critical of the removal of all guidance and regulation, noting that this approach can create challenges for teachers who lack the cognitive and relational resources to achieve agency.

Laura, Meabh and Sharon echoed Claire’s wish for curricular guidance. Laura noted the value of having prescriptive curriculum in certain subjects, so that the teacher has a sense of completion and feels they have “*covered as much as possible*” (Laura 3 L274). Laura’s identification of her stronger wish for agency in art and science (Laura 3 L303) recalls the discussion earlier of confidence and subject knowledge (section 4.1.3.1), although Laura had in a previous interview mentioned science as a subject in which she lacked confidence. It also suggests that partial guidance is supportive of teacher agency, a viewpoint shared by Meabh and Sharon:

I like a framework as a guide but I'd like to create my own lessons too, based on my class and their interests and their needs. (Meabh 3 L738-743)

I would like a mix of both: for them to allow you to decide how you're going to teach an objective, but then also have some rough guides as well. (Sharon 3 L640-644)

These comments regarding the value of and need for some level of curricular guidance suggest that an incremental model of agency might be helpful to these teachers, to allow them understand their agency as something which develops gradually, rather than an all-or-nothing proposition.

Laura and Claire reflected on the benefit of curriculum guidance in providing consistency between class groups, different teachers and different school settings, including the move from primary to secondary school.

I like the structures. I like the strands, strand units... I suppose I like having that kind of framework to work towards, a standard that I'm working towards. (Laura 1 L532-536)

I actually quite like the 1999 curriculum because I think it gives you a very clear idea where your class should be.... I think it is a good idea for some consistency between year after year, and when we are preparing our students to go on to secondary school that it is a little bit clear cut on some of those things. (Claire 1 L252-261)

The prescriptive nature of the curriculum offers a reassurance to some teachers that they are doing what they should be doing. Two teachers raised this aspect, with Laura perceiving the detailed content of the curriculum as a “*safety blanket*” (Laura 1 L61-63). In a follow-up interview, while discussing IBL, Laura admitted that she felt “*overwhelmed without anything there on paper*” (Laura 2 L2 L522-523). This suggests that the curriculum detail is a benefit to some teachers’ sense of security in their practice. It links to Claire’s desire for high levels of curriculum specificity, at least in “core” subjects where she had expressed lower levels of confidence (Claire 3 L739-741). The literature on agency does not address the role which prescriptive curriculum plays in building teacher agency through building confidence – in the literature, prescriptive curricula are viewed as detrimental to agency (Jenkins, 2020; van Oers, 2015; Eisenbach, 2012; Priestley et al., 2012). However, for Claire, Laura and Meabh, specific curricular guidance afforded them the security of feeling that they have covered the important skills and information.

Laura described an ideal for the redeveloped curriculum, which involves making teacher agency explicit in the next iteration of the curriculum:

It would be lovely if it was written into documents... that agency is accepted, that there's more freedom for teachers to express what they want... for the children in their class. It's very easy when you have a framework, you know you're covered. (Laura 3 L239-246)

This excerpt reveals the positive impact which an expressly agentic structure could have on teacher confidence. In Finland, where teacher agency is categorically outlined in the

curriculum documents (Finland Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023), teachers are expected to achieve high levels of agency as makers of curriculum (Chung, 2023; Sahlberg, 2015). The curriculum in New Zealand also positions teachers as agents (Ministry of Education, 2015), and research shows that teachers have largely positive attitudes towards this professional autonomy (Sinnema, 2011). These two examples may serve to justify Laura's opinion that her sense of professional agency would be positively impacted by more clarification within the guidelines.

4.2.2 Planning

Planning was another structural element which produced mixed responses from teachers, offering further evidence that Giddens' duality of structures reflects lived realities. All six teachers observed that planning routines disempower their agency by establishing a seemingly rigid and overloaded schedule. However, four also admitted positive aspects of planning, in terms of providing motivation and direction. These varying responses to planning and its impact on teacher agency are presented below.

4.2.2.1 Planning as Constraining Teacher Agency. Teachers are required to write planning documents to support their teaching, as well as monthly progress reports (DES, 2016b). The short term plans are referred to by the teachers as 'fortnightlies' and are derived from school curriculum plans and the national curriculum documents. Teachers reported a sense of being limited by the content of their plans, high levels of pressure arising from planning requirements, reluctance to write plans, and a lack of conviction in their value: all reflecting previous research (INTO, 2015).

Most teachers (4) acknowledged that their plans result in them feeling constrained by what they have written. Sharon explained this as follows:

You've got your fortnightly, you've got... all these things that we're supposed to achieve in a short amount of time. I feel restrained and restricted to follow those rather than me make my own choice. (Sharon 1 L41-45)

It is clear that Sharon perceived herself as an instrument of curriculum, which positioned her as delivering curriculum content designed by centralised committees. The diminished autonomy in these circumstances is recognised by Pieters et al. (2019). Meabh similarly admitted to feeling "*a bit tied*" by the content of the school plans and her class plans (Meabh 1 L53). Hannah, Alan and Claire also reported feeling constrained by having to follow school plans (Alan 1 L152) or content they planned themselves (Hannah 1 L773-775). Hannah was

critical of the rigidity which she perceives in the planning process, which prevented her from following the learning in the classroom:

If you veer off (the plan), I don't think that should matter if you go a step further or if you're a step back... Whereas when you're writing rigid plans... it makes it look like it matters more than it should. (Hannah 1 L901-905)

Hannah argued that plans should be flexible, without overly detailed content and allowing space for change, to accurately record the learning as it occurs. She identified ways in which she found agency during the research period by modifying her plans. However, prior to her engagement with inquiry, Hannah considered plans an impediment to agency as they force teachers to comply with planned objectives and deny the possibility of making alternative judgements.

Some teachers reported feeling pressure to complete all the content they planned, in spite of time constraints or the learning needs in the room. Sharon acknowledged that she sometimes taught lessons to complete a section on the plans, despite knowing that there is little learning resulting from her work:

Sometimes I feel under pressure to try and get everything done, even if it's not done properly, just do a little bit of it. (Sharon 2 L313-315)

This type of planning and teaching is referred to by Hannah and Claire as '*box-ticking*' and both admitted to similar techniques as Sharon. They both expressed negative attitudes about how their plans dictate their teaching (Claire 3 L689-695; Hannah 2 L187-192). Their comments demonstrate that the pressure which plans incur is debilitating to teacher agency as it compels teachers into practices which are contrary to their pedagogical knowledge and professional identity.

Several teachers (3) expressed a reluctant attitude towards planning and identified this as the part of teaching which they least enjoy. Hannah stated that she '*hates*' planning (Hannah 1 L773-775), while Sharon admitted:

I don't particularly love planning. I don't know many teachers who do. (Sharon 1 L378-380)

For Alan, the reluctance to plan resulted in him writing his plans after the fact. Planning requirements cause a certain insecurity for him, as he referred to himself as a '*bad planner*' (Alan 1 L724-726). This is in spite of his confidence in his teaching ability and his awareness of the rationale for his teaching and planning approach:

Rather than have these set ideas already for each day and I'm just going to plough through, whatever happens, I like to observe the learning, observe what are the

difficulties, what's going well and then adapt to suit that... This is one of the reasons why plans aren't good for me. If I'd written a detailed plan, I wouldn't stick to it anyway because there's the natural desire for agency: to respond to the learning. (Alan 1 L728-742)

These negative attitudes towards planning further illustrate that planning was found to be contradictory to these teachers' agency, as they must work in a way which does not fit their teaching style and which causes self-doubt. It is worthwhile considering the consequences for agency of teachers working as agents within a system which they consider to be ineffective or wrong.

Sharon referred to the planning process as “*a waste of time*” (Sharon 2 L483). A prominent message emerging from five of the teachers was that writing plans is of limited value and that their time would be better spent on other aspects of preparation for teaching. This position was explained by Claire and Laura:

I think it's just timewasting really when we hope to be making resources or doing more useful planning. (Claire 1 L163-171)

It's very time-consuming to plan. I would love to spend less time copying and pasting. I would love to spend my time resourcing or sourcing nice materials that I would like to bring into my classroom. (Laura 1 L786-791)

The idea of planning as “*copying and pasting*” from curriculum documents was repeated by Claire to convey the unproductive nature of planning (Claire 1 L635).

These comments about planning reveal that teachers feel unable to change or influence the system in relation to planning and must follow it, despite their misgivings. This has implications for their sense of teacher agency, as outlined by Sharon:

It just never seems to lessen; it always seems to be getting more... I just feel like (plans) should be there to help me as a teacher, not just another thing that I have to do to tick a box. (Sharon 3 L154-159)

Here, Sharon conveyed the feeling, expressed by other teachers, that planning requirements are external and teachers have no agency regarding them. The notion of planning as ‘*box-ticking*’ (Sharon, above; Hannah and Claire, p. 176) likely derives from the requirement to produce a monthly report identifying learning engagements undertaken. An extract from such a monthly report – taken from researcher’s teaching files for the 2020/2021 school year – is presented here as Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.8

Extract from Researcher’s Monthly Teaching Report

<p>Reading Strand Elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating <p>1 – <i>Engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding <p>5 – <i>Phonics/Word Study</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring and using <p>8 – <i>Response/Author’s intent</i></p>	<p>Main Learning Outcomes:</p> <p>1. Attend to, take part in and enjoy listening to reading and talking about the meaning and interpretation of written words and illustrations with others, recognising themselves as readers.</p> <p>5. Use phonic knowledge and a range of word identification strategies with flexibility and confidence when reading instructional and independent texts.</p> <p>8. Discuss and share thoughts and opinions on texts in a range of genres across the curriculum. Consider and discuss author’s intent.</p> <p>Learning Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Building Bridges of Comprehension – Determining Importance</i> • Using P.I.E. posters (persuade/ inform/ entertain) to discuss author’s intent in a variety of texts • Phonics pattern: <-y>, <ow> • Tricky words: more, before, were, other • Word study: Making and breaking words/ Chunking <p>Regular learning experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Daily read-aloud. D.E.A.R. time. Library visit weekly. Incidental reading in class. Reading homework ➢ Literacy group withdrawal x3 times weekly: high frequency words/ PAT programme/ comprehension/ spelling/ dictation ➢ Reading games: Snakes and Ladders/ Hot potato/ Race tracks ➢ A Way with Words: Unit 11 	<p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p> <p>✓</p>
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The educational literature supports the view that increased paperwork is disempowering for teachers (Menter & Hulme, 2013; Priestley et al., 2012). Planning requirements consume a significant proportion of time, thus reducing the time available to prepare and plan for agentic practice (Jenkins, 2020; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ollerhead, 2010). For the majority of these teachers, planning appears to exert an overbearing pressure on their teaching, as they reluctantly produce plans which they find unhelpful and then struggle to complete in the allotted time. The consequences for teaching are stark: teachers revealed a prioritisation of plan completion over children’s learning. Claire’s comment makes this clear:

You don’t really care about what they’ve learning, you’re on the clock, move on. Get through your plans, get through the intro. There’s no space for anyone not understanding. (Claire 1 L570-573)

Sharon dismissed some of her own classroom activity as “*another thing I have to do to tick a box*” (Sharon 3 L154-159), again highlighting how constrained teachers feel by the plans they write to meet departmental requirements.

4.2.2.2 Planning as Enabling Teacher Agency. There were a small number of indications during interviews that aspects of the planning process can empower teachers and afford them some space for agency. These utterances were not as numerous or as strongly argued as the opposite point of view, but they reveal that attitudes towards planning are not wholly homogenous. The positive features ascribed to planning were the guidance provided by plans and the possibility of modifying plans.

Three teachers made a link between set plans and teacher confidence. They connected confidence, structure and experience as they reflected on how plans have scaffolded the development of their confidence over time. Alan recognised that his own confidence at this point has been shaped by the structure which he followed as a younger teacher:

Sometimes (confidence) comes from something being given to you and saying “OK, go ahead and teach like this.” And, over time, after following someone's recipe as it were, then you can find more creativity through yourself, through those experiences. (Alan 1 L97-103)

Claire echoed this when she acknowledged that very structured lessons were helpful to her when she first qualified (Claire 1 L39-44). The idea of following a recipe recalls Priestley et al.'s (2015a) contention that specification in curricula can support teachers as they develop their agency to adapt curriculum locally. Both Alan and Claire referred to how they moved from that highly structured, planned approach to a more responsive model as their experience has grown:

I think about when I first qualified. I had no more headspace for anything else. Things like classroom management took so much time... that structured and very planned lessons were very helpful. But now I don't need to have every second organized, I can go with the flow a bit more. (Claire 1 L45-53)

These recollections by Alan and Claire seem to somewhat counter Priestley et al.'s (2015a) argument that restrictive teaching environments work to de-professionalise teachers and diminish their capacity for agency. Alan's reference to his years in an English school with high levels of prescription might be considered a repressive context, yet he reported that this experience afforded him the opportunity to develop his practice and gain confidence and agency over time. Alan and Claire's comments prompt the question whether following structured lesson plans is a negation of teacher agency or whether the plans can be an enabling precursor to developing agency. It appears that Alan and Claire regarded lesson plans as non-agentic experiences, but ones which helped develop their *capacity for agency*. It seems that there may be some potential for plans to act as supportive structures over time, as they functioned for Alan and Claire.

Teachers use plans in certain ways to give them agency and confidence. Hannah and Laura both appreciated the ways in which their plans guide and organise their teaching. Hannah admitted that her plans provided direction (Hannah 1 L856), while Laura noted that her plans organise her teaching approach (Laura 1 L745-749). As a result of scheduling

conflicts, Alan could not plan collaboratively with his co-teachers. Rather than regret this fact, Alan found agency by planning individually rather than collaboratively:

I don't plan with the other second class teachers, so there I have full agency. (Alan 1 L472)

This allowed Alan to adapt his plans to suit his own style, which, as described above, involves writing the plans after the teaching has occurred. In this way, Alan discovered a way to adapt the planning process to support his teacher agency. It might be queried whether such strategic compliance represents agency or simply habitual practice which follows the path of least resistance (Priestley et al., 2015b). In Alan's case, it seems to be the latter, as he completed the paperwork to fulfil an accountability requirement, however, it may serve as a valuable reflective opportunity if reframed. In the context of the educational reform in Ireland, strategic compliance – if enacted by teachers – would seem to pose a potential challenge to the ability of teacher agency to effect change.

These supports, albeit a smaller number than the constraints, reveal that teachers can find positive features in the planning process. The benefits identified were found to be helpful to the teachers at certain stages of their careers, and some – such as plans guiding practice as teachers gain experience – could be considered as supporting teacher confidence and agency. However, none of these features appeared to strongly empower the teachers in their agency, rather, it may be a case of taking a positive attitude towards a mandatory aspect of teaching, since planning is a Departmental requirement.

4.2.3 Timetables and Time Allocations

Time arose organically in the data as an issue which greatly constrains teachers' decisions and responses to learning. Every teacher in the study concurred with the idea of time as an enemy of agency. Time was mentioned by five of the teachers as a factor which makes it more difficult to enact their choices, to conduct child-led learning, and to respond to children's learning. All comments about timetables and the curricular time allocations related to how difficult it is to comply with the regulations. None of the teachers identified positive aspects of time in terms of teacher agency.

The primary school day is 5 hours and 40 minutes long – or 4 hours 40 minutes for the infant classes. This time includes assembly time, break time and lunch time. Within the teaching week, teachers are expected to complete teaching in each of 12 subject areas, according to the allocations laid out by the Department of Education (DES, 2011). These allocations – and the timetables which teachers generate to satisfy the allocations and the logistical structures of the school – cause notable difficulties and stress for most teachers (5)

in this study, including the difficulty of not having enough time to teach required topics and skills, and the inability to implement child-led learning in the time allotted. The below timetable – taken from the researcher’s teaching files for the 2017/2018 school year – illustrates the highly constrained timeframe within which teaching and learning occurs: with a short school day, multiple withdrawals of students each day, and a wide array of subjects to consider.

Figure 4.9

The Researcher’s Junior Infant Timetable (2017-18)

	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday
8.30	Assembly Gaeilge * EAL withdrawal	8.30	Assembly Gaeilge * EAL withdrawal	8.30	Assembly Gaeilge	8.30	Assembly Gaeilge	8.30	Assembly Gaeilge
9.00	Storytime	9.00	History	9.00	Geography	9.00	Science	9.00	Drama
9.30	Ready Set Go Maths: in- class team teaching	9.30	Maths	9.30	Ready Set Go Maths: in- class team teaching	9.30	Maths * EAL withdrawal	9.30	P.E.
10.00	BREAK								
10.15	P.E.	10.15	Music * Resource withdrawal	10.15	Learn Together	10.15	Phonics	10.15	SPHE
10.45	Phonics	10.45	Phonics * Resource withdrawal	10.45	Phonics	10.30	Art * EAL withdrawal	10.45	Maths
11.00	Aistear * Resource withdrawal	11.00	Aistear	11.00	Aistear * EAL withdrawal	11.00	Aistear	11.00	Aistear * Resource withdrawal
12.00	LUNCH								
12.25	Fine motor skills	12.25	Fine motor skills	12.25	Library	12.25	Fine motor skills	12.40	Golden Time
12.40	Learn Together	12.40	Learn Together	12.40		Learn Together			
1.00	TIDY UP								
1.10	HOME TIME								

For three teachers, the biggest disadvantage of this limited time is its consequence for the learning in the classroom. Sharon, Meabh and Laura expressed frustration that they could not follow the direction of the children’s interest and engagement due to timetables (Sharon 2 L207-209; Meabh 1 L474-480; Laura 1 L306-311/ Laura 1 L498-502). Meabh described how she would like to use teacher agency to amend time allocations:

I'd give more time to the areas that I found that the children were getting more benefit and fun out of... Still a broad and balanced approach, but just focusing more on specific needs within the class. (Meabh 3 L157-161)

When asked to identify what they would most like choice over, Laura, Meabh and Alan named timetables and time allocations (Laura 1 L306-311; M3 L157-161; Alan 1 L580-587). These data reveal that timetables and allocations are a significant impediment to teachers’ achievement of agency. However, time constraints are not discussed specifically in the literature on teacher agency, perhaps being incorporated into the general treatment of

curriculum as constraint. The negative impact of equivalent contact and contract hours for primary teachers (O’Sullivan-Dwyer, 2010) is a significant finding emerging from this study. Integration is promoted in the PSC and offered as a solution to limited time, however, it is not a panacea for the challenges of time constraints (NCCA, 2010).

All teachers noted the limited time available for bringing inquiry into their classroom practice. Four teachers noted that the research period (April-June) was a particularly busy time of the school year, with school initiatives and competitions, standardised testing in June and end-of-year activities. Meabh listed the tasks and teaching to be done in the month of June alone:

Finishing maths assessments, English assessments, getting some books finished, just tying things together at the end of the year, physically getting things ready and tidying up... Then there’s parties and there’s Sports Day and there’s teddy bears’ picnics. Every week there’s something new. (Meabh 2 L198-205)

This reveals how the teaching time of each school day is routinely shortened by school events and initiatives. Thus, teachers have a reduced amount of time in which to achieve the curricular aims and objectives. The sense of overload and overwhelm was effectively captured by the visual methods component of the data collection. Claire shared a photograph (Figure 4.10) which she described as “*a my-head-is-going-to-explode-I-can’t-get-through-everything kind of picture*” (VM L634: Claire). The photograph shows stacks of books and copies waiting to be corrected, along with a ‘high-viz’ jacket thrown on the floor after the teacher returned from yard supervision that day.

Figure 4.10

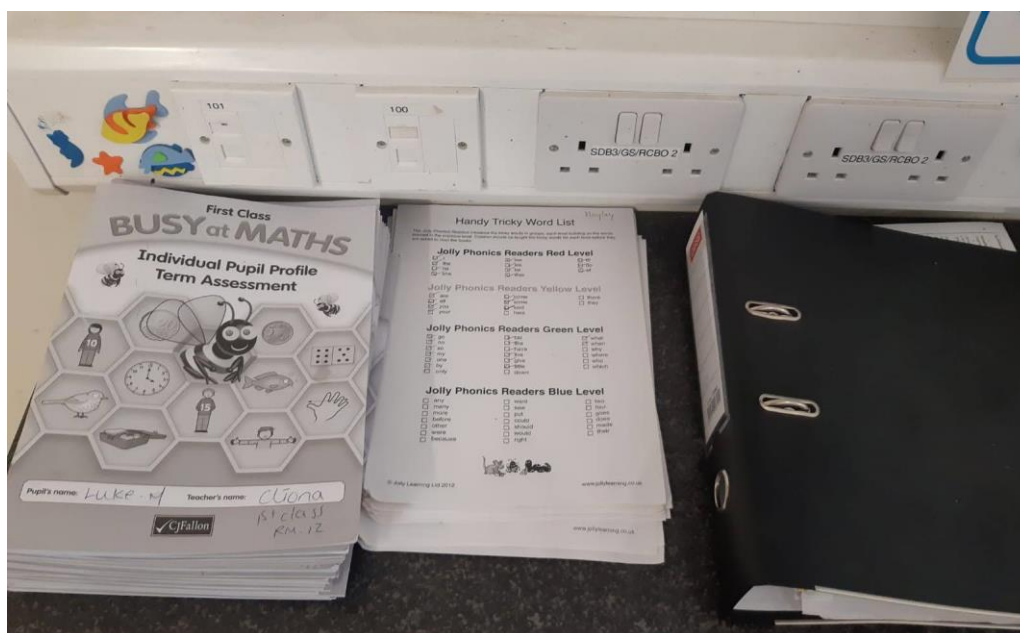
Image of a Busy Time of Year



Laura also offered a photograph of the multiple tasks she was juggling in her classroom, with stacks of maths and literacy assessments, as well as a large planning folder crowding her desk (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11

End-of-year Assessment Tasks



These photographs reveal some of the many tasks competing for time in the teaching day. As discussed above, time constraints are a significant influence on teacher agency and the limited time available denies teachers the opportunity to enact desired choices. Government reports (DES, 2015a) recognise that agentic practice requires time and, since time is a limited commodity, this represents a significant hurdle to the achievement of agency. New curriculum guidelines indicate a greater provision of autonomy to schools as regards timetabling, with the classifications of Minimum Curriculum Time and Flexible Time (DE, 2023). How this classification works out in practice remains to be seen, but the data from this study would suggest that a significant reform of time allocations is needed for teachers to feel less stretched and more empowered to achieve agency.

4.2.4 Accountability and Inspections

Primary schools in Ireland are not subject to high stakes assessments, but teachers and schools are subject to accountability in the form of inspections, under the remit of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education. A sample of schools are chosen for inspection

annually and a range of inspection models is used for evaluation, including incidental inspection, curriculum evaluation, and whole-school evaluation (DES, 2016b).

The issue of inspections and the inspectors' expectations was raised by three teachers to contextualise and defend their decisions, as well as to explain their sense of constraint. These teachers argued that the planning requirements are a result of the inspectorate's demands:

We all have to follow a specific planning format and I feel the reason we're doing that is because inspectors have asked for it because inspectors then find it easier to read them and see what they're looking for. That decision is then reinforced by the principal because she wants to be able to open up the plans and she wants to be able to see very, very quickly what she's looking for. (Alan 1 L592-601)

Alan, Sharon and Hannah were critical of the system which “*doubles up on the paperwork just to make an inspector happy*” (Sharon 1 L481). These teachers viewed the inspectorate as an obstacle to their agency, as it requires additional paperwork, and it renders teachers hesitant to try new approaches. For example, Sharon queried how the inspectors would respond to inquiry, while Alan speculated that schools would need to defend their teachers' agentic decisions to the inspectors (Alan 3 L264-269). These views suggest that the inspectorate habitually oppose teacher agency. Hannah portrayed a hypothetical scenario which illustrated this opposition. She was defending her choice to keep working on the theme of space for longer than planning to an imagined inspector:

It's very easy to walk into a classroom and say that you should cut off something after four weeks and move on, but that's not natural. If children are well engaged in a topic or they want to find out more... why would you stop?... I have all these things (to say) in my head, and I'm like, "I'm really sorry. I won't do that again" ... You sit there and you just nod. And then afterwards they leave and you think, I should have said this, that and the other. (Hannah 3 L710-749)

This excerpt conveys Hannah's attitude, shared by Alan and Sharon, that teachers are in conflict with the inspectors, albeit a muted conflict in which teachers do not voice their opinions. It is not clear from where this view of the inspectorate as opponents of teacher agency derives – whether it is from their experience during ITE or whether it is adopted from colleagues when they started teaching. The inspectorate itself emphasises the role of school staff and management in self-evaluation and refers to teacher-inspector discussion of the teaching and learning as “co-professional engagement” (DE, 2022b, p. 34), suggesting a level of collegiality which the teachers' comments do not recognise. The description of Hannah sitting and nodding agreement to an inspector's comments with which she disagrees is

revealing of how teachers' perception of the inspectorate can be disempowering. This example encapsulates the interplay between agency and structure which is noted by Biesta and Tedder (2007). They recognise how the context – in this case, the school inspection – affects teachers' achievement of agency – the original decision to continue teaching space, based on children's interest.

School inspectors feature prominently in the data as 'bogeypeople' who force teachers away from agentic, responsive teaching with their demands for comprehensive, standardised planning and assessments folders. Throughout her interviews, Sharon noted her worries about whether her current paperwork routines meet the needs of inspectors. She imagined scenarios in which she had the confidence to explain her practice if management or inspectors questioned her coverage of curriculum content:

Just being in the know, knowing that it's okay to do this. (Knowing) an inspector is not going to come in and go, "Why have you got blank spaces here?" (Sharon 2 L78-80)

This hypothetical scenario conveys how the idea of leaving blank spaces on the required paperwork currently causes Sharon concern, resulting in an understanding of agency as being able to defend those blank spaces to an inspector. The conception of inspectors that is advanced in the data is of distant figures, unconcerned with the reality of teaching and learning, utterly focussed on the recording of teaching and learning in folders.

School inspections were deemed to exert a downward pressure on school management, with negative consequence for teacher agency. Sharon attributed management's unsupportive attitude to the pressure emanating from school inspections and evaluations. In the research site school, the prospect of a WSE (Whole School Evaluation) is regularly highlighted and informs practice within the school in ways that might be deemed unhelpful (Researcher's Diary, 24th March 2023). Sharon articulated this downward pressure clearly:

I think there's always just this fear, and it's fed down from senior management. This fear of: "We have to do this, because we've been told this has to be this way and it has to be this template. So change everything you've done and put it into this format".
(Sharon 3 L273-284)

This quote reveals a sense of dubiousness about the willingness of school management to support teachers' agency in shaping plans and assessment to best meet the learning needs in their individual classes. It recalls Alan's assertion above that teachers' plans are dictated by the principal who aims to be ready for the requirements of inspectors, should they arrive in the school (Alan 1 L592-601).

4.2.5 Textbooks

The final aspect of structure which impacted on teacher agency was the use of textbooks and schemes. It emerged during interview conversations that textbooks function as both an enabler and constraint to teacher agency, depending on how they are utilised.

Hannah recognised that the textbooks chosen by the school strongly influence her teaching decisions, particularly in Irish and Maths.

I have to cover this in the maths book because it has to be covered for the assessment. However, if another area in maths might actually be more relevant to what you're doing... you might actually want to cover (it), but that's not covered until the end of the year. (Hannah 1 L144-149)

This excerpt reveals that Hannah's agency was constrained by textbooks which determine the topics and sequence of learning. Textbooks are not inherently antithetical to teacher agency; they can support teachers in modifying content to meet local needs, but this depends on how teachers use and reflect on the textbook (Stará & Krčmářová, 2014). Grundén (2022) contended that teachers' planning is guided to a large degree by commercial textbooks, thus reducing their agentic practice. Alan similarly acknowledged that his use of textbooks can remove his decision-making and consideration of the children's learning, in favour of completing the book:

Sometimes it feels like I'm turning the next page in the textbook and I'm just going to tick that... So I see a lack of awareness of the agency that we have as educators.
(Alan 2 581-583)

However, Alan also appreciated that textbooks are helpful for teachers, as "*I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel*" (Alan 1 L553). He contrasted this with his experience in England, where teachers were expected to design bespoke materials for every lesson (Alan 1 L358-365). Alan understood that a lack of textbooks can also be detrimental to teacher agency since teachers may become debilitated by an excessive amount of resource creation and cannot engage in agentic pedagogy.

The decision about which textbooks are used is often made at school level and it is not always possible for individual teachers to influence this decision. In such a case, it is worth considering how teachers can achieve agency when using textbooks that they have not chosen or they do not value. Parental expectations about textbook completion, along with textbook-linked assessments which streamline instruction, limit the opportunities for teacher agency and responsive teaching. Teachers surveyed by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO, 2015) reported feeling that parents look for evidence of learning in textbooks. This feeling appears to fuel teachers' sense that parents do not fully trust them to

make appropriate agentic choices. These factors demand scrutiny in the context of a new curriculum which aims to promote teacher agency.

4.2.6 Inquiry and Structure: Opening Up Possibilities?

This section explores the extent to which IBL offers agentic possibilities to participating teachers. Data present tensions regarding the affordances of agency from IBL, with interesting and important messages for policymakers regarding the ways in which IBL as a principle of teaching and learning in the PCF, might be practised by in-service teachers.

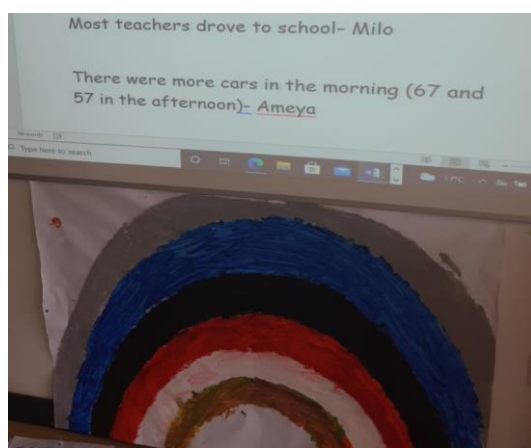
Inquiry was beneficial for two teachers in navigating the structures within which they teach. Laura reported satisfaction with how inquiry allowed her to meet curriculum objectives while following a more child-led approach:

They're meeting social objectives, they're collaborating, they're listening to each other, they're using their voice. In some cases, they're working independently. There's writing elements to it sometimes, depending on the inquiry. There was just so many different elements of the curriculum that were being met through that one inquiry. (Laura 2 L527-548)

Laura captured the transdisciplinary learning of inquiry in her classroom the photograph below (Figure 4.12), which shows the textual and graphical data which emerged from the children's inquiry into transport around the school environment. Laura explained in the visual methods meeting that the "rainbow" was the children's idea for displaying data on the school car park: vehicle colours appear in descending order on the rainbow, according to their prevalence in the car park.

Figure 4.12

Learning Achieved during Inquiry on Transport



For Sharon, inquiry helped her manage the planning requirements which cause her high levels of stress, as noted earlier (see section 4.2.2.1):

I don't feel that I've had these hours that I've wasted for nothing because they never got to do it... Planning in inquiry changes as you go along – and I think that's how I work anyway. (Sharon 2 L394-403)

Sharon viewed inquiry planning as less onerous than the mandated fortnightly plans and she appreciated having the agency to modify plans to reflect the learning that occurred. This, along with Laura's identification of multiple curricular connections from an inquiry unit, suggests that inquiry can function to support teacher agency as it renders the existing structures less daunting and more connected to classroom practices. Additionally, Sharon reported that her confidence grew through inquiry in terms of defending her pedagogical choices to management or inspectors:

I suppose I'm just more confident in what I'm doing and that I can stand by my plans and say, "Well this is what we're doing because inquiry has led to this and that's what the kids are interested in and they're engaged and they're still learning." (Sharon 2 L827-831)

This comment reveals that Sharon felt enabled to follow a child-led learning model, using the philosophy of inquiry to justify her practice to external authorities. This indicates another way in which inquiry can provide support to teachers in finding agentic manoeuvres within existing structures.

However, the data indicate complications for inquiry's potential enablement of teacher agency. These complications arise from the sense – within a third of the research group (2) – that IBL is not as suitable in senior classes (3rd – 6th class) as in junior classes (Junior Infants – 2nd class). It appears that these teachers perceive that the curriculum for senior classes is more heavily focussed on academic achievement and fact acquisition, making inquiry less appropriate:

I do feel that there would be much more pressure on the older classes to achieve academically in their reading and their maths and their writing. There would be a lot more focus on books in the older classes and less of those opportunities for open-ended learning and inquiry. (Laura 3 L583-588)

This comment suggests that Laura may not consider inquiry the best approach for developing academic skills and acquiring facts. It is apparent that Laura's view of teaching in senior classes emerges from the style and amount of curriculum content for these classes, along with her own perception of the transition from primary to secondary school (Laura 3 L608-610).

The contrast between primary and secondary teaching, recognised by Gleeson (2010) – and its impact on teaching in senior classes of primary schools – is also of concern to Claire. She shared a similar scepticism about the impact of inquiry on children’s readiness for secondary school, stating that, if she were teaching senior classes, particularly 5th and 6th class, she would not engage with IBL but would use rote learning to ensure children were prepared for the transition.

I think that primary and secondary need to be matching a lot more. It can't be that we're on this lovely inquiry-based approach in primary school and then they've just absolute baptisms of fire when they get to first year... This is the education system we are in. You have to be able to just accept it, learn it off, rattle it off and throw it back. It's not a good education system, but it is the one that we are in the whole way up. And I do think that we have a role in primary school preparing them for that as well.
(Claire 1 L922-934)

This is a strong indication of the conflict between Claire’s own beliefs about teaching and her experience of working within the structure of the educational system. It is worth questioning whether some elements of curriculum design reinforce the idea held by Claire and Laura that inquiry and child-led learning are less appropriate in senior classes and that rote learning becomes a significant methodology at that stage. Laura mentioned that the amount of content for senior classes is “*unbelievable*”, which indicates that some of her perception of the need for a different teaching approach in senior classes derives from the presentation and specification of the curriculum.

4.3 Research Intervention and Teacher Agency

As outlined in Section 3.4.1.1, a measurement scale was included in the schedule for interviews 1 and 2, to capture any evidence of changes in agency during the research period. The data reveal little movement overall on the scale, suggesting that more time is needed for teachers to achieve agency or to transform their practice in a significant way. However, the data from the scale reveal interesting perspectives on how teachers perceive their agency differently within their classroom as compared to at a wider school level.

Hannah’s second interview exposed a profile of high agency in the classroom and reduced agency at the school and management level. This profile is consistent with the responses of all teachers, who identified good or strong levels of agentic practice in their classrooms, while their agency at the school level ranged from neutral to low. For example, Claire’s responses suggested a neutral sense of agency in the wider school, which may well have suited her interest in focussing on her own class (see section 4.1.4.2). Laura reported

neutral to quite good levels of agency at the school level, while her classroom practice featured high levels of confidence and agency. Sharon observed similarly high levels of agency in her classroom but much lower agency beyond the classroom.

The purpose of the scale's inclusion in the interviews was to capture any sense of changing agency over the research period. I had hypothesised that the relationships in the CoP and the role of inquiry teacher in developing learning experiences might positively correlate with agency. However, only one teacher's responses indicated a change in agency: Hannah noted in her second interview that her general sense of agency was lower, ascribing the change to the consequences of COVID-19 protocols, which reduced platforms for teacher voice. There was little variation elsewhere in the scale, indicating again that a longer time-frame is needed to scaffold agentic practice and inquiry among in-service teachers. The agency scale was not used in the third interview, as the focus of this third interview moved to a more individualised schedule, exploring how teacher agency resonated with teachers' practice and experiences at a distance from the research period.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main findings of the research, grouped under two main themes: Agency and Structure. Teachers' comments featured heavily throughout the chapter, in line with the study's focus on teacher voice as an aspect of agency.

It emerged that these teachers understand agency as comprising choice and confidence, and as strongly influenced by professional experience. Voice was notably overlooked by these teachers, and the use of teacher voice in the wider school community was considered a personal choice. The data present a model of agency as an incremental phenomenon, developed over time and impacted by experience, relationships, and the structures of the educational system. These teachers desire more agency in order to engage in child-led pedagogy. IBL was identified as a suitable approach for this child-led teaching and for the achievement of agency. Curriculum, plans, time allocations, and inspections restrict teacher agency by limiting the capacity and willingness of teachers to embrace agentic practice which may be time-consuming and may fail to meet curriculum objectives and inspectors' criteria.

The key messages from the findings which present new insights into teacher agency relate to a revised model of teacher agency – an incremental model; the impact of subject knowledge on confidence and agency; the boundary teachers place at the classroom wall limiting the extent of their agency; the challenge to agency created by a lack of time for collaboration and reflection; and the impact of subject hierarchies on agency and innovation.

The literature on teacher agency is expanded by these findings, as well as by the Irish perspective offered on existing knowledge regarding teachers' desire for agency to enact child-led practice, and the hindering impact of time on teacher agency. Additionally, this study contributes to the knowledge base by revealing, in the context of a small, in-depth study, that IBL can help teachers achieve greater levels of and awareness of agency. These findings are explored in depth in the following chapter, providing deeper contextualisation within the literature, and with reference to the theoretical models of teacher agency and connection to the research questions which guided the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the major findings, examining the data from a research and practice perspective. The chapter is structured as a deep narrative journey through the findings, where the research questions are addressed along the way. Some sub-questions were revised during the study owing to the impact of COVID-19 on the research design, which modified opportunities for participants to collaborate. The final research question guiding this study was:

How do primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum?

The sub-questions associated with this over-arching question were:

1. What are primary school teachers' beliefs about agency in curriculum planning and enactment?
2. How do teachers understand their agency in relation to curriculum?
3. How do school cultures and the wider education system impact teachers' perceptions of their agency?
4. Can inquiry-based learning impact teachers' sense of their own agency? _How might teachers' sense of their own agency impact their engagement with inquiry-based learning?

This chapter discusses the underlying messages and implications of the data, and follows the path of three dominant 'wonderings' which emerged from the findings. I used Murdoch's (2023) practice of slowing down and being fully present to attend to 'moments of wonder' captured in these data. 'Wondering' is employed here as a habit of open-minded curiosity and provocation which is indispensable to inquiry. Through a reflexive process of distillation and 'wondering', I recursively explored the data over many months. The following cogitations emerged from the findings:

1. I wonder what type of agency teachers really want.
2. I wonder whether teacher agency is, in fact, possible.
3. I wonder what findings about IBL emerged in the study, and how it relates to teacher agency.

The process of considering and, potentially, answering these 'wonderings' addresses the themes of the research questions above – teachers' responses to and understanding of agency, the ways in which agency is impacted by teachers' beliefs and school cultures, and the potential influence of IBL on agency.

5.1 'I wonder what type of agency teachers really want?'

This section interrogates the key messages emerging about teachers' desire for agency and the form that agency might take. Data revealed a mixed response to teacher agency, as well as multiple boundaries on teachers' agentic practice, placed there by external factors or by teachers themselves. Potential reasons for such boundaries are discussed.

The literature demonstrates keen interest in and demand for teacher agency, judging from the proliferation of research into this area (Miller-Rushing & Hufnagel, 2023; Miller et al., 2022; Cong-Lem, 2021) and the strong benefits ascribed to agency (see section 2.1.5). However, Wang (2022), Jenkins (2020) and Sinnema (2011) found a mixed response among in-service teachers to their new-found agency as curriculum makers, which aligns more closely with the data from this sample of Irish teachers. While the six participants affirmed a desire for agency, their uniformity of response was challenged by reservations expressed regarding whether their colleagues desire agency (section 4.1.1). Notwithstanding that it casts a degree of doubt over whether these participants themselves want agency, their tepid response on behalf of colleagues highlights potential consequences for the redeveloped curriculum framework. It could indicate substantial challenges around embedding into practice the agency presented in the new primary school framework (PCF).

If these teachers' scepticism is reflective of teachers more widely – if teachers do not desire an engaged role in curriculum development at the school and classroom level, preferring, instead, to implement an externally imposed curriculum – it is difficult to imagine how the vision of teachers as responsive and agentic professionals can be realised. This could constitute a potential barrier to the reforming vision of the PCF. If agency is not an attribute of the teacher's role which is desired by teachers themselves, then it is highly unlikely that agency will be achieved, since it requires intentional action (Bandura, 2006; Giddens, 1984). In the absence of teacher agency, it appears that teaching and learning in Irish primary schools may largely continue in its present form, with teachers implementing decisions made by curriculum developers and supported by textbook publishers. This seems somewhat dispiriting in an era where evidence of the need for curricular and pedagogical reform has never been greater (Walsh, 2023; NCCA, 2020).

5.1.1 Bounded Agency

The redeveloped curriculum framework conceives of teachers achieving agency in a 'variety of contexts' (NCCA, 2020, p.5). Literature on teacher voice emphasises the responsibility of teachers for sharing and contributing to the broader school setting (Kauppinen et al., 2020; Quaglia Institute, 2020; Gyurko, 2012); suggesting that agency must move past

individual classroom walls. Nevertheless, literature on teacher agency recognises that teachers can exhibit a limited perspective on their role beyond the classroom (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Edwards, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015a). The circumscribed agency identified in the literature was echoed in this study: teachers appeared to set limits on where they wanted agency – in terms of subject areas and class levels – and how much agency they wanted, since they also felt under pressure to meet existing commitments such as planned learning experiences, school events, routine assessments, competitions, and assemblies.

Respondents in this study expressed an understanding of agency as classroom-based and learner-centred, and none articulated a vision beyond their classroom walls (section 4.1.4.2). I have termed this ‘bounded agency,’ modified from Oolbakkink-Marchand et al. (2022). In their research, bounded agency referred to a constrained level of agentic opportunities being available at school level. In the case of this study, it appears that at least some of these constraints were self-imposed. Data revealed that all teachers desired agency in classroom practice, but half did not show interest in agency more widely. These three did not perceive or desire a role as agents at school level, choosing to remain silent at staff meetings and deferring school-level decisions to management. This suggests a potentially under-developed concept of agency in which school-wide collaboration and decision-making about teaching, learning, planning, and policy is not a role these teachers consider as their responsibility as educators.

Thus, the data indicate a potential dissonance between the Department of Education’s concept of agency and the views of teachers in the field. The PCF’s vision of agency as involving collegiality and shared responsibility was not fully reflected in the attitudes of teachers in this study. However, the literature is clear in advocating for agency as a school-wide practice, where teachers are empowered within and beyond their classrooms and schools are sites of critical engagement, shared practice and robust collegiality (Jenkins, 2020; Quaglia & Lande, 2017; Priestley et al., 2015a; Gyurko, 2012). If agency remains within the confines of individual teachers’ classroom walls, it compels the question of whether such isolated agency can effect the innovative and reformed practice anticipated in the redeveloped curriculum framework, and much needed in Irish primary schools. The evidence in this study suggests that such ‘egg crate agency’ – paraphrasing Lortie’s (1975) metaphor for isolationism in schools – could perpetuate a culture of isolated innovation and creative practice, but fail to induce change at school level. This narrow conception of agency will continue to be the practice of teachers working diligently outside school hours, without a support network and without the help of pooled resources and ideas. Such an approach to achieving agency is unlikely to be truly effective in transforming school cultures.

The literature suggests that facilitating teacher agency within curriculum structures is a delicate process of balancing agency with support (Ashton, 2021; Eteläpelto et al., 2015). This might be thought of as scaffolding agency, where teachers are supported by frameworks within which they exercise agency. Teachers in this study expressed a strong desire to maintain structure and guidance, doubting their capacity for wholly agentic practice in terms of curriculum development (section 4.2.1.2). However, the data revealed mixed messages about the desired level of structure, since teachers also strongly endorsed a vision of agency as involving less accountability (inspectors, principal oversight, planning requirements), less fixed structure (time allocation, planning templates), and less content to cover. This tension between wanting guiding structures and also rejecting structures as limiting was apparent, to some degree, in all participants' responses. This reflects Giddens' duality of structures (section 2.2.1.1): it seems that the same structures which frustrate teacher agency in some situations also provide support for teacher agency in other regards. This more nuanced response to agency echoes the mixed responses to agency found by Wang (2022), Jenkins (2020), and Sinnema (2011). It suggests the need for flexibility when defining and presenting conceptions of agency to teachers which are reflective of their evolving lived realities in school and classroom cultures.

Advocates for teacher agency (Sahlberg, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015a) have commended scenarios where reduced guidance and accountability is present, recognising that certain types of guidance can scaffold the achievement of agency (Priestley et al., 2015a). Other writers emphasise that limited curriculum guidance presents a significant and debilitating obstacle for teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Poulton (2020) cautions that high levels of agency can cause confusion and ambiguity, compelling reflection on whether the minimal regulation envisaged by teachers in this study is a realistic and desirable goal. At the same time, teachers also recognised the challenge of minimal guidance, as the majority in this study (5) disavowed a hypothetical teacher agency which would fully position them as curriculum makers (Claire 3 L981; Hannah 3 L1294-1299; Laura 3 L687-790; Meabh 3 736-744; Sharon 3 L641-645). To resolve this tension, the incremental model of supported teacher agency (presented further below) identifies the various supports which might be constructive to teacher agency at various points in their careers. A caveat must be added to the model: as the ecological model of agency emphasises that agency is affected by the particular contexts in which each teacher works, a single model of supports cannot be applied to all situations.

In summary, this study presents a desire among teachers for a bounded range of agency which ends at the classroom door – a bounded agency with set parameters for teachers' agentic practice. Participants did not connect with the idea of agency as involving

responsibility for school-level practice and decision-making. This illustrates the need for teacher agency as a concept to be clarified and embedded through substantial ITE and CPD provision. It also suggests that school cultures can support or constrain teacher agency beyond the classroom, as found by Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2022). Further study into the impact of school cultures in Ireland would be welcome, as school culture was delicately handled in this study due to my role as an insider researcher (section 6.5).

5.1.2 Why might teachers express limited aspirations for agency?

It appears from the data that a range of factors result in these teachers' conceptualisation of agency as a bounded phenomenon. These include school culture and the wider education system, teachers' beliefs and identities, the influence of subject knowledge on teacher confidence, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and protocols, and their prior professional experiences.

Teachers appeared disempowered by the existing cultures around planning and inspection, as well as by hierarchical relationships within the school. Planning requirements were deemed unnecessary and overly submissive to inspectors (section 4.2.4), with teachers feeling that management deferred to the wishes of inspectors rather than supporting their teaching staff. This resulted in resentment about plans which "*make an inspector happy*" (Sharon 1 L481) but make teachers deeply unhappy, as evidenced by the multiple data points expressing participants' frustration with planning and paperwork mandates. While positive and supportive relationships within the school were noted, an impression of some hierarchical relationships emerged, which resulted in teachers choosing not to share their ideas or look for help (Sharon 1 L303-305, Hannah 2 L497-502). The wider culture of prescribed curriculum and seemingly unhelpful inspection regimes further suppressed capacity for agency, with teachers feeling compelled to attempt curriculum completion (section 4.2.1.1) and defer to inspectors' comments, in spite of differing opinions (section 4.2.4).

Teachers' professional beliefs about their role also constrained their sense of agency beyond the classroom. Their beliefs in their responsibility to 'cover' the curriculum impacted on their ability to exercise agency and choice within the curriculum (section 4.2.1.1). The data's somewhat muddled desires of wanting minimal oversight and prescription (section 4.2.2.1), while seeking guidance and clarity (section 4.2.1.2) indicate that teachers' understandings of their own professional identity require attention, as well as indicating again an under-developed understanding of autonomy/ agency. It could also point to a lack of freedom to prioritise what teachers regard as important in their children's education. It will take time to redress this long standing imbalance in priorities; moving away from externalised

curricular completion and accountability, towards shared child-led and teacher-led agentic approaches. It seems that an important element of achieving agency lies in comprehending the professional role and articulating individual values around this identity. Thus, it appears that time for reflection on professional identity may be a key step towards developing teachers' openness to agency as a school-wide and collegial phenomenon.

Data from this study demonstrate the connection between teacher agency and teachers' subject knowledge (section 4.1.3.3). This connection offers another possible rationale for the splintered aspiration for teacher agency which emerged: teachers sought guidance and the security of prescriptive curriculum in subjects where their confidence was low. As the literature on teacher agency does not address the impact of subject knowledge, this finding represents a contribution to knowledge, and a signal to those involved in ITE that subject knowledge, along with pedagogical knowledge, is a key aspect of the professional preparation of future teachers.

The impact of COVID-19 on these teachers' sense of agency should not be underestimated. It was clear from the data that COVID-19 resulted in burnout among the teachers, as evidenced by comments from Claire at the mid-point and end of the research period (Claire D L223-225; Claire 2 L111). Both quotes referred to a particular feeling of exhaustion and low morale among teachers, arising from the demands of COVID-19 protocols, the ongoing worry about health, and the isolation produced within the staff, who were obligated to remain in their individual rooms for lunch breaks and only permitted to visit the staff room for tea/coffee in short, timetabled slots. As outlined in section 4.1.2.2.4, the COVID-19 context reduced teachers' capacity and willingness for agentic practice, placing them in a low-agency role for an extended period of time. It seems highly likely that such a positioning limited their aspirations for agency, as their teaching horizons narrowed and protocols and regulations increased their effect:

Just all the hand hygiene, and all of these different things, and all the things you can't do and all the things you (have to) do. It's another new thing that you're trying to incorporate in. (Hannah D L385-389)

Priestley et al.'s (2015a) model of teacher agency depicts prior experience – both life and professional experiences – impacting on the capacity of teachers to achieve agency within their ecological context (Figure 2.1). Each teacher noted that their prior ITE experience lacked modelling or discussion of teacher agency. As outlined earlier (section 4.1.3.1), there is a lack of agency-related instruction offered by ITE and CPD providers, suggesting that the absence of experience of agency thus far in their careers may not be limited to this small sample of teachers. It seems probable that this factor might limit teachers' aspirations for agency: without any prior engagement with or observation of agentic practice, teachers may

well take a conservative approach towards it. The Billie Jean King quote “You have to see it to be it” is a cliché in marketing in contemporary society, yet it contains a kernel of truth: teachers’ openness towards teacher agency is surely impacted by the presence – or absence – of models of agency in their past experiences of school, ITE, and their careers to date. Teacher agency needs to be substantiated in ITE and CPD, and specifically named as such to heighten awareness of the phenomenon and expectation that teachers work agentially within the redeveloped curriculum framework.

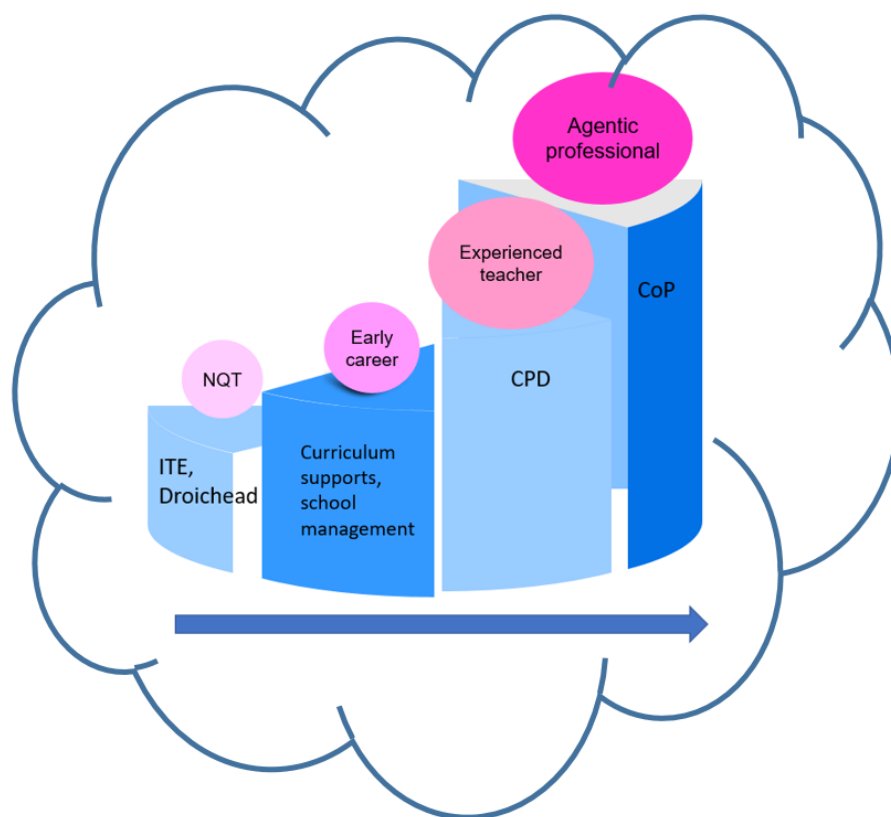
5.1.3 What supports and solutions might address the challenges to teacher agency?

Teachers’ desire for less accountability necessitates an education system with high levels of trust in teachers as professionals, such as the Finnish education system (section 2.3.7.3). Sahlberg (2015) cautioned against importing aspects of the Finnish system in a piecemeal manner. However, the Irish education system would benefit from a similar level of trust and confidence in teachers as it endeavours to support teachers to move from their current role – largely as implementers of a prescribed curriculum – to agents within the new curriculum framework. This involves meeting teachers where they are: bridging the gap between the PCF’s expectations and teachers’ lived experiences within schools and classrooms. To this end, the incremental model of teacher agency (see Figure 5.1) offers a visual map of where this meeting might occur and where it might lead.

The understanding of agency which emerges in this study is of a capacity for pedagogic decision-making which is gradually developed across the teaching career. Importantly, this capacity develops within a space constituted for this purpose, as the data reveals that agency cannot be achieved within the context of an overloaded curriculum and heavy accountability measures. This space represents the autonomy recognised by the literature as supportive of teacher agency (section 2.1.1.3). This incremental model of agency might be visualised as in Figure 5.1, where the steps increase gradually in height, representing the growth of teacher confidence, choice, and voice over time. The type of possible supports for teacher agency at each stage is also identified, moving from robust, external supports (ITE, Droichead), through in-school provision and CPD courses, to optional collegial supports, such as participation in collaborative learning groups or CoPs.

Figure 5.1

Incremental Model of Supported Teacher Agency



However, this graphic unwittingly implies an inevitability to the development of agency over time, which may not fully reflect reality. As seen in the last chapter, relationships with management, movement between class levels, and time were specifically cited as factors which stymie teachers' sense of agency. Those factors are omitted in the graphic above. Despite this limitation, the graphic is useful in emphasising the role of confidence and experience in agency. It also presents an immediate picture of agency as understood by this group of teachers.

As outlined in section 2.1.1.2, Aspbury-Miyaniishi (2022) criticises the view of agency as a phenomenon to be achieved, arguing instead that agency is more accurately framed as the momentary practice of responsive teaching. This understanding contrasts with the incremental model I have set forth in the graphic above, although the two ideas can be fused to establish a sense of agency as a phenomenon which is momentarily achieved and the ability for which achievement may be developed in line with career experience. Perhaps it is more accurate and also more heartening for teachers to think of agency as something to aim for in specific moments, rather than an absolute trait which they need to develop in themselves.

The incremental understanding of agency has consequences for ongoing curricular redevelopment, where supporting frameworks will need to be offered to scaffold teacher agency. Institutions involved in ITE and CPD will need to model teacher agency for pre- and in-service teachers, presenting a comprehensive suite of supports to buffer agency in its emergent stages. Laura raised this necessity in her final interview (Laura 3 L716-718). This compels analysis and reform of how ITE and Droichead provide support and training to NQTs in agency and IBL, as well as CPD provision for in-service teachers. Section 4.1.3.1 outlined the very limited connections made between ITE undergraduate modules and pre-service teachers' future roles as agentic professionals. It is possible that agentic practice is implicit in the pedagogical approaches of teacher educators, however, with agency foregrounded in the PCF it seems important that the agentic role of future teachers be highlighted throughout ITE. Similarly, agency may be implied rather than overtly referenced in the Droichead process. Nevertheless, considering that Droichead has been introduced quite recently – being fully implemented since 2020 – it is disappointing to observe that the induction process does not explicitly prepare new teachers for agency. It is again worth questioning how feasible it is to position teachers as agentic professionals without the teacher education to support them.

It appears that a potential solution to the issues discussed above – teachers' purported limited aspirations for agency and the classroom boundary which teachers may impose on agency (section 5.1.1) – could lie in ITE for new entrants to the profession, CPD for in-service teachers, and training for school management in order to nurture cultures of agency. Agency could be modelled to student teachers as a key component of their ITE programmes. In this way, it can become a lived aspect of emerging teacher identity. ITE may offer a particularly apposite time to model how teachers as agentic professionals engage with colleagues beyond the classroom and participate in the school community, serving to embed the principles and practices of agency in future generations of teaching professionals. Pedagogical approaches such as co-teaching incorporating different sets of expertise may have a role to play in increasingly embedding the principles of collaboration and integration in primary schools, leading to increased confidence and agentic practice (Nilsson & Kerin, 2022; Kerin & Murphy, 2018). In her research of music education at in a primary school, Kerin (2019) found that co-teaching, whereby a subject expert partnered with a classroom teacher, resulted in a shift towards collaborative and agentic practice. Teachers reported higher confidence, greater willingness to collaborate, and an awareness of the pedagogical advantages of coteaching. Such approaches may serve to bridge teachers' lack of confidence in some subject areas as reported in this study, and encourage a sharing of teachers' expertise in areas where they already feel confident.

Another aspect of the incremental model of agency is the sense of space for teachers to practise the pedagogy in which they believe. This indicates the importance – as subject specifications for the redeveloped curriculum framework are currently being drawn up – for the notion of agency as space to be built into the curriculum (i.e. flexible time, licence to prioritise and follow children’s learning interests, contracted planning and reflection time). In this regard, Aistear represents a model where agency is afforded by the structure of a curriculum framework (section 2.3.5). Play-based curricula are recognised in the literature as affording greater agency (van Oers, 2015), while Aistear is identified in the data as a more favourable site for achieving agency (Alan 3 L481-490). However, there is a lack of empirical research into teacher agency in the context of Aistear; potentially a fruitful area for future research.

The intention of this study was to provide support for participating teachers’ agency through collaboration within a CoP. However, there was limited data generated about the impact of the CoP on teacher agency or IBL practices. This was likely due, in large part, to the unfortunate online nature of the CoP and my own absence from school during the research period. Teachers noted regretfully that the online collaboration and their isolation within the school building was not as supportive as they had envisaged, and my absence compounded the difficulty (section 4.1.2.2.4, p. 133). An online CoP was not effective in this study and produced minimal data about the potential impact of a CoP on teacher agency, despite the recognition within the literature that agency is supported by teacher collaboration (section 2.4.3; section 2.4.4). This implies a necessity to conduct future research into in-person CoP and teacher agency in the Irish context.

The above sections outlined the bounded conception of agency which prevailed among these teachers, before moving on to consider the possible reasons for such limited aspirations. An incremental model of teacher agency, with graduated supports, has been presented as a potential scaffold in order to build capacity for teacher agency. However, the next section ponders whether wide-ranging teacher agency is possible within the current education system and prevailing educational climate in Ireland.

5.2 ‘I wonder whether extensive teacher agency is, in fact, possible?’

The literature illustrates that teacher agency is a powerful aspect of educational reform and transformation, yet, among this group of committed, hard-working teachers, teacher agency is difficult to achieve. This led me to consider why this might be. A stand-out quote from the data came from Sharon, who acknowledged the inexorable increase of demands and expectations:

(The demands) just never seem to lessen; it always seems to be getting more. It's like, oh, we're doing this now. And then it's like, well, what about the other thing we're doing? Oh, it's on top of that. (Sharon 3 L154-159)

This comment poses the question of whether extensive agency is truly possible for teachers. The data reveal the multiple constraints on the achievement of agency and teachers' consequently hesitant response to being positioned as agentic professionals in the redeveloped curriculum framework. Furthermore, the data raise concerns about whether the agentic practice posited in the PCF will be achieved since there is currently too much going on for expansive agency to be achieved. This is a sobering thought considering the years of consultation, research and planning which have gone into curriculum reform.

It is evident that the teachers in this study perceive agency as highly restricted for them currently, due to an overload of content, planning, new initiatives, textbooks, inspections, internal and external expectations, and the limited time in which to meet these requirements. Time was the single most prominent obstacle to agency identified by teachers, every one of whom concurred with the idea of time as an enemy of agency. Their comments largely focussed on the sense of overload within the school day, with too many content objectives and school initiatives to be covered for any agentic, responsive teaching to occur. However, they also noted a lack of time to consider their choices and practice, a lack of time for sharing ideas, a lack of time for resourcing teaching which moved beyond textbooks. The significance of time for teacher agency is often noted in the literature, most often in relation to the need for collaborative planning time (Leijen et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022; Sahlberg, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Riveros et al., 2012). There is a valid question to be posed here regarding whether agency is possible to achieve in the absence of contracted time for collaboration and reflection.

Integration is invariably cited as the solution to time pressures on teachers (Burke et al., 2023a and 2023b; Majoni, 2017; Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2011), and there is certainly room for deeper understanding and application of authentic integration (Bacon, 2018; NCCA, 2018). However, it seems that integration can only do so much in terms of resolving a key challenge for primary education: resolving the equivalence of contact and contract hours. Irish primary teachers are not contracted to work beyond teaching hours, which renders contact and contract hours synonymous. O'Sullivan-Dwyer (2010) recognised this absence of available time as a major issue for educational innovation and reform (section 4.1.2.2.3). This challenge was also identified in the data, as Alan observed the practice of some colleagues in arriving and departing precisely at contact hours and surmised that it was difficult for such teachers to achieve agency:

I can't see where their teacher agency is in that. If you're going to arrive at 20 past 8 and leave at quarter past 2, there is no time to really be responding to the learning and seeing this as a creative process, a daily changing creative process that we're supposed to be engaged in. (Alan 2 L604-608)

Having experienced some collaboration, inquiry, and attempts at achieving agency in his practice, Alan concluded that agency requires time outside of contact hours, a claim supported by the literature (Calvert, 2016; DES, 2015a; Marsh & Willis, 2007). Thus, the literature and data are in accord on the need for time to facilitate teacher agency.

While it is difficult to imagine an alternative to the limitations of contact hours, it is obvious that reform is required. There are very significant demands on children and young people in society today who face the challenges of addressing major global issues such as climate change, food and water shortages, wide spread environmental pollution (OECD, 2018). In a world which is changing faster than ever experienced previously, education is having to shift its priorities from the traditional learning of academic subjects to key competences and 21st century thinking skills. The PCF recognises that pupils benefit from having extended time to investigate and analyse authentic problems, which will be accommodated through the provision of flexible time within the new curriculum framework (DE, 2023).

However, this aspiration for extended time and investigation is currently not the case, as evidenced by the data in this study which details content-heavy, time-poor classrooms. Laura offered one suggestion which might redress issue of limited time for agentic practice when she recalled her experience of 'Planning, Preparation and Assessment Time' in England where teachers were released during contact hours to collaborate on planning, resourcing and assessment (Laura 1 L425-433). Admittedly, this practice might currently present challenges for management and support teachers in resourcing it, and may be particularly difficult to implement in smaller schools. Another possibility is the redirection of some of the Croke Park hours towards smaller collaborative groups of teachers. However, the mandated 36 hours per school year (DES, 2011) may not suffice to allow for agency as understood in the literature which calls for a less perfunctory approach and more of a lived philosophy (Priestley et al., 2015a).

A consequence of the multiple demands on teaching time is the production of timetables. The influence of timetables on teacher agency is not often explicitly recognised, although Leijen et al. (2022) specifically named timetabling of teaching activities as a structural element which exerts influence over teacher agency. The data generated in this study confirm the impact of timetables as a factor in the ecology of teacher agency, illustrating how timetables constrain teachers' choices. The research took place within a large urban

school, which raises queries about the effect of school size on teacher agency. In large schools, access to shared spaces such as the library, PE hall, school yard, school garden, and kitchen must be timetabled, along with resources such as iPads, maths/ music/ science equipment, and more. When teachers must adhere strictly to timetables, it removes their capacity to follow the learning in the moment. This was alluded to by Alan and Meabh who both judged their timetable as something which could potentially prevent them from conducting child-led learning (Alan 1 L332-333; Meabh 1 L604-606). In comparison, smaller schools may have the potential for greater flexibility in timetabling spaces and resources, allowing teachers to respond to the children's learning needs and interests. This has consequences for how agency might be realised differently – and the obstacles to which might be experienced differently – in different schools. Thus, the ecological model works as an accurate frame for understanding how supports for teacher agency must be modified for particular contexts, including school size.

Planning and paperwork demand a significant time investment, particularly for early career teachers (Eteläpelto et al., 2015), while in-service teachers are not convinced of the necessity for the required paperwork (Hizli Alkan & Priestley, 2019). Planning and paperwork reduce the time available to prepare for agentic practice (Jenkins, 2020; Ollerhead, 2010) and disempower teachers (Priestley et al., 2012). These messages were reflected in the data: planning caused particular resentment for all teachers for the way in which it circumscribed teacher choice (see section 4.2.2.1). This needs consideration in the roll-out of a new curriculum underpinned by teacher and child agency. While all participants accepted the necessity of planning for effective teaching and learning, the extent of planning documents and the repetitive nature of planning templates caused a considerable level of resentment. The extent and nature of planning and paperwork for primary teachers was certainly unpopular with this cohort of teachers, but the question must be asked whether it is an excessive expectation or a reasonable way to present evidence of learning and assessment? Despite the uniformity of participants' negative opinions, it is worth considering what modifications might be made to the planning structures to afford teachers greater agency over planning, rather than adopting the copy-and-paste, tick-the-box practice alluded to in this study. These questions bear consideration alongside the reform of the curriculum content at this time.

School inspections are one of the accountability measures criticised by several writers as disempowering of teacher agency (see section 2.1.2.3). The opinion that inspections convey a lack of trust in teachers' work and negatively influence their practice is fully endorsed in the data from this study. A negative perception of the teacher-inspector relationship emerged, with teachers manifesting a strong sense of feeling undermined, distrusted and

unsupported by inspectors on incidental and WSE visits. It is evident that agency can be eroded by such a relationship. However, it seems unlikely or desirable that inspection would be completely removed, as is the case in Finland (Chung, 2023; Sahlberg, 2015). Thus, a reformed model of inspection may help to support the development and achievement of agency, whereby inspectors function as resources to schools built on a sustained, supportive relationship. In this case, inspectors might be assigned to schools to work with staff on areas for development which are identified by teachers and teaching staff, to allow for greater school autonomy and teacher agency, as advocated in the PCF (DE, 2023).

Textbooks can be highly influential over the planning and execution of learning engagements (Grundén, 2022), thus highlighting their significance to teachers' choices. Data from this study supported that also, adding that the use of textbooks can make the achievement of teacher agency more difficult (section 4.2.5). Despite the convenience of textbooks, it emerged that their content and sequencing dictates a significant amount of teachers' decisions, such as aligning teaching with textbook layout rather than integrating topics in the classroom. Alan's critique of some teachers as '*textbook junkies*' (Alan 3 L303) suggests that textbooks remove the need for teachers to engage on a deeper level with their practice, and that agentic practice is not supported by a reliance on textbooks, workbooks, and educational schemes. These data point to the need for schools to examine their policy around textbooks, booklists and the ways in which textbooks are used at the class level.

It is evident that some teachers do not fully trust school management to endorse their individual agency. While half noted the trust implied by management's lack of classroom inspection and the equality of relationships within the school (section 4.1.3.2), others depicted a different style of relationship, featuring distance, difficulty in communication, and distrust. Examples of these more problematic relationships with management were articulated (see section 4.1.4.3), yet few were willing to identify the relationship as challenging. In the context of hierarchical relationships within the school, where many teaching practices felt imposed by management – for example, the topics taught per year group (Alan 1 L164-165) – teacher agency becomes a more difficult phenomenon to achieve.

Despite the obstacles to achieving teacher agency discussed above, it is important to recognise the many positives which support the potential for agency amongst these teachers. Chief among these positive factors is the professional commitment and interest in self-directed learning of these teachers. Their participation in a lengthy and demanding research project over many months – which coincided with the hugely disruptive and difficult protocols for social distancing, hygiene, and class closures of the COVID-19 pandemic – points to an impressive commitment to ongoing professional development. Another positive which emerged strongly from the data is the deeply held professional care which these teachers hold

for the classes they teach. There was great warmth and interest expressed in children's investigations, unexpected discoveries, and contributions arising from IBL, which made clear the teachers' enjoyment of their class groups and their learning. It seems highly likely that this motivation for continuous improvement and interest in their own pedagogical practices will sustain teachers as they begin interacting with the PCF and its key principles, including teacher agency.

Positive relationships with management and colleagues emerged from the data, albeit not for all participants. There are levels of distrust in some teachers' relationship with management, as described earlier. However, there also exists a sense of the possibility of agentic practice for some, derived from the limited presence of management in classrooms and the consequent space and autonomy afforded to teachers. The literature and the data both recognise that supportive relationships with management promote teacher confidence and teachers' willingness to innovate in classroom practice. Additionally, the positive collegial relationships enjoyed by these teachers, where they are able to honestly share experiences and learning with peers, encouraged teachers during the more challenging aspects of the research period. Hopefully such support from management and colleagues will support teachers towards a more wide-reaching expression of agency under the PCF than was witnessed during this study: an agency that ranges beyond the classroom to pursue dialogue and development at school level.

Finally, teachers themselves saw the potential for agency in the pre-existing Aistear framework and the play-based nature of junior classes. As experienced teachers at this level, the participants were aware of how child-led and responsive play-based teaching is (Alan 3 L481-487; Laura 3 L577-581) and identified this as an area of structure which supported agency. It is to be hoped that the framework nature of the redeveloped curriculum, and the strong emphasis on inquiry – of which play is an important corollary (IBO, 2020; McLean et al, 2015; Fahey, 2012) – will afford more extensive agency to these teachers in a similar way to that experienced by them in Aistear.

It is undeniable there are many obstacles to these teachers – and potentially a much wider cohort of Irish primary teachers – achieving the extensive agency observed by Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2022). The challenges posed by limited time, curriculum overload, mandated paperwork, inspections, textbooks, and limited trust in their relationships with management pose considerable, but not insurmountable, difficulties for teachers in their efforts to achieve agency. The positives presented above – teacher commitment, supportive measures from management, and teachers' autonomy within Aistear – are outlined not to minimise the challenges ahead, but to identify existing and potential supports for teacher agency and to foster a sense of possibility and self-belief.

5.3 'I wonder what findings about IBL emerged in the study, and how inquiry relates to teacher agency'

Inquiry emerged as both a support to and a constraint of teacher agency in the study. All teachers reported positive outcomes for children arising from IBL: prominent among these being the space provided by IBL for pupil voice and pupil agency, and the deepening of engagement and learning. Teachers also noted positive innovation in their practice through engaging with inquiry. However, IBL also presented challenges for teachers in terms of resourcing, time, and planning without guidelines. Advantages and disadvantages were found in relation to the inclusion of children with additional educational needs (AEN) during IBL. It was also felt that IBL was not appropriate in all subject areas and at all class levels. The overall response to and understanding of IBL points to a muddled conceptual framework, where agency and inquiry are conflated. These key findings are discussed next.

The literature records the centrality of student voice and agency within IBL (Lewis et al., 2020; Gholam, 2019). This message was echoed by half of the participants, as they identified pupil voice as the single key component of successful inquiry, linking to literature on the outcomes of teacher agency (section 2.1.5) and teacher voice (section 2.1.2.7). Though the PCF does not specifically name pupil voice, it emphasises pupil agency as a principle of teaching and learning (DE, 2023). This means that the findings of this study align with both the literature and curricular policy, further supporting the adoption of IBL as a method of promoting children's agency in their learning. It seems clear that, just as teacher agency benefits from modelling and support in ITE and CPD (section 5.1.2), pupil agency might be strengthened by observing agency in practice among teaching staff, as recorded by Robertson et al. (2020).

IBL was found to present advantages for cognitive and dispositional outcomes, as well as for children with additional educational needs (AEN) – although the data on this latter point were mixed. Teachers reported deeper engagement and learning during inquiry teaching, which reflects the literature on outcomes of IBL (section 2.2.4). Literature on the engagement of children with learning needs in IBL articulates a strongly positive message, reporting benefits for learning when appropriate scaffolds are established (Abels, 2014; Watt et al., 2013; Aydeniz et al., 2012). Nevertheless, teachers in this study offered mixed responses to the engagement of children with AEN, finding both advantages and challenges for these children. Teachers found IBL to be an inclusive, accessible approach for children with AEN, yet the same teachers also queried whether the lack of structure in IBL could be overwhelming to children with AEN. This may reflect the limited experience of these teachers with IBL and their lack of awareness of different types of inquiry (section 2.2.3), which is understandable given the time constraints of the research. However, these may present a challenge to the

successful implementation of principles of the redeveloped curriculum framework, where inquiry and inclusion are both key.

IBL was also found to be a challenging approach to teaching and planning, presenting multiple difficulties: the limited time available for inquiry, the lengthy duration of children's inquiry engagements, the burden of providing appropriate resources, and the lack of guidance for planning IBL. This focus on teachers' experiences of inquiry represents a contribution to the literature, much of which is directed towards the outcomes and experiences of learners in inquiry (Kaçar et al., 2021; Cervantes et al., 2015; Zafra-Gómez et al., 2015). The data reveal that IBL was deprioritised by teachers during the research period, despite their best intentions – possibly as a result of combined fatigue arising from the busy nature of the school year, and the added complications of COVID-19 protocols during the research period, alongside an over-abundance of policies and guidance (section 5.1.2; section 4.2.1.1). Additionally, it is clear that teachers in this study were sceptical of the suitability of IBL across all subject areas and class levels (sections 4.1.2.2.2, and 4.2.6). If teachers continue to believe that inquiry should be avoided in core subjects, the benefits and skills arising from IBL will be constrained. The conclusion regarding IBL's unsuitability in certain subjects may be perpetuated by largely framing IBL as SESE-based at ITE level (section 4.1.3.1), thus limiting learners' exposure to the benefits of IBL across the breadth of curriculum areas. This indicates the importance of revisions within ITE to embed IBL practices across the curriculum. Two teachers in this study maintained the conviction that IBL should be replaced by rote learning and fact acquisition in senior classes, therefore, it is difficult to imagine how innovation in education can be achieved. Care is needed in the presentation of the redeveloped curriculum to avoid reinforcing the mind-set of some teachers about the suitability of innovative, pedagogy in junior classes, with a reversion to rote learning approaches at the senior end of primary school. The data imply that if inquiry is to be utilised widely, as suggested in curriculum documents (DE, 2023), deeper exploration of its potential is necessary.

This study reveals a somewhat muddled understanding of inquiry, in which inquiry was seen as almost wholly synonymous with agency: a means by which teachers act agentically. The data reveals an almost porous relationship between agency and inquiry, which may imply an under-developed understanding of agency, where it is overly identified with inquiry rather than being understood in its own right. It is clear that teachers' agency can be promoted through the decision to adopt IBL, however, agency is more than the individual practices of teachers in their classrooms. Positioning agency and IBL as one-and-the-same leads to an over-simplification of agency and ignores the importance of teacher voice, collaborative groups, and collegial relationships. It also reduces IBL to a tool for agency, rather than a separate entity, a sophisticated pedagogical approach in its own right. It is clear that

participants did not appreciate or experience inquiry as a stance, conducted within a community of inquiry and social practice (section 2.2.2). The continuum of inquiry (section 2.2.3) was not embedded within the research period. Instead, IBL was more simply understood as a methodology and an approach to discourse within the classroom. This suggests that more time and support is needed to empower teachers in their IBL practice, so that they might be enabled to experience and articulate the opportunities which inquiry may afford them in terms of innovation and teacher agency.

The conflation of agency and IBL as mentioned points to the need for deeper conversations than were afforded in this research period. During the fieldwork stage, there was not enough time to embed either agency or IBL as deeply as needed for educational transformation. The potential negative consequence for the redeveloped curriculum is clear: two key principles of the curriculum are at risk of being conflated by teachers and in that confusion is the risk that neither concept will be fully realised in practice.

Finally, this chapter discussed the major findings from this study: the desire for a bounded form of agency, the incremental model of teacher agency, the multiple hurdles which render the achievement of agency particularly difficult – with time constraints principal among them – and an unhelpful conflation of agency and inquiry. These findings represent a contribution to knowledge by offering honest voices from the field and focussing on teachers of junior classes. They reveal some worrying trends regarding the capacity and likelihood of teacher agency being achieved by this sample of teachers, and possibly others like them. However, the seeds of optimism are evident, if not buried somewhat under the current constraints of the PSC (DES, 1999). If the introduction of the PCF is adequately resourced at both pre-and in-service levels, it will land on fertile soil as evidenced by the positive appetite for change demonstrated by the teachers in this study. The final chapter synthesises the main findings from this study and makes some recommendations in response.

Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to investigate how primary school teachers respond to the concept of teacher agency in relation to planning and enacting curriculum. It was enacted in the context of the PSC (DES, 1999) which currently operates in schools. [While the PCF (DE, 2023) has been circulated to schools and boards of management, it remains at a high level of policy discussion as yet, while work is ongoing to develop subject/subject area specifications for implementation from September 2025. Within the busy day to day routines of primary schools, there is little conversation about the PCF or what it may mean for teachers and pupils in schools.] The literature on teacher agency is inconclusive in regards to whether and in what format teachers desire professional agency. Additionally, it is unclear at this juncture how the redeveloped curriculum framework envisages teachers achieving the agency posited in the new curriculum framework guidelines. In conducting practitioner research whereby teaching colleagues were introduced to IBL and asked to implement and reflect on inquiry in their classrooms, the study sought to examine the ways in which IBL might impact teachers' sense of their own agency within their classrooms and the school more widely. As IBL is also promoted within the redeveloped curriculum framework, this study represents a timely and particularly relevant investigation of Irish teachers at a time of educational flux.

The chapter presents a summary of the major findings, followed by recommendations addressing the implications of these findings from a policy and practice perspective. This is followed by consideration of several areas for future research- arising from the study. The final sections present the limitations of this study and offer- some personal and professional reflections about the research and the learning it afforded.

6.1 Major Findings

The findings were presented in Chapter 4 and the most salient were discussed in Chapter 5. The major findings – as determined by their prominence among participants, their relevance to current educational structures, and the degree to which they confirm or complicate the messages emerging from the literature – are summarised below.

- ▶ Teachers in this study expressed a desire for more agency than they currently have, in order to enact child-led responsive teaching. However, most doubted the agentic impulse amongst their teaching colleagues.

- ▶ The potential for teachers to achieve extensive agency is reduced by lack of time, paperwork commitments, inspections, textbooks, and hierarchical relationships with management.
- ▶ The impact of prior teaching experience on agency was strongly affirmed. The conception of agency which emerges from the data is of an incremental phenomenon, with agency developing across the teaching career (see Figure 5.1). However, it was noted that agency does not develop unequivocally and in a linear fashion, as structural factors – the contexts-for-action – influence teachers’ ability to achieve agency at any given point in their careers.
- ▶ Teachers in this study had limited interest in achieving and exercising agency beyond their classrooms.
- ▶ IBL can support teachers’ achievement of agency. Teachers had broadly positive responses to IBL and identified multiple benefits to teaching and learning through IBL. However, inquiry was deemed more suitable to younger classes than senior classes, where fact and skill acquisition took precedence for these teachers.
- ▶ Teacher agency and IBL were generally conflated by participants, without a sense of distinction between both concepts.

6.2 Recommendations

Arising from the findings, some recommendations for policy and practice are proposed.

Recommendations at policy level:

- A coherent definition of agency should be included in the redeveloped curriculum, so that teachers can engage confidently with the concept. This definition needs to be shared among all stakeholders in education, so that teaching and ancillary staff, school management, inspectors, parents and others involved in the education system understand and support a reconfigured role of teachers. The definition should unequivocally clarify for teachers and others, that as agentic professionals, teachers’ voice and choice is valued beyond the classroom. This definition will form the bedrock of support and justification for decisions and structures to support teacher agency, some of which are proposed below.
- ITE should be reconfigured to introduce, model and build agency into core modules across all years of teacher education programmes. School placement is a particularly important area within which student teachers should be required to demonstrate steps towards the achievement of agency as emerging professionals.
- Extensive and recurrent CPD is required to incrementally model and build agency amongst in-service teachers. Such provision needs to consider that many currently

serving teachers may have been inducted during their ITE experiences towards a different conception of the teacher's role. Consideration should be given to making participation mandatory, which could be facilitated by offering the CPD during school hours. It should be repeated at regular intervals over a number of years, to embed the practice in teachers' day to day professional lives.

- Time emerged as a major deterrent in teachers' decisions, willingness, and confidence to embrace agency and IBL. Time and space are urgently needed by teachers to engage with and reflect on agency and inquiry. Although beyond the scope of the present study, and likely to be contested, it may be timely to explore and debate issues around teachers' current contracted hours of employment in the Irish education system. These will be difficult questions to explore, with no easy solutions, but in the interests of embracing change, it may be timely and necessary to start a discussion on how and where much needed time and space to foster agentic professionals and practices in schools can be found.
- As confidence is a key aspect of agency, without which agentic practice is unlikely to occur, teachers' pedagogical and professional confidence requires support. This entails work at ITE and CPD levels to boost confidence, as well as significant CPD engagement with school management to support them with the tools needed to bolster teacher confidence at a local level. In an education system where generalist teachers work at the primary level, the relationship of subject knowledge across multiple disciplines to confidence should also be considered.
- Consideration should be given to how planning requirements might be modified to afford more space for agentic manoeuvres by teachers. This will involve engagement with and approval by government bodies and the Inspectorate for more flexible documentation which may be less standardised, in order to meet local teaching and learning realities.
- Education and support is required at ITE and CPD levels to promote IBL. Inquiry should be explored as an inclusive pedagogical approach across all subject areas, rather than solely in SESE. Inquiry should be positioned as appropriate for all class levels, to avoid any tendencies to replace IBL and child-led learning in junior classes with rote learning in senior classes, which is in opposition to the principles of the PSC (DES, 1999).
- The greatest challenge for these teachers in conducting inquiry with their classes lay in their confidence with a new approach which required a new role for teachers. Greater time is needed to embed these changes in practice and in the self-conception of teachers. This finding again highlights the importance of rich transdisciplinary IBL modelling at ITE level and in CPD programmes.

- Hierarchical positioning of subjects and subject areas should be carefully considered in the redeveloped curriculum. This can be achieved through time allocations, but also through the layout of the curriculum and through the promotion of genuine and authentic integration within the curriculum. The data also illustrates the need for consideration of how the redeveloped curriculum will be presented, in order to avoid teachers perceiving creativity, play and IBL as only suitable for junior classes.

Recommendations at a practice level:

- The findings suggested a value in retaining teachers at the same class level for a period of time (e.g., 3-6 years), to build confidence and support the achievement of agency. It is worth school principals giving this suggestion some thought, as a potentially straightforward way to encourage and nurture agency.
- The study confirmed the importance of positive relationships in supporting agentic classroom practice. It heralds an important role for management in scaffolding such relationships without micro-managing collegial relations. This is undoubtedly a sophisticated skill, and training and guidance for principals and school leaders may be needed.
- Although limited data on the effectiveness of the CoP was generated in this study, the reception of participants to working in such a community with their colleagues suggests merit in facilitating opportunities to support teachers as they work to achieve agency and enact IBL. School management should be given guidance on how to encourage, establish and sustain CoPs in schools.
- Based on the findings and the available literature in this area, resilient leadership and flexibility is recommended at this pivotal time of curriculum reform, in order to encourage authentic implementation of curriculum goals. Awareness training and preparation is recommended for Boards of Management and in-school management teams, and arguably all school personnel, that increased agency may result in teachers, and pupils, voicing more critical and constructive opinions than may have been experienced previously.
- A local strategy is recommended to introduce an incremental approach to the development and nurturing of teacher (and child) agency across the whole school community. This may involve short-term pilot initiatives such as 'timetable flexi' days/weeks, where the routine timetable is suspended while teachers and pupils engage in inquiry on a topic of interest. Working in an integrated manner across traditional subject boundaries, and involving co-teachers and external partners/organisations should be encouraged. Such 'experimental' or 'exploratory'

shorter periods supporting the development and enactment of teacher and child agency may be necessary over several years to gradually build teacher confidence and capacity, and to support diverse learners in classrooms and the wider local community who may struggle initially with a fully agentic educational environment.

6.3 Areas for further research

This study emerges at a particularly timely juncture, being completed in the year when the redeveloped curriculum framework was published. This suggests that the field of research into teacher agency in Ireland would benefit from extensive fieldwork, generating data with teachers as co-researchers as they contend with their new positioning. Mixed-methods exploratory research over the coming years into the successes, challenges, ideals, and realities of achieving teacher agency within the redeveloped curriculum will be crucial to ensure the viability and realisation of the model proposed by the PCF.

Considering the focus of this research as a study of teacher agency among junior class teachers, it would be valuable to conduct a similar study into teacher agency in senior classes. This would allow for similarities and contrasts to emerge, and to test out some of the hypotheses which arose in this study regarding the suitability of IBL and agentic practices with senior primary classes. Additionally, there is a notable lack of research into teacher agency in the context of Aistear and play-based learning, which would constitute another important area for future research, particularly considering the emphasis on playful learning as a pedagogy in the PCF:

Throughout childhood, play is of value in and of itself, and children have both a right and a desire to play. Play and playfulness are also important elements of children's learning experiences and of curriculum enactment in general. ... During these experiences, teaching and learning are fluid and flexible, and unexpected and emerging learning opportunities arise. Teachers prepare for play by providing extended blocks of time, adapting the learning environment appropriately, and ensuring a supportive atmosphere. Play and playful experiences lend themselves to children taking ownership and responsibility for their own learning. (DE, 2023, p. 25)

Due to COVID-19 protocols, the CoP for this practitioner research was conducted online, with consequent challenges (section 4.1.2.2.4). Insufficient data on teachers' responses to working with a CoP to support agency were generated. However, further research into the role of CoPs and teacher agency may be beneficial in the Irish context due to the strength of evidence in the international literature on teacher agency and relationships

(section 2.1.2.2), as well as research into the benefits of CoPs for teacher confidence, self-efficacy, and agency (sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4).

Due to time constraints, this research did not investigate the relationship between teacher identity and agency, or teachers' reflective practices and agency, which are evidenced in the literature. In the context of the redeveloped curriculum framework (PCF), research in these areas in the primary school sector would be beneficial.

There continues to be limited literature published on IBL within the Irish education system. Such research would be an important contribution to the knowledge base regarding the applicability of IBL in the Irish curriculum, as well as understanding the realities of implementing inquiry, particularly over the coming years with the ascendance of teacher agency in Irish curricula.

6.4 Limitations

This was a small-scale study, involving a sample of six participants bounded within in a specific teaching and learning context. Therefore, the findings are not generalisable and are necessarily of a modest and localised nature. As a colleague of the participants, my insider position may have affected the lens through which I interpreted the data, despite methodological approaches implemented to minimise bias. An unavoidable limitation of this study is the challenge involved in conducting research fieldwork during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Periods of lengthy school closures, significant restrictions on staff collaboration, notable changes to classroom practices, and, more generally, a heightened level of pressure, uncertainty, anxiety and consequent fatigue for the teaching workforce were likely to have impacted the study in several significant ways, including changes to the research design and teacher implementation. The research was based on an IBL intervention led by the researcher. Due to COVID-19 protocols, as well as my own health situation, I was working from home for the entire period of the fieldwork (see Appendix Q). My absence had consequences for the coherence of the CoP, as well as my own sense of connection to the research (Researcher's Diary, 7th May 2021).

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution to knowledge through capturing the voice and experiences of a small self-selecting group of teachers who were sufficiently interested in exploring concepts around teacher agency and IBL, to give generously and willingly of their time, and who engaged robustly with the research process throughout. The data capture this group of teachers' lived realities during an unprecedented time in schools, and the depth of their opinions and feedback demonstrates their interest in teacher agency and its role in their professional teaching lives.

6.5 Concluding Personal Reflection

The process of conducting, analysing and writing up this research has been an enormous learning experience. Reflecting on my expectations of the research compared to the reality of its implementation, and accepting the limitations as well as the strengths of the study, has illustrated for me the manifold points of celebration and discouragement that comprise the research journey.

At the outset of this doctoral project, I was enthusiastic about the opportunity of investigating IBL in my own school setting. As an advocate of and part-time lecturer in IBL, I welcomed the chance to share IBL as an approach among my teaching colleagues. Noting that teacher agency was posited in the draft PCF (NCCA, 2020) seemed fortuitous as a link to the teacher's role in IBL. I initially visualised the research as a potentially empowering experience for teachers, where they would engage with IBL and experience its affordances for choice and child-led teaching. However, the challenges of COVID-19, along with the habitual 'time poverty' realities of teachers professional lives, presented considerable hurdles during the research implementation period.

Reflecting on the difficulties and at times disappointments of the research period, has allowed me to see the strengths of this study. My position as practitioner-researcher granted me a deep understanding of and empathy for the participants, particularly during these challenging years of closures and social distancing. I believe that this understanding had a positive influence on my approach to the data generation and analysis. My personal experience of returning to school during the analysis stage was particularly important in this regard, as it allowed me to witness again first-hand how busy and stretched class teachers are, how many objectives and initiatives and targets are presented to them, and how little time is available to work collaboratively, exercise voice, and achieve agency.

Another strength of this study is the honesty of the data. Being an insider researcher presented a methodological challenge in adopting sufficient distance from colleagues to analyse their contributions without undue influence on the data. However, this challenge also represented a benefit, as participants were enabled to speak openly to me, knowing that I understood their context and experienced the same pressures. I feel that an outsider researcher may not have gained the same insights. The sophisticated yet unvarnished sentiments expressed at many points during interviews offer a valuable insight into the challenges which lie ahead for the achievement of teacher agency and IBL practices reflected in the PCF.

My learning through this doctoral process has been extensive and there are certain aspects which I would extend if I were to repeat the research. For example, I would like to

investigate the relationship between culture and agency, which emerged from the data in subtle ways. It would be important to examine how much school culture might impact teachers working agentially. School culture also has an impact on teachers' openness to IBL, as inquiry is founded on collaborative practice both within and beyond classrooms. If that collaborative ethos is not in place, it renders the development of a community of inquiry within the school more difficult and less likely to occur.

Conclusion

This research supports a conception of teacher agency as an ecological phenomenon, while adding the elements of experience, confidence, time, and space to the model. Strong evidence emerges regarding the complicated responses of primary teachers in junior classes to potentially being positioned as curriculum makers. At a policy level, this research presents concerning views which are likely to conflict with a conception of agentic teachers, unless significant supports and extensive professional development are provided to support the transition. At present, the image of classroom practice that emerges from this study is of committed professionals who are stretched by an over-abundance of curriculum guidance, school initiatives, stakeholders' expectations, mandated paperwork, and – in the particular era of this research – COVID-19-related protocols, the consequences of which they are still dealing with. Amid such a swarm of responsibilities, teachers lack the time to investigate teacher agency and inquiry, resorting instead to a concise but simplistic conceptualisation of both, which fail to support teachers in either achieving agency or engaging with IBL at a deep pedagogical level.

However, this study also presents an image of engagement and commitment to professional development, despite considerable challenges. Moments of agentic practice (Aspbury-Miyaniishi, 2022) were captured, and the benefit of collegial support groups was affirmed and strongly desired for the future. Given appropriate supports, it might be hoped that the participants and similarly motivated teachers would deepen their awareness and appreciation of agency and IBL as separate, potentially mutually supportive, entities, on their journey towards the achievement of a fuller, enacted agency within their classrooms and schools.

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APPENDICES

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Appendix A – Ethical Approval for Research from TCD Ethics Committee

Review Submission History: 8-4 Ethics Submissions and Resubmissions

Assignment Instructions ▾
Assignment Details ▾ ↺ ↻ ↷

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School of Education, Trinity College Dublin
[Application for Ethical Approval of Research Proposals](#)

Title of Research Inquiry-based learning and teacher agency

Researcher Name(s) Máiréad Nally

Trinity Email Address nallym@tcd.ie

Supervisor Name (if applicable) Dr. Colette Murphy (TCD) / Dr. Karin Bacon (MIE)

Supervisor Email (if applicable) Colette.murphy@tcd.ie/ karin.bacon@mie.ie

Category of Proposer (please tick)

Student	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Principal Investigator (Staff)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Course of Study (please tick)

BMusEd	<input type="checkbox"/>
PME	<input type="checkbox"/>
MEd	<input type="checkbox"/>
DEd/PhD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
ASIAP	<input type="checkbox"/>
CertC21T&L	<input type="checkbox"/>

MARK
LAST MARKED ATTEMPT

Approved

ATTEMPT 2
02/04/20 11:31

Approved

Submission

[Mairead_Nally_Ethical_Approval_Submission_April_2020.pdf](#) 📄 ⬇️

Comments

Feedback from YVONNE LYNCH
20/04/20 14:37

The application is suitable for approval subject to some minor amendment:

Section 2.5: Edit the sentence "I will then work the volunteers who approach me" - meaning not clear.

Clarify that data collection is happening in classroom but outside class time (as is stated in the letter to the Principal).

Appendix B – Extract from Researcher’s Diary

8th June 2021

I was very aware that the teachers have all had another busy month with lots of challenges to inquiry implementation. We spent a while naming these, because I think my data will be significantly shaped by the COVID-19/ online reality. I’m aware that this time of year is always so crammed and I’m placing another burden on busy teachers. I felt bad when Sharon said that she felt like a bold student for not having much inquiry done. When I first visualised this research project I saw it as a (potentially) empowering addition and experience for these teachers, where they’d get to see and try out inquiry, and experience the exciting opportunities it presents. But for at least one of my participants this has been just another chore, as Sharon said – another thing they are not doing properly.

It makes me disappointed and a bit deflated that I haven’t been able to provide a more positive experience for them. But then, they chose to do the research and they (to a certain extent) – chose not to do inquiry at some points, or to prioritise other things... So I suppose that is an exercise of agency too. I think it is helpful for me to recognise the different forms that agency might take.

Appendix C – Information Letter for School Principal

12th December 2020

Dear Principal,

As you know, I am currently studying for a Doctorate in Education at TCD. My research explores the issue of teacher agency and curriculum planning. I want to explore how teachers perceive their agency and decision-making in the context of the curriculum and Aistear, and how inquiry-based learning might impact on their sense of agency, voice and choice.

Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning which aims to promote children's curiosity, creativity and skills for learning. Since bringing inquiry into my own practice, four years ago, I have found it to be transformative. I hope to demonstrate the potential of IBL as a powerful pedagogy; one which is responsive to individual learners, while affording agency to teachers in designing learning engagements. I hope that the development of a community of inquirers within the teaching staff will be beneficial to the school as a whole and will promote the spirit of collegiality and continuous learning of the staff of our school.

My planned methodology for the research is practitioner research, using a community of practice framework. I hope to recruit teaching colleagues to form a research group. After an individual interview with each teacher, the group will:

- Participate in hands-on inquiry workshops (3 workshops, February – March 2021)
- Plan collaboratively for inquiry (2 planning meetings: April, May, June 2021)
- Engage in inquiry with our classes (April, May, June 2021)

I will conduct an individual interview with each teacher in June 2021 and a follow-on interview with the teachers in the school year 2021 – 2022.

My data will consist of audio recordings of the interviews, workshops and meetings, teachers' reflective journals and photographs (which will not include any children or identifying details). The school and the teachers involved will be given an alias in my written analysis. All recordings, journals and photographs will be stored on a password-encrypted computer and backed up on a password-encrypted USB device and in Microsoft One Drive. Audio recordings will be destroyed 13 months after the completion of the examination process (approximately 4 years from now). Transcripts of interviews, workshops and planning meetings, along with reflection journals will be retained securely in perpetuity, in order to allow time for completion of the research and publication of the findings. Participation in the research is wholly voluntary and teachers are free to remove themselves from the process at any time, up to the point of my analysis of the data (approximately May 2022).

The research will be carried out in line with school protocols on social distancing and hygiene, in the context of the ongoing pandemic. The interview and meetings will be held online. The workshops will be held face-to-face while observing social distancing.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about the research, please feel free to talk to me.

Kind regards,

Máiréad Nally

Appendix D – Information Letter for Board of Management

12th December 2020

Dear Members of the Board of Management,

I am currently studying for a Doctorate of Education at Trinity College Dublin. My focus is on the area of inquiry-based learning (IBL) and teacher agency. Teachers are positioned as agentic professionals in the draft Primary Curriculum Framework. My research will investigate how inquiry may promote this aim of teacher agency.

IBL is an approach to teaching and learning which aims to promote children's curiosity, creativity and skills for learning. The children will be exploring a wide range of subjects through questioning and early research skills. The aims and objectives of the Primary School Curriculum will be met through inquiry. I hope to demonstrate the potential of IBL as a powerful pedagogy; one which is responsive to the learners while affording agency to teachers in designing learning engagements. This research will be of significance to the on-going curricular reform, as well as expanding the field of pedagogy.

My planned methodology for the research is practitioner research, using a community of practice framework. I hope to recruit teaching colleagues to form a research group. After an individual interview with each teacher, the group will:

- Participate in hands-on inquiry workshops (3 workshops, Feb – Mar 2021)
- Plan collaboratively for inquiry (2 planning meetings: April, May, June 2021)
- Engage in inquiry with our classes (April, May, June 2021)

I will conduct an individual interview with each teacher in June 2021 and a follow-on interview with the teachers in the school year 2021 – 2022. Interviews, workshops and meetings will take place outside of school hours and in line with school protocols on social distancing and hygiene, in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

The data gathered will include meeting notes and audio recordings from the research group, interview transcripts, planning notes and reflective journals. All identifying details will be removed from the data. Data will be stored on a password-encrypted external hard drive and in Microsoft One Drive, a password-protected cloud-based file storage service. Data will be stored in perpetuity – with the consent of the participants – to allow for completion of the research and publication of the study.

I am seeking permission from the Board of Management to recruit a group of participants from the school staff, to carry out the planning meetings and the units of inquiry, and to gather notes for my thesis. I have attached for the Board's consideration and approval a copy of the letter of consent which I will give to participating teachers. I hope that the research will be acceptable under the school's policies and will be considered useful to the staff and children.

Thank you for your support.
Máiréad Nally

Appendix E – Information Letter for Teachers

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with more information about the purpose and timeframe of the project, how the data will be gathered and stored, and how your anonymity will be protected.

The focus of my research is on the area of inquiry-based learning (IBL) and teacher agency. Teachers are positioned as agentic professionals in the draft Primary Curriculum Framework. My research will investigate how IBL may promote this aim.

IBL is an approach to teaching and learning which aims to promote children's curiosity, creativity and skills for learning. I hope to demonstrate the potential of IBL as a powerful pedagogy; one which is responsive to the learners in individual classrooms, while addressing curriculum concepts and skills. This research will be of significance to the on-going curricular reform, as well as expanding the field of pedagogy.

My methodology is practitioner research within a community of practice. You will be asked to participate in:

- an individual interview (approximately 45 minutes): February 2021
- 3 inquiry workshops (1.5 hours each): February – March 2021
- 3 planning meetings (1 hours each): April, May and June 2021
- an individual interview to review the process: June 2021
- a follow-on interview to reflect back: approximately February 2022
- Maintain a journal from February – June 2021, to be given to me as data
- Take photographs representing your agency as a teacher, to be given as data

The inquiry units will be developed to suit the curriculum of your class level, so they will inform your class planning rather than act as an additional workload. All meetings and workshops will take place after school hours.

During the research, I will make audio recordings of the interviews, workshops and planning meetings. Photographs, extracts from journals and transcripts of recordings will be used sensitively. Aliases will be used in my written analysis. All recordings will be stored on a password-encrypted computer and backed up on a password-encrypted USB device and in Microsoft One Drive.

You will be given a 2-week period where you can view and amend transcripts until data analysis begins. After this point, the data will be fully anonymised and your data can no longer be withdrawn from the study.

Data collected will be used for examination and publication purposes. Audio recordings will be destroyed 13 months after the completion of the examination process (approximately 4 years from now). Transcripts will be retained securely in perpetuity, in order to allow time for publication of the findings.

Participation is wholly voluntary and you are free to remove yourself at any time, without reason or prejudice, up to analysis of the data (approximately May 2022).

Consent Form for Research Participants

STUDY NAME: Teacher Agency and Inquiry-Based Learning	
There are 3 sections in this form. Each section has a number of statements and asks you to initial if you agree. Please ask <u>any</u> questions you may have when reading each of the statements. Thank you for participating.	
General	Initial box
I confirm I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for the above study. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I understand that this study is entirely voluntary, and if I decide that I do not want to take part, I can stop taking part in this study at any time (up to the analysis of data, approximately May 2022) without giving a reason.	
I understand that I will not be paid for taking part in this study.	
I know how to contact the researcher if I need to.	
Data collection	Initial box
I consent to audio recordings of my individual interviews.	
I consent to audio recordings of the inquiry workshops.	
I consent to audio recordings of the planning meetings.	
I consent to the use of extracts from my reflection journal.	
I consent to the use of photographs taken by me.	
Data processing	Initial box
I understand that personal information about me, including the transfer of this personal information about me outside of the EU, will be protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation.	
I understand that Máiréad will retain the audio recordings until 13 months after the examination process has been completed (approx. 4 years from now)	
I understand that Máiréad will retain the photographs, scanned copies of my reflection journal and transcripts of the interviews and planning meetings in perpetuity. She will use these in her thesis and in publication of the findings from this research.	
I understand that Máiréad will not use my data in future, unrelated research, without securing my specific consent.	

If you have any questions or would like to know more about the research, please feel free to talk to me: Máiréad Nally ([email](#)). My supervisor in TCD is Dr Carmel O' Sullivan ([email](#)). My supervisor in MIE is Dr Karin Bacon ([email](#)), should you wish to contact them.

Kind regards,

Máiréad Nally

Appendix F – SurveyMonkey™ Instrument for Gathering Participant Profiles

MN Research - Participant Profiles

Participants profiles for MN research

This survey will gather some basic information about you for the research profile. Approx 5 minutes completion time.

OK

1. What is your name?

2. What is your age range?

- 22-34 54-62
- 34-42 Prefer not to indicate my age
range
- 42-54

3. What class are you currently teaching?

- Junior Infants
- Senior Infants
- 1st Class
- 2nd Class

4. What classes have you taught in the past? Click all that apply.

Junior Infants

4th Class

Senior Infants

5th Class

1st Class

6th Class

2nd Class

ASD Class

3rd Class

Resource/ Learning Support/
Language Support

5. How long have you been working as a primary school teacher?

6. Have you worked in any other country as a primary school teacher? If so, where?

DONE

Appendix G – Overview of and Evidence from Inquiry Workshops

Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Workshop 3
<p>THEME: The teacher as a learner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building our CoP: getting to know the group • Initial ideas about IBL: Mentimeter word cloud, “Me Museum” video, “Sound of the Sea” video, Reflective journals • IBL engagement: Foam investigation – exploring types of inquiry • Personal inquiry: introduce apple investigation • Follow-up work (optional): Kath Murdoch video, Kathy Short article 	<p>THEME: Role of the teacher in IBL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing our understanding of IBL: Fish is Fish • Looking at IBL and conceptual development • Listening and talking in the IBL classroom: Explanation Game, “Measuring the Rug” by Vivian Paley • Personal inquiry: introduce Stickman inquiry (completed individually after the workshop) • Follow-up work (optional): Kathy Short webinar, collect an example of inquiry-rich dialogue from your class 	<p>THEME: Developing a community of inquiry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing evidence of inquiry – apples, dialogue, etc. • Inquiry engagement – play: Review Stickman • Transdisciplinary inquiry: Pattern • Personal inquiry: Introduce visual arts inquiry (completed individually after the workshop) • Follow-up work (optional): Teacher talk in IBL padlet, White (2011) The power of play

Foam investigation:

Example 1 –



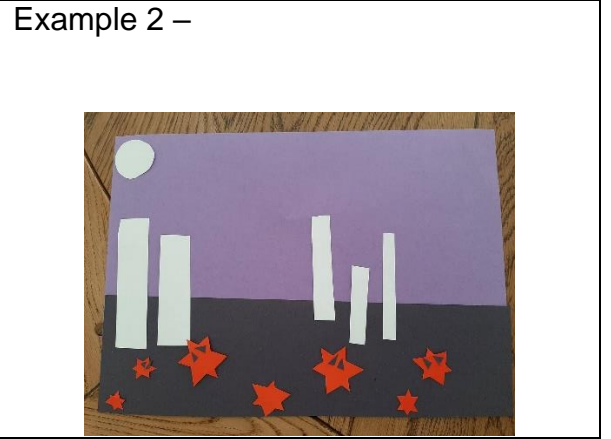
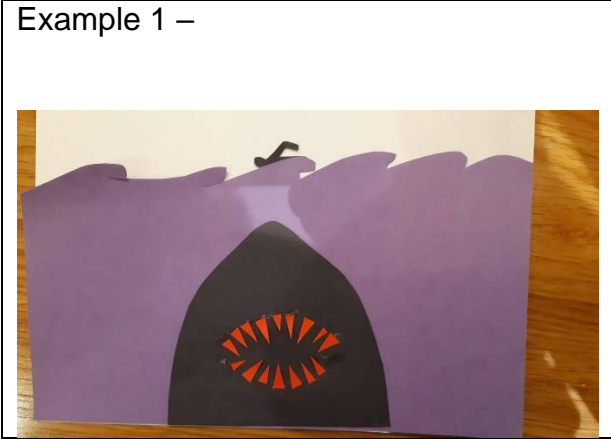
Example 2 –



Apple investigation:



Visual Arts inquiry:



Appendix H – Schedule for Interview 1

The following are the key questions for our upcoming interview. Please take time to read over them and reflect on your answers. The interview will follow this schedule, but may divert from these questions, to follow up on responses you provide.

Section 1: Teacher Agency

1. *Agency might be thought of as voice and choice, the ability and confidence of teachers to make decisions about learning and teaching in their classrooms.* What are your thoughts on this?
2. What choices do you think you make as a teacher?
3. Where do you feel that your voice is heard? (in the school more widely)
4. The new draft Primary School Curriculum (2020) positions teachers as “agentic professionals.” Previous curricula mostly position teachers as implementers of the curriculum. What are your thoughts on this?

Section 2: Teacher Relationships

5. How do your relationships with other teachers support your planning and teaching?
6. How does the school facilitate professional relationships between teachers?
7. How does your relationship with the children in your class affect your teaching and planning?

Section 3: Curriculum and Planning

8. What parts of the curriculum do you find most/ least useful in your planning/ in your teaching?
9. The 2020 draft Primary School Curriculum is based on 8 key competencies and organised by curricular areas and learning outcomes. In this way, it is similar to the Primary Language Curriculum. What are your thoughts about such a curriculum?
10. Which of the following approaches to planning would you recognise as closest to your own planning:
 - I start with the learning engagement/ activity
 - I start with the outcome to be achieved
 - I start with the curriculum documents
 - I start with the concept or skill to be developed
11. How do you use your plans in your daily teaching?
12. What would you like to change about the planning process?

Section 4: Inquiry-based learning

13. *Inquiry might be defined as a child-centred approach to teaching and learning, where children ask and investigate questions which are meaningful to them.* What are your thoughts on this?
14. What is your experience, if any, of inquiry-based learning?
15. What do you see as the potential benefits/ challenges of inquiry?

Section 5: Teacher Beliefs

16. What, do you think, are the main purposes of education?
17. Which of the following do you think are the most important aspects of your role as a teacher?
 - Resource to the learners
 - Director of learning engagements

- Motivator to children
- Assessor of children's learning
- Participant in the learning
- Organiser of the learning space

18. What do you think the children in your class bring to school and learning?

Section 6: Agency scale (we will talk through this in the interview)

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I tell school management what I like and what I don't like.							
2	I let my principal know what I'm interested in.							
3	I offer suggestions about how to make teaching and learning better.							
4	During meetings, I express my preferences and opinions.							
5	I let school management know what I need and want.							
6	When I need something, I can source it myself or ask for it.							
7	I try to make whatever the children are learning as interesting as possible							
8	I adjust what the children are learning so they can learn as much as possible							

19. Finally, are there any other comments you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your participation!

Appendix I – Information on 2020 Draft Curriculum Framework for Interview 1

Key Competencies of 2020 Draft Curriculum Framework



Curriculum areas of 2020 Draft Curriculum Framework

Figure 3: Curriculum areas and subjects

Stages	Language	Mathematics, Science and Technology	Wellbeing	Arts Education*	Social and Environmental Education	Religious/Ethical/Multi-Belief Education - Patron's Programme
STAGES 1 AND 2 (JUNIOR INFANTS - 2 ND CLASS)	LANGUAGE (IRISH AND ENGLISH)	MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION	WELLBEING	ARTS EDUCATION*	SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME
STAGES 3 AND 4 (3 RD - 6 TH CLASS)	IRISH ENGLISH MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES	MATHEMATICS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY	PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND VALUES EDUCATION	VISUAL ARTS MUSIC DRAMA (AND OTHER ASPECTS, E.G. DANCE, FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA)	HISTORY GEOGRAPHY	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME

Appendix J – Schedule for Interview 2: Summary for participants

The following are the key question areas for our upcoming interview. Please take time to read over them and reflect on your answers.

Section 1: Teacher Agency

In this section, we will discuss the ways in which the research might – or might not have – affected your teacher agency in terms of:

- Your voice
- Your choice
- Your confidence.

We will discuss these three aspects of agency in relation to your involvement in the research group, your classroom practice and your role in the school more widely.

Section 2: Teacher Relationships

In this section, we will discuss how the relationships with the others within the research might – or might not have – helped with your planning and teaching. I will ask you to consider what aspects of the group collaboration might have supported your practice.

Section 3: Curriculum and Planning

In this section, we will discuss your response to planning for inquiry. I will ask whether the inquiry approach affected your planning and use of the curriculum. I will ask you for examples of how inquiry might have helped you meet some curriculum objectives (eg. Inquiring into the diversity of plant life might have helped you to meet some curriculum objectives from the “Plants and Animals” strand unit of Science).

Section 4: Inquiry-based learning

In this section, we will discuss your understanding of inquiry and your thoughts on it as an approach to teaching. I will ask you about the benefits and challenges you experienced for yourself as teacher and for the children in your class. I will also ask about the factors which helped or hindered you from “doing” inquiry in your class over the last few months.

Section 5: Teacher Beliefs

In this section, we will discuss the ways in which the research might have been beneficial or not beneficial to you, as a teacher.

Section 6: Agency scale (repeated from Interview 1)

Finally, are there any other comments you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your cooperation.!

Appendix K – Schedule for Interview 2: Full schedule

Key Questions for each section are marked *KQ.
Follow-up/ probe questions are written in italics.

Section 1: Teacher Agency

1. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not at all, 5 = very much), do you feel that you got to use your voice during the research period (March - June)?
 - a. *KQ: Can you give examples of how you used your voice within:
 - (a) The research group
 - (b) The classroom
 - (c) The school more widely?
2. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not at all, 5 = very much), do you feel that you got to make choices during the research period?
 - a. *KQ: Can you give examples of the choices you made within:
 - (a) The research group
 - (b) The classroom
 - (c) The school more widely?
3. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not at all confident, 5 = very confident), did you feel confident in yourself as a teacher during the research period?
 - a. *KQ: Can you give examples of your confidence within:
 - (a) The research group
 - (b) The classroom
 - (c) The school more widely?
4. What choices did you not get to make during the time when we worked together as a group?

What impact did that have on you?
5. When did you feel you did not get to use your voice during the research time?

What impact did that have on you?
6. *KQ: Did the inquiry approach to teaching impact on your voice, choice and confidence? If so, can you give examples of this?

Section 2: Teacher Relationships

20. Did your relationships with other teachers within the research group help you in your
 - (a) planning
 - (b) teaching?

If yes, how? If not, why do they think this was?
21. *KQ: Did you feel supported within the community of practice – the research group?

What aspects of the group supported you? Can you give examples of when you were supported?
22. How did the online nature of the collaboration impact on your relationships with other teachers in the research group?

3: Curriculum and Planning

1. *KQ: Did the inquiry approach affect the way in which you used the curriculum? If yes, how? If not, why not?

2. Did inquiry help you to meet curriculum aims and objectives?
Can you give any examples?
3. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable did you feel with planning for inquiry?
Could you expand on this, please?
4. *KQ: Did inquiry help with your planning or was it an additional burden on planning?
Can you expand on this?
5. Is the way that we planned for inquiry – using concepts and big ideas useful to you in your day-to-day teaching? If yes, how, and if no, why not.
6. Could you see yourself taking this approach into core subjects? Why/ why not?

Section 4: Inquiry-based learning

1. How would you define inquiry?
What does it mean to you?
2. *KQ: After having experienced some inquiry teaching over the last three months, what are your thoughts on it as an approach to teaching?
3. What benefits did inquiry present to you as the teacher?
4. What challenges did inquiry present to you as the teacher?
5. What benefits did inquiry present to the children?
6. What challenges did it present to the children?
7. *KQ: Do you see yourself bringing inquiry into your teaching for the next school year? Why/ why not?
What aspects of inquiry seem most important to you for your teaching practice?
What aspects seem less important? Why?
8. What factors in your job as a teacher helped you to engage with (to “do”) inquiry over the research period?
9. What factors limited your ability/ willingness to “do” inquiry?
What occurrences along the way took precedence over inquiry? Can you explain these?

Section 5: Teacher Beliefs

1. What factors led you to sign up to participate in this research?
2. Was participating in the research what you expected?
3. What parts of the research were beneficial to you?
4. What parts were less beneficial to you?
5. *KQ: What have you learned from this experience?

Section 6: Agency scale (repeated from Interview 1) Finally, are there any other comments you would like to add?

Appendix L – Schedule for Interview 3 with Claire

AGENCY

1. What does teacher agency mean to you now?
2. Has this understanding changed, do you think?
3. What techniques that you have used/ observed/ read about particularly support teacher agency?
4. Where would you most like to have agency within the classroom/ school?
5. What would that agency look like?
6. What choices within your classroom/ school do you **not** want to make?
7. What are the advantages/ disadvantages of having agency, as you see it?
8. How do you think teachers can achieve agency within the structures of curriculum, planning and inspections from school management/ inspectorate?
 - a. Do you think curriculum should be written in a way that “aliens” can implement it? What would such a curriculum look like?

INQUIRY

9. How do you see the relationship between teacher agency and inquiry?
 - a. Would you consider preparing them for secondary as opposed to doing inquiry a choice?
 - b. Is the pressure to prepare them for secondary school coming from your own valuing of rote learning or is it an external pressure?
 - c. Where do you think your ideas about rote learning come from?
10. How has the experience of inquiry based learning (as part of the research) affected your view of agency?
11. What techniques/ strategies have you used to support inquiry this year?
12. Has anything in your teaching practice changed since we explored inquiry during the research? Do you think some of that could be attributed to the workshops/ other factors?

BELIEFS

13. How are your beliefs about teaching (that children need to be independent, that the purpose of education is preparing children for life) carried through in the way you teach?
14. Do your beliefs align with what you now know about inquiry?
15. Is there a tension between your beliefs and the education system? (You said in your first interview that the purpose of education is to develop life skills, but then the importance of rote learning for secondary school)
 - i. How do you facilitate these two different ideas of teaching?
 - ii. Which view is stronger?
 - iii. Where do they come from, do you think?
16. Is inquiry part of that tension? Why?

FINAL QUESTION

17. Do you want agency in curriculum or do you want to implement a curriculum that is developed by others (e.g. NCCA/ Department of Education)?

Appendix M – Diary Prompts

1. Prompts after Workshop 1:

Write in your reflective diary:

- a. Thinking over today's workshop, what is your current understanding of inquiry?

Prompts for reflection:

- b. What have you noticed about inquiry?
- c. What has surprised you?
- d. What questions do you have?

2. Prompts after Workshop 2

Prompts for reflection:

- a. What you learned
- b. Questions/ideas that you slowed down to consider
- c. Anything that stopped you learning

3. Prompts after Workshop 3

Prompts:

- a. Key ideas I have taken from the workshops....
- b. What my first step towards inquiry with my class will be....
- c. What I am looking forward to....
- d. What challenges I am anticipating....

Reflection Sheet

1. Complete the sentence in relation to inquiry:

"I used to think.... but now I think..." (eg. "I used to think inquiry was entirely child-led but now I think it can be guided by the teacher.")

2. What has surprised me about inquiry-based learning:
3. What I am wondering about now:
4. One (or more) thing(s) that I would have liked from the inquiry workshops:
5. What support I would like from the group during our planning meetings:
6. Any question/ suggestions/ comments:

4. Prompts for Month 1 of IBL in-class engagement

- a) Quick description of the inquiry engagement
- b) Snippets of questions or comments from children during the engagement
- c) What was your role as teacher?
- d) How did you feel about it? Was it enjoyable for you/ Were there moments of tension? Did you feel confident in your role and your planning?
- e) Anything else that strikes you

5. Prompts after Collaborative Meeting 2

- a) How do you feel after today's planning session? Do you feel equipped for the May inquiry?
- b) How would you like this month's inquiry to be different from the April inquiry
 - For you as a teacher in the room?
 - For the planning process?
 - For the children?
- c) How could I or the research group help support you in the planning and carrying out of the inquiry?

6. Prompts for Month 2 of in-class inquiry engagement

- a) Quick description of the learning engagement
- b) How did you plan for this engagement?
- c) Did the activity in the class follow your plan or move away from it?
- d) How did you, as teacher, respond to children's questions and activity?
- e) How did you feel about the learning engagement: enjoyable/ stressful, etc? How would it compare to your usual teaching practice?
- f) Anything else that strikes you

7. Prompts for Month 3 of in-class inquiry engagement

- a) Quick description of the learning engagement
- b) What were you doing during the engagement (eg. Observing/ listening/ scribing children's ideas/ handing out resources, etc)?
- c) What were the children doing?
- d) What went well?
- e) What went less well?
- f) How did you feel during it (eg. Interested/ stressed/ motivated/ uncomfortable, etc)?

8. Prompts for final meeting of CoP

- a) Reflect on your choices as a teacher during the inquiry period (April/ May/ June). Did the inquiry approach make any different (positive or negative) to the choices you were enabled to make?
- b) Did the research group function as a support to you during the inquiry period? How/ how not?
- c) What are your thoughts on planning for inquiry as compared to planning from the curriculum?
- d) What are your thoughts on inquiry after the research period? Have your ideas about inquiry changed? If so, in what way?
- e) What have you learned from the experience of participating in the research?
- f) What were the positives and negatives of your experience of this research participation?

Appendix N – Excerpt of Interview 2 transcript with coding

563 ALAN: I suppose as well, that agency was a little bit more
564 present in the UK or England, specifically, because there was
565 this constant monitoring. Yesterday I taught the addition
566 process, 3 digits plus 3 digits but then when I look at the work
567 they did that day, if I see that they're not getting it right, then I
568 have to look and see what's in the way. What are the barriers
569 to them getting on with this or understanding it? So in a way I
570 was responding to their voice through their work and then
571 coming back with something different the next day, something
572 I hadn't necessarily planned

1. more responding in
UK system

573 My experience or my understanding of the Irish system so far
574 is that there's not really a lot of really taking an interest in
575 what the children have produced in their work and at the same
576 respect, listening to what they're feeding back to you. And
577 then seeing that "Oh this has gone pear-shaped" or "They're
578 much further on that I expected so let's plan something
579 different."

1. Irish system less
responsive or interested in
children's work

2. space in Irish system for
agency/ choice (see L315-
325) but not agency as
responsive teaching

580 MN: Yeah

581 ALAN: Now, I don't necessarily – sometimes it feels like I'm
582 turning the next page in the textbook and I'm just going to tick
583 that. Quick explanation to the one person who didn't get it.
584 And I see a lack of awareness of agency that we have as
585 educators and that we should be constantly looking for the
586 feedback of the learning and responding so the learning is
587 going in the right direction.

1. teachers not looking at
children's learning

2. agency as responding to
children's learning

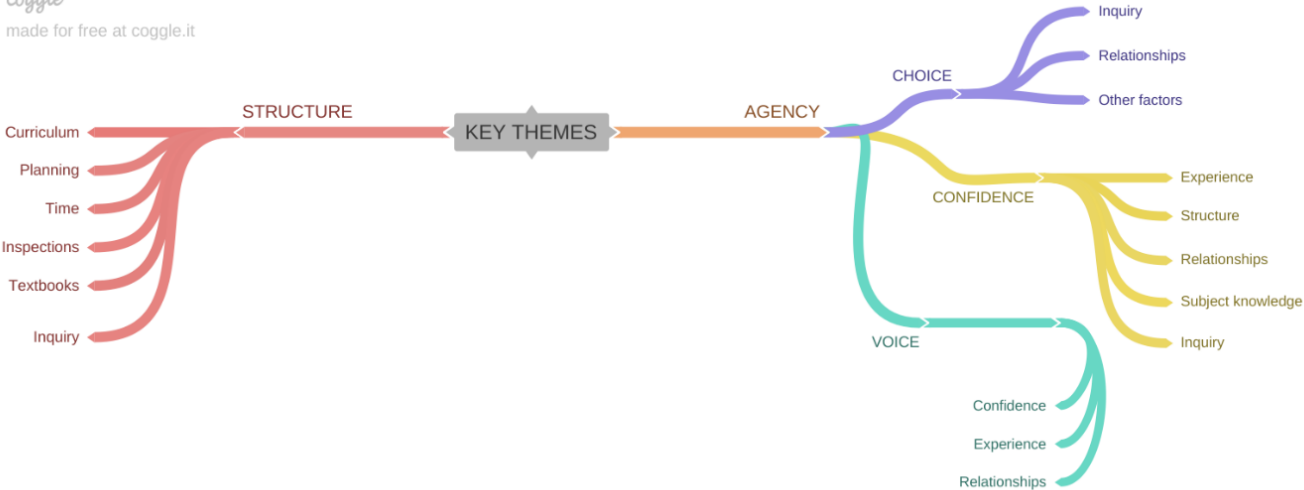
Appendix O – Diagrams of Data Analysis (Phases 3 – 4)

Refining Codes (Phase 3)



Reviewing and Refining Themes (Phase 4)

coggle
made for free at coggle.it



Appendix P – CPD Provision in Leinster Education Centres (November 2023 – January 2024)

Name of Centre	November	December	January
Athlone	Embracing Diversity Trauma Informed Practice Yeats Nobel Centenary Embracing Diversity Reluctant School Attendance		DEIS community of practice
Blackrock	Canva Inclusion of Autistic Students Playful Literacy Self-Regulation Team Dynamics Bring STEM to Life Embracing Diversity Biodiversity Trauma Informed Practice Sustainable Food & Agriculture Reluctant School Attendance Accelerated Reader Seasonal Crafts Circular Economy	Sensory Arts for SEN	Create your School Newsletter
Drumcondra	Distributive Leadership Technology for Múineadh na Gaeilge Biodiversity Creative Arts in STEM Creative Resources for Múineadh na Gaeilge Sensory Arts for SEN Sustainable Food & Agriculture Circular Economy EcoEd: Energy		Practical Digital Technologies
Dublin West	Applying for in-school management positions Wellbeing and SSE Climate Justice Craft Skills ChatGBT for Science Teachers Irish Beginners Using ICT in all Subjects Decodable Readers Biodiversity Dyscalculia Attachment Aware School Climate Risks and Opportunities Emotional Regulation Plant a Planet Yeats Nobel Centenary Aspiring Leaders Wellbeing Seminar for SNAs Sustainable Food & Agriculture Infant Oral Language Development Irish for Intermediates Circular Economy Awareness of COP28 Peer Observation School Caretaker Health & Safety Culinary Culture with Neurodiversity Managing Challenging Behaviour EcoEd: Energy	Developing Resilience Teaching about Energy & Climate	
Kildare	EpiPen Training Mata sa Rang Accelerated Reader	First Aid Responders	First Aid Responders

	<p>Restorative Practice Izak9s in Maths Yeats Nobel Centenary Manual Handling Kildare Lego Six Bricks Fire Warden Training First Aid School Caretaker Health & Safety</p>		
Kilkenny	<p>Role of SNA Technology for Múineadh na Gaeilge Assistive Technology for Students who are Deaf Time Management Yeats Nobel Centenary Creative Resources for Múineadh na Gaeilge Refreshing the Read-Aloud Assistive Technology for Blind Students</p>	<p>Christmas Cooking Picture Books for Literacy Learning Autism & Sensory Processing</p>	
Laois	<p>Time management Working with Children with Epilepsy Leadership Course Storytelling for processing Pathological Demand Avoidance Suicide Bereavement Levelled and Banded Books Biodiversity Accelerated Reader Film-Making Sustainable Food & Agriculture The Middle Leader Reading Comprehension Circular Economy Student Support Plan EcoEd: Energy</p>	<p>Playful Literacy Setting SMART Targets</p>	<p>Dysregulation Using Movement to Regulate Anger</p>
Monaghan	<p>Modern Foreign Language Science Challenges Embracing Diversity Biodiversity Building Resilience Programme Role of SNA Sensory Processing Disorder Trauma Informed Practice Middle Leadership Available Sensory Resources Sustainable Food & Agriculture Trauma Responsive School Reluctant School Attendance Resilient Leadership Using the WIAT-III ASD Early Intervention Circular Economy Supporting your Autistic Child at Home EcoEd: Energy</p>		
Navan	<p>Sensory inclusive classroom Restorative practice Science of Reading Fine Motor Skills UFLI Phonics Multidisciplinary Team Ocean Conservation First Aid Sensory Pathways Yeats Nobel Centenary Áiseanna Ghaeilge</p>	<p>Trauma Responsive School Restorative Practice Toe-by-Toe Training</p>	<p>Home School Community Liaison Challenging Behaviour</p>

	Co-regulation and Communication Sensory Play Maths Circles Guiding Writing Power of Play for Carer General Learning Disability Autism Webinar Maintaining Healthy Boundaries		
Wexford	Mindfulness & relaxation for neurodiverse children and teenagers Technology to Make Learning Easier First Aid Role of SNA Distributive Leadership Leadership Hour Supporting Students with Autism Nature Friendly Gardening Meet the Scientist Yeats Nobel Centenary Managing Challenging Behaviour Maths Stations Halloween Science Coding Collaborative Play with Lego Classroom Management Leading Learning Children with Down Syndrome	Emotional Intelligence Christmas STEM WIAT-III training Wellbeing for SEN students Supporting the Anxious Child Mindfulness Talk as Reflective Enquiry Wellbeing with SEN Students Warning Sides for Suicidal Thoughts Wellbeing as Focus for SSE Anxiety in Students with Autism ASD Community of Practice	Test to Read Training Students with Emotional Behavioural Difficulties Meet the Scientist Exploring Numicon Reframing Challenging Behaviour Restorative School Culture Planning for Every Student Dignity in the Workplace Review and Update IEP Leading Ireland's Future Together Sensory Play Asthma in the School Environment

Appendix Q – Timeline of Research indicating Researcher’s Presence/ Absence in School

	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Jul 2021 – Jan 2022	Feb 2022	Mar – Dec 2022	Jan – Jun 2023
Spoke to staff about project											
Recruited participants											
Interview 1											
Inquiry workshops											
Classroom inquiry											
Interview 2											
Interview 3											
Data analysis											
Researcher in school											
Researcher working remotely/ on leave											