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Perspectives on Partnership: A critical realist exploration of the characteristics and determinants of a multi-level partnership in action in the curriculum review of senior cycle education in Ireland, 2017-2019

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89102959

This thesis is submitted to University College Dublin in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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May 2022

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Abstract

The experience of senior cycle in Ireland has been dominated by the Leaving Certificate Examination despite continued efforts since the 1960s to broaden the education experience beyond a narrow curricular focus on examinations. Since the 1980s, the NCCA has been directly involved in these efforts, producing multiple papers, proposals and initiatives, and yet very little has fundamentally changed. The NCCA is a representative structure, based on a particular partnership model of policy development, and even though it is a policy space where curricular concerns are raised and negotiated by the partners in education, this cannot guarantee agreement on proposals as the recent disputes over junior cycle implementation can attest. In 2017, the NCCA embarked on a review of senior cycle education, designed to gather opinions and viewpoints from all the partners in education, including those not represented on the structures such as students. The NCCA worked with schools, teachers, parents and students to gather opinions on the aims and purpose of senior cycle and how it could develop to meet the needs of a diverse and changing society. This study aims to gather the perspectives of those involved in this review at various different levels, including an external policy view, and through a critical realist analysis of these discussions gain some insights into the characteristics and determinants of this partnership form of policy development and shed some light on the overt and covert influences on curricular reform in Ireland in order to better understand the processes at work.

Statement of original authorship

I hereby certify that the submitted work is my own work, was completed while registered as a candidate for the degree stated on the Title Page, and I have not obtained a degree elsewhere on the basis of the research presented in this submitted work.

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My thoughts are with my darling Lucy who never got to see her mam become a Doctor, she would be so proud.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my daughter, Lucy O'Reilly Fleming who left us too soon and whose absence makes every day a little less bright. For the most thoughtful, generous, funny and bubbly person I have ever known – we miss you. All my love always.

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List of Abbreviations

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
CAO	Central Applications Office
CBA	Classroom Based Assessments.
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEB	Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, a scheme developed by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005 aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities.
DES/DE	Department of Education and Science/Skills
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETBI	Educational Training Boards Ireland
HEA	Higher Education Authority
Ibec	Irish business and employer association
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IFUT	Irish Federation of University Teachers
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
ISSU	Irish Secondary Students' Union
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
JMB/AMCSS	Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools
L1LP	Level one learning programme is a programme for a specific group of students with general learning disabilities in the range of lower functioning moderate to severe and profound categories.
L2LP	Level two learning programme is a programme for a specific group of students who have general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories.
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year Leaving Certificate available to students who wish to follow a programme with a strong practical and vocational emphasis.
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established is the leaving certificate course followed by the majority of students in senior cycle.
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is designed to give a vocational dimension to the Leaving Certificate (established) and is followed by some LCE students if they fulfil certain criteria.
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCP-P	National Parents Council Primary
NPC-PP	National Parents Council Post Primary
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment

SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special Educational Needs
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TIMMS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
TY	Transition Year refers to an optional year that can be taken by students after junior cycle before starting senior cycle.
USI	Union of Students in Ireland
VEC	Vocational Education Committee (pre-dates the ETBI)

1. Introduction

The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way -
William Butler Yeats, Among School Children (Yeats, 1928)

1.1 The research topic

What is the purpose of education? Yeats in his poem *Among School Children* written after a visit to a school in 1926, suggests what was seen as important in Irish classrooms shortly after the foundation of the Irish Free State: To cipher and sing, reading books and history encompass the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic along with a rewritten history suitable for a fledgling nation, and with a side of vocational education in the description to cut and sew and be neat in everything. There is a derisory tone implied in the line "in the best modern way." The new government of Irish Free State in 1922, despite its revolutionary origins, looked to conserve the past and there is very little 'modern' thought evident in the early educational policies (Akenson, 1975). The educational structures of the previous British-run state were retained without question and there is little evidence of discussion on the aims of education in the documentation available. The *Proposed Rules and Programmes for Secondary School* (Department of Education, 1924) defined the programmes available for students by means of the examinations they could sit. The limited numbers who could afford to remain in full-time education until they completed the Leaving Certificate examination were destined for third level academia followed by careers in the professions or the upper echelons of the civil service. None of this was questioned by the Commission on Secondary Education tasked with drafting a programme "to meet the national requirements, while allotting its due place to the Irish language" (Commission on Secondary Education, 1921).

In the international context, contemporary education theorists had different ideas about the purpose of education. For Dewey (1902), the purpose of education was broader than the stated narrow focus evident in the *Rules and Programmes* documents and instead

encompassed a more democratic ideal that included the holistic development of all students in order to contribute to society. Similarly, Montessori (1912) argued for a child-centred curriculum with a complementary pedagogy. In the United Kingdom, in the years after the Irish Free state had been established, multiple reports argued for a shift in the aims, purposes, curriculum and pedagogy employed in secondary schools (Board of Education, 1921, 1938) and British education policy moved away from an elitist, examination-centric curriculum as a result (British Parliament, 1944). But there is little evidence in Irish education policy of the influence of any of these educational theorists in the early years of the new Free State (Walsh, 2012, p. 90).

In Ireland, questions on the aims of education at upper secondary one hundred years later are still dominated by the influence of the Leaving Certificate examination (Banks et al., 2018). The intense media scrutiny and commentary on the Leaving Certification examinations have formed the basis of a number of studies (McCormack et al., 2020; O'Donoghue et al., 2017). Since 1976, access to third level education has been mediated by a system of 'points' allocated on the basis of Leaving Certificate results. In 1998, the Department of Education commissioned a report into the dominance of this 'points system' on education. The Commission on the Points System noted "a narrowing of the curriculum arising from the tendency to teach to the examination and an undue focus on the attainment of results" (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.108). Depressingly, this echoes statements on the narrowing of teaching to focus on examination attainment made a century before by various British governmental enquiries into the impact of examinations in Ireland prior to the founding of the state (Molony, 1919; Palles, 1899). But, if it has been repeatedly recognised that overt focus on examinations narrow the attainment of the broad aims of the curriculum (Banks et al., 2010; Banks & Smyth, 2015a; Government of Ireland, 1999; Madaus & MacNamara, 1970a; Molony, 1919; Palles, 1899), why has little changed in the dominance of examinations in Ireland in the interim?

Internationally, curricular thought has moved significantly. For Biesta (2009), the conversation about the aims and purpose of education has been lacking from recent educational discussions. According to Biesta, the lack of explicit engagement with these aims and values in education can lead to an implicit reliance on a particular 'common sense' view of what education is for (Biesta, 2009, p. 37). In the words of John Schostak (1991),

“If education is supposed to be a preparation for life, then for what kind of life is a curriculum to be a preparation?” The link between questioning what sort of society a state wishes to develop and what life a curriculum should prepare you for, are fundamental questions in the formulation of any curriculum development or reform. But to whom or where these questions are asked, and who listens to the answers depends on where and how curriculum or curriculum policy is developed. The development of curriculum policy in Ireland has moved from the centralised prescription of the Department of Education evident in the early years of the Free State to the representative, statutory, advisory body, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as established in the Education Act (1998). The emergence of the NCCA as a statutory body with responsibility to advise the Minister on matters relating to curriculum and assessment marked a change in the formulation of curricular advice that will be more fully explored in Chapter 2. Throughout its history, from the early days in the Interim Curriculum and Examination Board in the early 1980s to the reformed NCCA from 1987 to date, there have been attempts to review the upper secondary stage of education and instil a broader set of learner experiences with a focus on skills development, but despite this, the experience of senior cycle and Leaving Certificate for students in Ireland has remained steadfastly exam-focused (Smyth, 2019).

The introduction of a new Junior Cycle Framework in 2012 and revised in 2015 (Department of Education and Skills, 2015), and the increased discussion and debate on the pressure felt by students at senior cycle level (Banks & Smyth, 2015b), led to calls for a review of senior cycle education. To try to fulfil this objective, the NCCA embarked on an unusual and innovative process that reviewed senior cycle education to ascertain what is valued by the system and to formulate a shared vision for senior cycle education in Ireland. This engagement in a conversation on the aims and values of education, as recommended by Biesta, was a new departure. A questioning of the ‘common-sense’ view of what was important. A full exploration of what was involved in this review and why this was an unusual departure in the formulation of policy is detailed in Chapter 2. The Senior Cycle Review involved 41 schools across the country and sought responses from teachers, parents and students. The results of two cycles of questions for schools were analysed by the ESRI (Banks et al., 2018) and the resultant summary report was published for public

consultation (NCCA, 2019b) before the formulation of a Senior Cycle Advisory Report for the Department of Education and Skills.

This review built on the specific model of partnership present in Irish policy development since the 1980s. To understand how this partnership model worked in this unusual review of senior cycle education, the intention of this research is to examine this process of policy evolution based on a partnership model of policy development. The detailed examination of the core curriculum documentation and attention to the discourses and debates in relation to these processes provides an insight into the specific and particular partnership model found in policy development in Ireland. This will have implications for any further developments in this type of curricular reform and policy development. To fully understand the structures, actors and influences in the development of education policy in Ireland, a brief overview of the system and how it developed will be necessary.

1.2 A brief history of curriculum and curriculum development in the Irish context

A state-funded education system in Ireland was formally established with the introduction of widespread, free primary education in 1831. By the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of children attended a primary school and stayed, in declining numbers, to the end of that period of schooling, around the age of 12. Those who could afford the fees and had the inclination, proceeded to secondary education[1], or post-primary education as it is referred to in Irish documentation. This post-primary stage of education spanned three years and culminated in an Intermediate examination or continued for a further two years of study and ended with the Leaving Certificate examination. This structure of Irish education has remained broadly the same with the first three years of post-primary corresponding to lower-secondary education and the two final years with upper secondary education seen in other jurisdictions. A more detailed account of the changing shape and nature of the Irish education system can be found in Chapter 2.

The origin of the Leaving Certificate examination in Ireland pre-dates the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Originally, the Leaving Certificate Examination, along with its incarnation for slightly younger students, the Intermediate Examination, was introduced

[1] Some remained in primary schools while availing of a secondary school curriculum in these schools called 'secondary tops', further details can be found in Coolahan (1981).

by the Intermediate Board for Education as a means of funding denominational schools without explicitly funding denominational education. Payments were given for the results achieved in the Leaving Certificate and Intermediate examinations following the introduction of the Intermediate Education Act in 1878 (Coolahan, 1981). The emphasis on the examination at the latter end of the nineteenth century is hardly surprising when the purpose and function of this stage of education was entirely exam driven. Despite contemporary criticism of the impact the examination system was having on the broader aims of education (Dale & Stephens, 1905; Molony, 1919; Palles, 1899) without the necessary support given to the development of teacher professional practice and an alternative means of resourcing schools, examinations still remained the central concern of schools and schooling up to the founding of the new state.

After the founding of the State in 1922, the system of examination remained static, and the dominance of the exams continued. The Commission on Secondary Education charged with setting out a programme for education in the new state summed up their vision for secondary education by continuing the same system of examination as the previous Intermediate Boards and iterated "That there be at least two written and oral examinations, one at 15-16, at which age the great majority leave for business, etc.,[the Intermediate Examination] and one at 18 for those proceeding to the University [the Leaving Certificate examination]" (Department of Education, 1924). The purpose of education at Leaving Certificate level was explicitly for those who planned to enter university and no other considerations are evident in the documentation. The early Ministers of Education were more concerned with establishing and maintaining an education system that was financially viable and upheld the cultural beliefs of the new state to worry about curricular innovation (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2012). The years immediately after the second world war saw the continuation of this "conservative consensus" (Walsh, 2016, p. 236) which was at odds with changing beliefs and policies about education evident elsewhere in the world such as the Butler Act in Britain which provided free secondary education for all pupils (British Parliament, 1944), and in the United States the Smith Hughes Act (1917) and George-Barden Act (1946) which funded and diversified second level education programmes beyond a purely academic focus. In Ireland, the natural conservatism of the civil service was not even overcome when external

bodies were founded to advise on the emerging curricular needs of the state. The Council of Education in 1950 established by the then Minister, Richard Mulcahy, published findings that were predictably conservative. The second report of the Council published in 1960 focused on post-primary education and in it, the Council dismissed the idea of a secondary education for all as utopian and undesirable (Walsh, 2016).

Despite that declaration, within six years the introduction of free secondary education for all was announced by Donogh O'Malley, the then Minister for Education, in 1966. This also led to a revision of the syllabi to be examined from 1969 (Coolahan, 1981; Mulcahy, 1981, 1989), the introduction of new comprehensive schools and an expansion of the higher education sector (O'Donoghue, 1999). The central role of the Minister in the formulation of policy has been well documented (Harris, 1989; McManus, 2016; Walsh, 2016) and in this instance, the announcement by the Minister caused unprecedented shockwaves through the Department as there was no forewarning given and no infrastructure was in place. Some of the reasons for O'Malley's announcement lie in the actions of a previous Minister for Education, Patrick Hillery who in 1962 initiated the OECD investigation into Irish education and resulted in the *Investment in Education Report* (OECD, 1965) which exposed the new thinking about education that existed in the government circles at the time. This view of education as linked to economic success, required necessary investment and was fundamentally influenced by international organisations such as the OECD (Walsh, 2016). This had its roots in the shift in economic policy from protectionism to free trade advanced by T.K. Whitaker as secretary of the Department of Finance from 1956. The economic imperative for education resulted in the development of syllabi that had a decidedly economic focus. Subjects such as accounting, business organisation and economics replaced the generic subject commerce and there was a changed emphasis on language acquisition from the classical Latin and Greek to modern European languages. This represents the shift, as described by O'Sullivan (2005), from a 'theocentric' paradigm to a 'mercantile' paradigm of education in Ireland from the 1960s. When Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, various funds provided financial support for certain curricular innovations that followed this mercantile paradigm, for instance European Social Funds (ESF) provided the financial support to develop Regional Technical Colleges and the National Institutes of

Higher Education in Limerick and Glasnevin and European Community projects supported curriculum innovation for second level education.

Curriculum innovation in the late 1960s and 1970s was mainly carried out by units at a remove from the Department of Education. The Shannon Curriculum Development Centre was established under the aegis of the Board of Management for St Patrick's Comprehensive School in Shannon in 1972. As part of the new vision for schools promoted by Patrick Hillery in the 1960s, the comprehensive school aimed to provide a combined academic and vocational education, and the greenfield site of the new town development in Shannon provided a location to develop new curricula and programmes designed to suit the diverse cohort of students attending the school. Some of the programmes developed in Shannon were supported by the European Community Projects funding and one project, the Spiral II project, focused on developing programmes for students of post-compulsory age who wished to remain at school but for whom the traditional Leaving Certificate offered few opportunities (Gleeson, 1990). The City of Dublin VEC Curriculum Development Unit was another independent curriculum body developing programmes and units for schools across the country such as the Junior Cycle Schools Programme and the modules that formed the basis for the development of Youthreach developed as part of a network of European Community projects (Crooks, 1990). Another curriculum development unit in the Tipperary (N.R.) VEC developed alternative mathematics programmes for senior cycle and health education and life skills modules (McKernan, 1990). But these initiatives were all developed outside the Department of Education and there were increasing calls for the establishment of an expert-led curriculum development body first mooted by the OECD report in 1966 and further referenced over the 1960s and 70s by various political manifestos, departmental committees and the 1980 *White Paper on Educational Development* (Hyland, 1990).

The form and function of an independent board for curriculum and examinations was discussed, proposed, dismissed and redesigned on multiple occasions over the 1970s and early 1980s (J. Harris, 1989). By 1984 the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was established with the intention that a statutory board be established on a permanent basis to deal with both curriculum and examinations within two years. Gemma Hussey, the

then Minister, broke with tradition by introducing a partnership approach to education policy making in the establishment of the CEB with the inclusion of management bodies and union representatives on the Board (McManus, 2016). The change in government resulted in the establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in 1987 with responsibility for the development of curriculum but with only an advisory function over assessment (Harris, 1989). A full examination of the evolving structures of the CEB and the NCCA and the limitations of those structures can be found in Chapter 2.

In its short existence the Curriculum and Examinations Board published a number of key documents including the *In Our Schools* report which outlined a framework for curriculum and assessment reform (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1986a). This resulted in the first change to the examination structure in the introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989 and first examined in 1992. However, as the assessment procedures remained within the remit of the Department, other than the removal of the name Intermediate from the assessments it is doubtful that any revolutionary change occurred (Smyth et al., 2007).

Arising from the work of the decentralised curriculum development units in Shannon and the City of Dublin CDU, the more innovative programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme were introduced nationally in 1995. Along with introduction of a formalised Transition Year, this represented a fundamental change to the structure of senior cycle. The LCA offered an alternative certification and system of examination for students at this level (Gleeson et al., 2002), however its aim to challenge the established dominance of the traditional Leaving Certificate has not materialised (Banks et al., 2014).

Attempts to reform senior cycle education published by the NCCA in 2005 included a changed assessment schedule, the unitization of Leaving Certificate subjects and more flexible learning options for students (NCCA, 2005). The proposals were dismissed by the then minister for education, Mary Hanafin as being the 'Rolls Royce' model of education and assessment (Flynn, 2005a). Instead of sweeping reform, some of the proposals around introducing a "second assessment component" and new courses such as politics and computer science, were gradually phased into senior cycle. This gradual evolution was more palatable than sudden change in what was expected of the system, and the particular

partnership model of the NCCA allowed the tinkering on the edges of curriculum policy without challenging any fundamental beliefs of the actors involved. An examination of this evolution of the Leaving Certificate programmes, the efforts to change the dominance of the examination over the past century, and the context of those efforts will be presented in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The focus of reform then shifted to the less high stakes arena of Junior Cycle. However, the impact of the economic crash in 2008 and the series of fiscal measures undertaken as a result by successive governments meant that the context of the introduction of Junior Cycle reform was not conducive to easy implementation. The proposed changes to assessment procedures proved a red line and resulted in protracted industrial disputes (MacPhail et al., 2018). Despite its rocky start, the junior cycle has introduced new learning experiences to the curriculum in the form of Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) and Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings. These experiences have created a greater agency for teachers as curriculum makers (Dempsey, 2021) and resulted in calls for a re-evaluation of the continuity of learning between junior and senior cycle (Byrne, 2018). The dominance of the singular pathway through upper secondary education, and the absence of a relevant alternative/vocational/professional/technical/creative pathway is out of step with counterparts in other European countries (Burke et al., 2016) and has led to calls from those outside the education sphere to broaden the curriculum available (Donnelly & Kearney, 2019). In response to these growing pressures, the NCCA in 2017, began an unprecedented review of the provision at senior cycle to assess its fitness for purpose and how it provides, or could provide, an educational framework suitable for the future needs of all the citizens of the state. In undertaking the Senior Cycle Review the NCCA enlisted 41 schools to discuss on aims and purpose of this stage of education and give feedback on how they would like to see it evolve. This direct involvement of schools, including teachers, parents, and students, in a national reflective process on the system they were directly experiencing, marked a new departure in policy formulation. A full description of the process of the review, and explication of how it went beyond just a review of existing policies, is presented in Chapter 2.

In light of all of the above, this presents a number of challenges and directions of travel for future policy developments at senior cycle and for research in this area. The perspectives

of those who participated in the review, and what they felt their impact to be, will have an impact on any future developments of this nature. The review involved multiple levels of actors in schools but was also shaped and influenced by those at other levels in the structures of the education system and within the structures of the NCCA. Exploring the perspectives of these actors at various levels in the Senior Cycle Review of their roles within the partnership process provides this study with data to analyse to determine the characteristics and determinants of a multi-level partnership in action. As outlined above and further developed in Chapter 2 and 3, education policy is often influenced by external factors such as the economic or social context and international trends and forces. The analysis of the discussions held with the participants in this study, along with in-depth textual analysis of the related documentation, will aim to reveal and to better understand some of the influencing forces at work in this policy field.

Since the review was carried out (2017-2019), the education system in Ireland, and worldwide, has been impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic. Unprecedented changes in the working of schools and the disruption to the traditional implementation of examination systems have characterised the fluctuating system over 2020 and 2021. This obviously influenced the thoughts and responses of the participants in reflecting on their experience of the review and Chapter 2 also gives a brief insight into the changing context in which the interviews were held. This study then also provides a glimpse of the impact of a global phenomenon on the thinking of multiple level actors on curriculum policy development at a moment of crux.

1.3 Theoretical stance and approach

The research stance I have adopted allows a critical focus on two main strands: documentation and voice representation. The actors in this study are active in multiple roles as policy makers, curriculum implementers, school leaders, union members and/or representatives as well as also being parents and former students themselves. This multiplicity of roles and relationships between the actors requires an ontology that recognises the complexity of these relational encounters. Critical Realism as outlined by Bhaskar (1975) and further developed by Archer (1995) and Elder-Vass (2007, 2012) offers

a depth ontology that provides a means of recognising the levels of influence that have an impact on our understanding of the world beyond the observable and empirical level (Alderson, 2020). This stratified view of reality acknowledges the existence of the empirical observable world and the actual domain where actual events caused by mechanisms at work can be seen, but it also recognises the real domain where unobservable mechanisms, structures and powers have an influence on events (Withell & Haigh, 2018). Critical Realism also offers a means of examining the links between structure and agency over time. Agency is defined as an individual's will and capacity to act, but teacher agency is recognised as part of a complex dynamic influenced by society and culture (Lasky, 2005). This stratified world is characterised by emergence, where the properties of a structure may be more than the sum of its reducible parts (Sayer, 2000).

An ontology rooted in these principles provides a medium for understanding the complex, stratified process of education policy formation in Ireland and in particular the processes experienced in the senior cycle review. The actors at various levels are influential in different ways, hold multiple roles and they influence perspectives and agency in various situations. An exploration of the apparent stagnation of education policy in Ireland may be helped by an understanding of the forces for change and forces for stasis at work in the structures of development. A full description of this theoretical framework and its implications for this research can be found in Chapter 3. If we can understand these forces at work, it may provide lessons for future developments and provide learning points for developers of curriculum policy at all levels.

1.4 Theoretical understanding of curriculum and its development

Globally, curriculum theory has been significantly influenced by a number of key theorists. John Dewey's (1902) child-centred curriculum has been fundamental in the development of state curricula across the world. Tyler (1949) introduced a more technicist view of the curriculum and how it should be organised but still started with the learners as the source of curriculum objectives. In the United States, the thinking of psychologists such as Edward Thorndike had a transformative effect on education. His belief in the scientific nature of knowledge transfer changed the focus of education from the humanist tradition promoted by Dewey to a mechanistic measurement by numbers (Gibboney, 2018) which has been

prevalent in American curriculum theory since the 1930s. A different view of curriculum is represented by the *Didaktik* tradition as outlined by authors such as Humbolt (1793/ 2000), Klafki (2000) and Deng (2018). This tradition views the aim of curriculum as the holistic development of the student that is created through the triadic relationship between the student, content and the teacher. Each of these views can have an influence on the development and valuing of teacher identity and professionalism in different contexts. Chapter 3 explores these concepts for a fuller understanding of what we mean by curriculum in order to conduct this study.

These theories of curriculum have different impacts on policy development across the world such as the common core standards of the USA with its widespread use of multiple choice testing, as opposed to the German tradition of written, oral and practical assessment (Eurydice, 2022). This gives some indication of the importance of culture and context on the development of curriculum, particularly national state curriculum. The origin and development of state curricula and their purposes are outlined in Chapter 3. Internationally, curricular reform at this level is increasingly focused on developing knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes and values (OECD, 2018). The influence of this international/supranational trend can be seen in the reforms at junior cycle set out in the 2015 Framework for Junior Cycle (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). In the Irish context, in addition to the influence of international organisations, the influence of the Catholic church and the teacher unions on the development of curriculum has been extensively examined (Gleeson, 2000b; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021; Sullivan, 2018). Chapter 2 gives an overview of how some of these influences had an impact on the Irish context of curriculum development. Through an examination of the evolution and impact of these influences, this study aims to better understand the unobservable structures and mechanisms at work.

1.5 Partnership model of curriculum development

Curricular development happens at various levels from the national policy development level to the classroom implementation level (Dempsey et al., 2021; Van den Akker & Thijs, 2009). In Ireland, there is what is described as a 'partnership model' of policy development. This model evolved from the social partnership theories originating in post-war West

Germany where government, unions and business interests united to create economic and social stability (Streeck & Hassel, 2010). These theories gradually made their way into political discourse in Ireland in the late 1970s and early 80s as a result of increased involvement with European bodies culminating in a series of social partnership agreements from 1987 to 2008 (Ó Riain, 2006). One of the side effects of this focus on partnership was the introduction of institutional partnership structures (Ó Riain, 2013). These structures could provide a deliberative space for complex issues to be discussed but also provided a "flexible network of governance" (Hardiman, 2006, p. 344). The influence of this partnership model resulted in the representative structure of the NCCA where partners in education such as management bodies, teacher unions and interested groups such as Foras na Gaeilge have a say in the development of policy. All curricular developments pass through the NCCA structures and so, theoretically, all partners are involved in the developments. This partnership model has been questioned in the past (Gleeson, 2004; Granville, 1994, 2004) and recent industrial relations issues evident in the implementation of junior cycle reform would support this questioning of its effectiveness. Granville (2004) in his analysis of the partnership model of the NCCA identified one of the deficits in this model as the lack of innovation and creativity possible in the representative committee system. He concludes that the most radical or divergent curriculum innovations emerged instead from "self-defining communities of practice in schools" (Granville, 2004, p. 86).

The use of the word 'partnership' belies the inherent hierarchical structure. One of the partners involved in the development of education policy in the NCCA is the Department of Education. The Department is overseen by the Minister and the role of the Minister in the partnership model can be seen as problematic. The central role of the Minister is outlined succinctly by Harris (1989):

> Educational policy making is ultimately the prerogative of the government; specifically of that cabinet member designated as having particular responsibility for education. (Harris, 1989, p. 7)

The central role of the Minister as a factor inhibiting change was evident in 2005 when the initial proposals for senior cycle reform were introduced. The NCCA, established as a statutory body under the aegis of the Department of Education, is charged with advising the Minister on curricular matters, but the advice is created at a step removed from the

Department itself. In theory, the NCCA may propose advice that could be considered radical. The role of the Minister however is to take the advice or reject it. In 2005, Minister Hanafin rejected the radical elements of the proposed reform (Flynn, 2005b) and attention shifted to the Junior Certificate. There was a different reaction to NCCA proposals in 2011 around reform to the Junior Cycle when the then Minister, Ruari Quinn, not only accepted the reform proposals but extended the radical nature of the reforms (Flynn, 2012). The announced reform included the proposal that the State Examinations Commission (SEC) involvement in the examinations be limited to the examinations for Irish, English and mathematics and all other assessments would be carried out by teachers. Given the social context of financial austerity which had a direct impact on the wages and working conditions of teachers, this proved too much change for the system to bear, and so led to a prolonged period of industrial relations disputes in education (Murchan, 2018).

The direct influence of a minister can be seen in more recent years with the reaction of Minister Joe McHugh to a public campaign for history to be reinstated as a core subject in Junior Cycle. The fact that it had never been a core subject in 48% of secondary schools, as the core status only referred to the voluntary secondary schools to whom the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* referred, was irrelevant in the media and political discourse on the issue. The decision by the Minister, to commission a report on the topic from the NCCA and then reject the advice therein (NCCA, 2019a), and make history a core subject for all students in all schools has caused organisational difficulties for schools with neither the teachers nor the capacity to include it in their timetables (Department of Education and Skills, 2020a). It also ignored the wide spectrum of students in the system. For those students following a Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programme for Junior Cycle, a new course in this now mandatory subject had to be developed to comply with the announcement by the Minister. This direct political act on the part of a minister had the potential to derail the entire Framework for Junior Cycle, which moved away from subject specific requirements, and which had been hard fought in the preceding years. Further detail on the influence of ministerial decisions on the policy development process is outlined in Chapter 2.

The ‘partnership’ model does not include all partners in the process. One of the partners not included is students. Granville (2004, 2021) notes the absence of student voice in curriculum matters but the impact of Covid 19 has changed this. Students, through the representation of the ISSU, had a central position in the discussions on the alternative arrangements for examinations in 2020 and 2021. Minister Foley has also announced the inclusion of a student representative on the NCCA Council (Foley, 2022). In the Senior Cycle Review students, along with parents and teachers, were central to the review and so in this study, the voices of each of these levels will be included in the discussion and analysis. Chapter 3 will also examine the practical and theoretical issues around student representation in policy development.

1.6 Purpose, aims and research questions

The central purpose of this research study is to explore the characteristics and determinants in the partnership model of policy development, specifically the partnership model that was evident in the Senior Cycle Review, 2017-2019. In order to do this, the perspectives of the actors involved in the senior cycle review were analysed to understand the process of curricular policy development in relation to senior cycle education in Ireland for three levels of participants engaged in the senior cycle review and a further fourth level of interviewee not directly involved in the review but who, as experts in the area of curriculum development, offered insights on these processes. This research is undertaken in order to better understand the nature of the development processes at work, to understand the nature of the political interventions in those processes and to enhance understanding of the place of the teaching population within these processes in order to improve engagement with curricular development at a local and national level.

The research questions that frame this study are:

- What are the characteristics and determining features of the ‘partnership’ activities that underscored the Senior Cycle Review (2017-2019) in Ireland?

- How did this exercise in partnership manifest across the range of interests and roles of the participants? Who engaged in the work and what was their experience of this engagement?

- What insights in terms of the processes and methodologies of policy development does a critical realist analysis of the Senior Cycle Review bring forward?

Using the description of the levels of involvement in the policy development process outlined by Van den Akker and Thijs (2009) and later by Priestley et al. (2021), the actors involved in the review are described in this study in terms of their spheres of influence in the policy arena. These are described as the macro, meso and micro levels, further detailed in Chapter 4. The influences and intent of actors at the macro level of policy development have almost inevitably been at the centre of the few studies on curricular policy development in Ireland, but this study aims to gather the voices at various levels including those at the micro level, the parents, teachers and students, who were directly involved in the review. Through an examination of the data gathered, along with an in-depth analysis of relevant documentation, this study explores the perspectives of the actors and from that exploration undertakes to try to identify the influences on policy development in Ireland and the characteristics and determinants of the partnership model utilised.

1.7 Approach to this research

As an exercise in eliciting and analysing the perspectives, motives and activities of the multiple actors involved, as they reflected on their navigation of the review over the 2017-2019 period and the shift in their perceptions since, a qualitive study is the most suitable method to obtain the rich descriptions sought. The parameters of a case study, where an event is examined from multiple perspectives, was chosen as a guide to the research design. The work of Bartlett and Vavrus (2009) on the benefits of a vertical case study was instrumental in deciding on the shape of the research study. The vertical case study allows for actors at various levels in the review in Ireland to have their voices heard and their experience valued. Actors at the macro level of policy development, the meso level of school leadership and policy discussion, the micro level of school implementation were identified and approached to participate in this research. Prior to the interview stage a textual analysis of the previous policy developments in this area was carried out to inform the research and help to shape the research protocol which guided the interviews. This planning and detailing of the methodological decisions made are further presented in Chapter 4.

In the initial planning, these three levels were the only ones considered, but as part of the background research, other key voices on the context of Irish education policy development and international curriculum policy development emerged and the researcher decided to extend the categories of participant to include a fourth category: external expert. This category of participant was external to the review and so could not give an insight into the experiences of the actors on the ground in Ireland, but their previous research and viewpoints on the process of development provided alternative perspectives where participant assertions could be measured against the external viewpoints. This external viewpoint, along with textual analysis of the policy documentation and the research journal of the researcher sought to alleviate concerns of validity and reliability often associated with qualitative research design (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Informed by a broadly grounded approach to this research (Charmaz, 2001), a research protocol was developed rather than a strict set of interview questions to be rigidly followed. This allowed the interviews to cover topics that had not been considered by the researcher while still ensuring that the key elements were discussed. The elite status of some of the interview participants and the narrow field of policy makers in the Irish context meant that total anonymity could not be guaranteed but it was agreed with participants that references to the participants would be de-identified in the published research (Conti & O'Neil, 2007).

The positionality of the researcher as an Education Officer in the NCCA, who had been directly involved in the review and in the preparation of documents during the review and since, obviously has had an impact on the research. As a piece of insider research the advantages gained by having privileged access to participants and an in-depth understanding of the workings of the process being described (Merton, 1972) needed to be set in balance with the particular ethical dilemmas and quest for objective stance that such research brings (Mercer, 2007). In the interview process, efforts were made to separate the work of this study from other interactions with the participants in order to delineate the experience, this is detailed in Chapter 4. However, given the multiple influences and roles held by all of the participants, it is acknowledged that all accounts are

embedded in their context and while efforts at obtaining objectivity through reflexive techniques were applied they may not always have been entirely successful (Sandelowski, 1993).

A full exploration of the methodology, including an account of the interviews, transcription, coding and analysis processes used, can be found in Chapter 4.

1.8 Significance of this study

The purpose of education is one of the central questions for educational theorists. How successful one considers an education system to be depends on what you consider the purposes of that system. In a brief review of the history of the Irish education system, the dominance of the final examinations becomes very evident. The efforts to evolve curriculum to better align with the stated and implicit purposes of this stage of education, such as the holistic development of all students, have been steadfastly resisted in favour of the singular academic focus of senior cycle to provide a selection mechanism for third level entry. The Senior Cycle Review is the most recent attempt to examine this stage of education and engage in a discussion of what the aims and values of this stage of education are or should be, through a partnership model of engagement.

The specific form of partnership evident in Irish curricular policy development has been in existence in Ireland since the establishment of the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board and evolved in the establishment of the statutory NCCA. The designated bodies represented have negotiated the space of curricular development with varying degrees of success over the past thirty years. The Senior Cycle Review built on this partnership model to examine what were viewed as the pressing questions about senior cycle: what is its purpose, how well is this achieved, and how should it develop in the future? The usual representative structures were augmented by the participation of 41 schools in the review process in the school-based phase of the review.

This unusual and unprecedented review of the system by the participants in the system in order to develop policy in the Senior Cycle Review is the focus of this study. Through a vertical case study involving participants at various levels in the review process from the

international/national levels, the meso-level of management and the micro level of teachers, parents and students involved in the review, the experiences of the participants were sought through interviews and the results analysed to identify themes and influencing factors in the discourse. The results of these findings will help to better understand the visible and invisible influences at work in the process of curriculum development and the characteristics and determinants of this process of policy development. The critical realist approach to the research reveals the causal mechanisms at work in the social and cultural structures represented by senior cycle and the policy development structures. It will also offer an approach to examining the complex challenges of understanding the partnership model that underpins the policy development process.

The value of the research is that it offers a unique insight into the process of curricular development in Ireland in a high-stakes public policy arena. Due to the context of this study, during the Covid pandemic, this research also offers a real-time perspective on the impact of an event of global significance on decision-making, policy development and personal viewpoints of participants at various levels of policy engagement.

2. The Irish Education System in Context

2.0 Introduction

The Leaving Certificate, awarded at the end of senior cycle education in Ireland has important cultural significance. Every June the newspapers report on the daily examinations. Pages of newspaper print and hours of radio time are dedicated to analysis of the day's Leaving Certificate examination papers (McCormack et al., 2020; O'Donoghue et al., 2017). How has a national examination managed to gain that kind of traction? Why do many view the Leaving Certificate as 'the great leveller' giving an equal chance to all students in the state? Why, despite the growing evidence of the detrimental impact it has on students and the dubious educational value inherent in such testing (Banks et al., 2018; Banks & Smyth, 2015b; Canny & Hamilton, 2018), does it continue, essentially unchanged, in its 100 years of existence? Before any examination of the perspectives of the participants in the senior cycle review can take place, two contextualising factors need to be examined. The first is to examine the path that led to this iteration of senior cycle by tracing the development of the education and examination system in Ireland from its early roots in the Intermediate Examination Board to its current conceptions. The second contextualising factor is the evolution of how curriculum is developed in this country. The origins of the NCCA in the Curriculum Examinations Board marked the first step away from a centralised curriculum development in the Department of Education towards a statutory curriculum body. The evolution of this body and its structures has had an impact on how and why curriculum is developed in Ireland. Before the experience of the Senior Cycle Review, can be examined, these two threads will be explored in this chapter.

2.1 Where did the Leaving Certificate come from and how did it get so powerful?

The state-run system of education and examination has its roots in the provision of education in the late nineteenth century and how that evolved in the Irish Free State from 1922. The political and economic changes from the 1960s had an impact on the structure and access to this stage of education and the efforts to reform and change the upper secondary stage of education continued into the twenty first century.

2.1.1 Irish Education in the Nineteenth Century

As a subordinate part of the British Empire since the Act of Union in 1801, the educational policies enacted in Ireland over the nineteenth and early twentieth century were subject to the wishes of the British parliament in Westminster. As part of an extensive empire, the ultimate focus of any state-sponsored education at this time was to provide the workings of the state with a sufficiently educated class to run the administration of the state (Cowen, 1996). Similar to the experience in other British colonies (Visanathan, 2014), the initial establishment of state educational structures in Ireland emphasised these basic needs: a literate, numerate class where the English language was acquired to fulfil administrative and business needs. The development of the widespread national primary school provision in Ireland from 1831 (Coolahan, 1981) aligns with the requirement of the British state to have educated administrators to run the political empire. The curricular focus on reading, writing and arithmetic, provided an adequately educated population to allow an empire to function. The smaller numbers progressing beyond the primary stage of education to fee-paying secondary schools to complete the newly introduced Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations from 1878, provided an academic elite to populate the upper echelons of the civil service and other prestigious roles such as barristers, solicitors and bankers to ensure the smooth running of the country.

That is not to say that there was no education in Ireland before the British government instigated the development of the national school system. In fact, there was an extensive network of schools established by religious orders throughout the country that undertook another function of education at this time, preparing students for religious orders. In the denominational schools, the focus on classical languages such as Latin and Greek prepared students for further theological studies. There was also a tradition of hedge schools, stemming from the penal era where classical studies mingled with geography, history and literature in various languages (Atkinson, 1969; Dowling, 1968; McManus, 2004; O'Reilly, 2014). The hedge school masters were free from church and state control and so could choose their content and texts and, unlike their Protestant counterparts, were able to utilise the emerging novel form to stimulate the interest of their pupils (McManus, 2004).

The importance, and subsequent dominance of the examination system, stems from its success. The Intermediate Examinations were established to provide a form of funding to denominational schools without explicitly funding denominational education. With the repeal of the penal laws in 1782, the establishment of Catholic schools was allowed but funding such denominational education was forbidden (McManus, 2004, p. 28). In a country that was steadily developing a national identity along sectarian lines, finding the means to support essential education without preferencing one denomination over another was essential for the imperial parliament in Westminster. Funding schools via their performance in examinations was a success in terms of funding provision but an abject failure in objective educational terms. Despite its intention to fund schools along non-denominational lines, the influence of the Catholic Church on the examinations is evident in the higher fees granted to the examinations in English, Latin and Greek, essential requirements for a career in the church (O'Donoghue, 1999, p. 20). Repeated reports into educational attainment over this period lamented the detrimental impact of the systemic examinations on real educational attainment to such an extent that the payment by results scheme was abandoned completely in Britain. But, as no feasible alternative to fund schools was constructed in Ireland, the system limped on into the 20th century. Various reports (Dale & Stephens, 1905; Molony, 1919; Palles, 1899) were explicit in their criticism of the system of examination. The criticisms outlined by these reports over a century ago, may have been written about the current system.

> We have already pointed out that a public general examination held for the whole of Ireland in several hundred centres must, for practical reasons, be conducted by written papers only. But there are certain branches, the efficient teaching of which cannot be adequately tested in that way. Amongst these are the Natural and Experimental Sciences and Modern Languages. In these subjects written papers without the addition of viva voce or practical examination are not an adequate test (Palles, 1899, p. 12).

> The following grave educational defects are inherent in the present system:…The hindrance to proper educational experiments; the danger of a loss of initiative on the part of many teachers; the subordination of the organisation of the school to the requirements of an external examination… (Dale & Stephens, 1905, p. 86)

One result of Molony report in 1919 was the introduction of the McPherson Education Bill (1919). This Bill provided for the improvement of salaries and conditions of service for teachers and funding for the education system along with the establishment of Local

Education Committees. However, as half the membership of these committees was to be appointed by a new Department of Education, the Bill was opposed by the Catholic clergy and the bill was defeated (O'Donoghue, 1999). The emergence of a national government in the Irish Free State in 1922 could have heralded a new stage in education and assessment arrangements in Ireland, but an examination of the educational priorities of the new government reveals why this was not the case.

2.1.2 Education under the Irish Free State

The growing nationalist sentiment in Ireland had erupted into the 1916 rising, quickly followed by the War of Independence from 1919-1921, ending with the signing of the treaty between the British government and the newly formed Irish Free State in 1921. This fledging Free State was mired in political instability as both sides of the nationalist party, Sinn Fein, struggled to come to terms with establishing a new state on compromised ideals and terms dictated by the Treaty. The Treaty, and the preceding Government of Ireland Act (1920) created two governments on the island of Ireland: Saorstát Éireann (The Irish Free State) with its governing body Dáil Éireann, and the Parliament of Northern Ireland. This division of the Irish education system under the auspices of two separate entities began a separation of the educational policies on the island that has continued since. This study of curriculum development practices refers exclusively to the developments of the system in the Irish Free State, later renamed the Republic of Ireland in 1949.

The civil war as a result of the treaty, and economic difficulties encountered by the government of the Free State, meant that education was initially not high on the political agenda. The only educational theorist within the nationalist grouping, Padraig Pearse, had been executed by the British forces in 1916, and so the only educational treatise for a new Irish state, *The Murder Machine*, was left unexplored by the new Dáil. Instead the assertion of religious orthodoxy and insistence on the primacy of the national language became the central tenets of policy development for the Irish Free State (Akenson, 1975; Corcoran, 1923; Ferriter, 2004; O'Donoghue, 1999; Walsh, 2012). In the assertion of a cultural identity, the Free State, through its education policies defined its difference from the British Empire mainly in terms of language and religion. However, the internal logic of contradiction of modern education policy described by Cowen (1996), is evident in the

policies of the Free State and beyond. Cowen describes how the inherited contents and structures of education which contained earlier cultural and social messages and stratification continue to remain and exert influence. Despite the assertion of a separate and different Irish identity, the Free State retained the previous contents and structures of the education system: the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations, the contents of courses of instruction, even down to the annual publication of the *Rules and Programmes for Schools* continued without change under the Free State government. The new government also inherited the administrative structures and personnel of the previous regime (Walsh, 2012, p. 86) and so continuity was assured.

The establishment of the Leaving Certificate in 1924, albeit a replica of the Leaving Certificate examinations of the Intermediate Board, set a marker for the new state. It marked the intention to establish the new state along the same educational lines as the previous system but with one important difference. Rather than payment to schools via the results obtained by students, capitation fees were now paid to schools based on the numbers of students enrolled. This capitation fee applied only to primary schools and post primary education was still seen as the preserve of the wealthy as the payment of fees to the post primary setting was the norm. For the new state then, continuing education to a Leaving Certificate was seen as a luxury for a few rather than the right of the many (Akenson, 1975; Coolahan, 1981; Raftery & Fischer, 2014). The early meetings of the new government initiated a Commission on Secondary Education to draft a programme suitable for the new state. This Commission set up six sub-committees to make a case for their respective subject areas as obligatory components of the new programme[2]. The titling of the subcommittees already set the boundaries of what disciplines should be included in the programme and therefore what education could or should look like. However, in the letter sent to all headmasters and teachers, feedback was sought on the proposals and there is evidence of an underpinning belief in teacher professionalism and school autonomy to develop their own programmes. "The detailed programmes drawn up by some committees are intended to be merely helpful and suggestive. Each school should be

[2] The six committees were: 1) Irish, English and other Modern languages; 2) Mathematics, Science and Manual Training, Agriculture; 3) Classics; 4) History and Geography, Economics and Sociology; 5) Art; 6) Music.

free to draw up the details of its own programme, subject to the approval of the Educational authority" (Commission on Secondary Education, 1921, p.2). While the early work of the commission advised against prescription of texts on the grounds that "it is educationally unsound to prescribe set uniform texts" (ibid, p.1), the examinations asked questions on the texts regularly used by the previous Examinations Board, and so the prescription continued, but specified by the requirements of the examinations. The *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* (published by the Department of Education annually 1924-2003) set out the curriculum to be followed in terms of what would be assessed in the examinations and so the dominance of the examinations continued (Akenson, 1975; Coolahan, 1981). The practice of the Department of Education in publishing the examination results for all schools in an annual booklet further reinforced the dominance of the examinations in the public psyche (O'Donoghue, 1999, p. 90).

The implicit aim of education in the new state was very clear to the founders. As stated by Eoin MacNeill the Minister for Education from 1922-1925, "The chief function of Irish educational policy is to conserve and develop Irish nationality" (cited in Akenson, 1975, p.39). This Irish nationality was defined by its language and religion, both of which were given privileged status in the schools of the state. The curriculum, while shaped by previous educational structures and devised in the Department of Education, was passed through the hands of the Catholic hierarchy before publication to ensure it maintained the religious standards the state sought to uphold (Akenson, 1975). The Dáil Commission on Secondary Education was comprised of representatives of various religious orders and its most influential member, Rev. Timothy Corcoran S.J., was later described as the "master builder in education" by Joseph O'Neill first Secretary of the Department (O'Donoghue, 1999, p. 33) and so it is unsurprising that religious instruction was seen as a central tenet of primary and secondary education in the new Free State. While the Catholic hierarchy supported the Gaelicisation process and the promotion of the Irish language in schools, it did so under the assumption that it would not threaten the position of the study of English, Latin and Greek (O'Donoghue, 1999).

By 1932-33, the stated aim of the Leaving Certificate examination was "to testify to the completion of a good secondary education and the fitness of a pupil to enter on a course

of study at a University or an educational institution of similar standing"(Department of Education Secondary Education Branch, 1932, p. 13). The purpose was to prepare students for continuing their education in a university and, given the small number of students continuing to the Leaving Certificate, this aim catered for the small numbers with the ambition and financial ability to continue to this level. As outlined by Mulcahy (2018) most curriculum documents of the new Irish Free State omitted any discussion of aims or purpose. The curricular documentation since 1922 has provided a dearth of discussion or engagement with what the aims of a general education should be. As pointed out by Mulcahy, " one of the consequences of the neglect of aims in education is a tendency to fall back on practice and, in doing so, inherit its failings as well as its strengths" (Mulcahy, 2018, p. 102). As was the case in the pre-Free State era, the sole purpose of the Leaving Certificate was to ease passage to the university of choice in order to pursue a career in the professional class. While fees for post primary and third level education were an obvious impediment to progression for many, the state and religious orders did provide some scholarships for the brightest students to further their education. But for most pupils, educational attainment finished at the end of primary school, or possibly at the end of the provision by a 'secondary top'. The 'secondary top' enabled students who were finished their primary education to continue their studies to Intermediate level while staying within the primary structures. The numbers staying on in education until the Leaving Certificate examination steadily grew over the course of the early 20th century as seen in the table below (Figure 1). This, plus international pressure, led to one of the seismic changes in education policy in Ireland.

Year	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Total**
1901	416	201	617
1927	516	307	823
1950	2524	2067	4591

Figure 1 Numbers of pupils completing Leaving Certificate Examinations 1901-1950

(Department of Education, 1928, 1951; Intermediate Education Board, 1902)

2.1.3 Post Primary Education from the 1960s

The Leaving Certificate examination system was not designed, nor did it cater for, a diverse range of pathways for students beyond a linear academic pathway nor did it cater for students whose abilities were outside those assessed by the traditional examination system. The purpose of this stage of education was assumed to be for the education of the small numbers of the elite who would take up the legal, professional and political positions necessary for the functioning of the state.

Two possible threats to the success of this system therefore were (a) an increasing number of students continuing in education from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and (b) the demand for a wider range of educational experiences to prepare students for a changing world. Couple those threats with a scathing report from the OECD detailing the deficiencies in the Irish education system in providing education for a changing world and a second phase of education policy development in Ireland began. The introduction of free second level education as announced by Donogh O'Malley in 1967, the raising of the school leaving age to 15 in 1972 and the adjustment to the yearly progression of pupils in 1967 (Circular 10/67) meant that one of these criteria for putting pressure on the system was fulfilled. The number of students staying in full-time education increased exponentially over the remaining decades of the twentieth century. In 1966, prior to the announcement of free education 12,573 students participated in the Leaving Certificate and 20,756 participated in the Intermediate Certificate, the increase in these figures due to these changes in policy (shown in Figure 2) led to a retention rate of 76% by 1996. This increase in numbers led to the second criteria being fulfilled. The students who now presented at Leaving Certificate were not all interested in pursuing an academic qualification at third level, but instead required a more varied range of educational experiences that prepared them for the worlds of work and further education after school.

Year	**Intermediate Certificate**	**Leaving Certificate**
1966	20,756	12,573
1976	47,015	32,559

1986	57,869	47,857
1996	68,064	59,176

Figure 2 Figures for Certificate Examination 1966-1996

(DES, Statistical Reports 1966-1996)

By 1969, the list of subjects available for examination at Leaving Certificate was expanded beyond the traditional classical education instituted in the 1800s. Subjects such as business studies, woodwork and metalwork expanded the range of disciplines included in this stage of education, and the lifting of the exclusion of vocational school students from the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations in 1966 further broadened the scope of the terminal assessments. The Leaving Certificate however remained relatively unchanged. In fact, rather than broadening the numbers of students taking vocational style subjects, by lifting the ban on vocational schools offering the Leaving Certificate examination, the unintended consequence was that more students in vocational schools abandoned the vocational offerings in order to take up subjects seen as traditionally 'academic' in order to benefit from the perceived route to success – access to third level education and the professional class (Hyland, 1999).

The Leaving Certificate examination was synonymous with education after the Intermediate level examinations, and despite renewed and consistent criticism of the over reliance on examinations, such as the report on the Intermediate Certificate Examinations (ICE Report) (Department of Education, 1975) and the backwash effect it was having on educational attainment, the system continued and the examination system continued to dominate education at this level (Coolahan et al., 2017). The numbers sitting the Leaving Certificate examinations continued to grow and in educational circles there was growing unease about the suitability for this education for the entire student cohort and the desirability of a singular academic pathway through education for a country on the cusp of a new millennium (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1986b; Hyland, 1996; Madaus & MacNamara, 1970b).

2.1.4 Changes to Senior Cycle education 1995: TY, LCVP, LCA

Despite the attempts of the Curriculum and Examinations Board in the 1980s to engage the public and political spheres in a debate on the aims and purpose of senior cycle, the first real changes to this stage of education happened in the 1990s. Possibly influenced by the recent publication of an OECD review into national education policies (OECD, 1991), the 1990s marked a decade of increasing political involvement in education with the publication of green papers, white papers and an Education Act in 1998. But the changes to senior cycle remained on the periphery. In 1995 the Transition Year, which had been a piloted programme in some schools since the 1980s, was made an official option in senior cycle. The Transition Year was revolutionary as it introduced a year for students where they were not preparing for state examinations but could engage in learning experiences not catered for within the rigid format of Leaving Certificate syllabi (Clerkin, 2013, 2018). The numbers availing of this option have grown significantly since its introduction in schools so that in 2018 approximately 65% of the eligible cohort participated in a Transition Year programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

Also in 1995, two other programmes were introduced: the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). These programmes arose from the growing efforts to diversify the educational offering in post primary school and presented a modularised structure of learning with varied methods of assessment (Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013). The LCVP, despite its name did not provide vocational education but provided modules in enterprise and work experience to be taken alongside the traditional Leaving Certificate subjects. In this way, students sitting the traditional Leaving Certificate (now renamed the Leaving Certificate Established) could take additional modules that would broaden their educational experience beyond the classical education structure. As the LCVP modules are accredited CAO points and so could be used for university entrance, unlike the LCA programme, the LCVP gained popularity in schools and was seen as a way of 'gaining additional points' for students for whom the mandatory core subjects were not going to provide sufficient points for entry to university.

The LCA was a much more radical departure from the traditional Leaving Certificate. It was structured in terms of three education areas: vocational preparation, vocational education

and general education. Within these areas, subjects were described in modular form over a four-term programme. Students accumulated credits for modules based on completion of key assignments and attendance signed off by the school. Credits were also gained through the completion of cross curricular tasks, examined via face-to-face interviews and completion of a task report. The vocational education section included vocational specialisms beyond the traditional subject disciplines of post primary education to date such as Hotel Catering and Tourism, Childcare, and, Information and Communication Technology. Unlike any other post primary offering, LCA students received their statements of credits after year one and again after year 2. Students could leave the course and return at a later date while retaining their accumulated credits. Another major difference with the LCA programme was that not all subjects had a final examination. Educational attainment in a possible seven areas including science; vocational preparation and guidance; arts education; and social education were measured and reported on, based on module completion rather than dependence on an external terminal assessment (Department of Education, 1995).

However, the LCA failed to tackle the social stigma associated with anything other than the traditional Leaving Certificate route to third level (Banks et al., 2010, 2014; McCoy et al., 2014) and the numbers enrolled on the programme continued to remain at approximately 5% of the student cohort (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). The absence of a vocational pathway in the Irish post primary sector was somewhat obscured by the reporting of the LCVP as a separate programme rather than an additional option for students completing the Leaving Certificate Established (OECD, 2020b). With the establishment on a statutory basis of the NCCA in 2001, further questions on the purpose and aims of this stage of education were asked.

2.1.5 Senior Cycle 2003

With the enactment of its statutory status in 2001, the NCCA initiated a review of senior cycle education beginning with a consultative paper on issues and options in 2002 (NCCA, 2002), followed by a consultative document called *Directions for Development* in 2003. This was followed by an overview of the proposed advice in 2004 and a detailed advice document in 2005 (NCCA, 2005). The initiative of the then Minister for Education Noel

Dempsey, the call was for a redevelopment of the upper secondary offering in line with European counterparts. The advice on the redevelopment of senior cycle was premised on the need to "ensure that an education system originally designed to serve the needs of an elite few can be re-shaped to meet the needs of a broader, more diverse group of learners" (NCCA, 2005, p. 5).

The resultant proposals provided for a new type of senior cycle and a reshaped Leaving Certificate with a combination of subjects, short courses and transition units. The proposals called for the unitisation of subjects to allow for assessment over the two or three years of senior cycle and the development of a range of assessment components. It also raised the possibility of developing new courses in subjects such as social and political education, psychology, drama and sports studies in addition to a review of existing senior cycle subjects to allow for a focus on the development of key skills. The most interesting aspect of the proposals document is in the chapter on supporting change in senior cycle (NCCA, 2005, p. 76-81) where the indicative costs for such changes were outlined. The impact the figures had on the new Minister in charge, Mary Hanafin, was the declaration that the proposals were "Rolls Royce model" of education (Flynn, 2005a) and so were deemed surplus to requirement. The remarks made by Minister Hanafin on the side of a street in Beijing while attending an education summit were to haunt the senior cycle developments, and any other form of senior cycle redesign, over the coming years.

The cold welcome from the Minister meant that wholescale change as advised was not going to make the transition into policy. However, some aspects of the proposals continued to advance: a Key Skills Framework for senior cycle was introduced (NCCA, 2009b), flexible learning profiles were piloted in some schools (NCCA, 2009a), the review of senior cycle subjects resulted in the introduction of additional assessment components in subjects such as history, geography and Design and Communication Graphics (DCG), new courses in Politics and Society and Physical Education were developed as senior cycle programmes in their own right and a series of Transition Units were developed and published for use in schools. Despite the reluctance to engage in whole scale reform, the Leaving Certificate incrementally changed over the following decade. In the revised subjects of history and geography, courses that had remained unchanged for almost a century, new elements

were introduced that would have implications for the pedagogy used such as the documentary analysis in the history course. The obvious aim was to develop skills such as critical thinking as outlined in the key skills framework. The introduction of a second assessment component in history, geography and DCG paved the way for additional components to be fundamental in any new subject development. With the introduction of Politics and Society as a full subject in 2018, the tentative steps of introducing politics as a module as senior cycle in the 2005 proposals had been surpassed and a new subject specification was developed. In 2017, the then Minister Richard Bruton fast tracked the development of a new subject, Computer Science, to be ready for implementation in schools by 2018. But large-scale change in the high stakes assessment that the Leaving Certificate examinations represented was put on hold. Attention shifted instead to the lower-stakes junior certificate.

2.1.6 The impact of junior cycle reform 2012 - 2018

The introduction of the Junior Cycle Framework in 2012 and its second iteration in 2015, introduced a framework for the education experience at lower secondary governed by 24 statements of learning, not bound by subject disciplines but which may be experienced within and across subject/discipline areas. This move away from the strict dependence on subject disciplines marked a new departure for education in Ireland. Ever since the Intermediate Education Board allocated funds on the basis of student results in certain subjects in the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate Examinations, certain subjects were viewed as more academic and therefore as of more intrinsic worth. This can be traced back to the practice where some subjects such as classical languages or calculus were awarded more funding than subjects deemed of lesser value such as modern languages and manual instruction (Intermediate Education Board, 1880). The move in the Junior Cycle Framework away from defining learning in terms of subject disciplines to an overarching framework was therefore significant.

The deficits identified by Gleeson (2004) in having piecemeal approach to curricular reform without a fundamental concern with the philosophical underpinnings of the education envisaged, was in some way addressed by the introduction of a framework, but the educational discourse around the introduction of the framework reflected the same issues

noted by Gleeson, namely positivist issues with the levels, grades and external assessment (Byrne & Prendergast, 2020; Murchan, 2018).

The dismissal of the senior cycle proposals in 2005 and the acceptance of the junior cycle proposals in 2011 were ultimately the result of the different reactions of the minister in charge. The press release from Minister Ruairí Quinn (Quinn, 2011) repeatedly mentions the welcome he gave to the "radical changes" envisaged for the new Junior Cycle including the limit on the number of subjects, the introduction of a level 2 award and changes to the assessment of learning. Despite the warm ministerial welcome, the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle was not an easy passage and was fraught with industrial disputes and resulted in a fundamental reworking of the framework in 2015 to remove the most contentious aspects: teacher assessment and common level subjects (Murchan, 2018). After increasing entrenchment of positions by the teacher unions that disrupted the implementation of subjects, the contentious components of the framework became the subject of negotiations between the Department of Education and Skills and the teachers' unions, chaired by an independent chairman, Pauric Travers. In the negotiated agreement, the terminal examination was retained, as was the distinction between higher and ordinary levels in Irish, English and mathematics and the expectation that teachers would mark their own students work for a percentage of the final award was removed (Travers, 2015). Where the purpose of the new framework was to alleviate the pressure of examination at the lower secondary stage, the introduction of an additional assessment task for each subject to replace the teacher mark has meant an increase in the points of assessment for Junior Cycle students. The most contentious aspect of the proposed 2012 *Framework for Junior Cycle* was the move away from an externally assessed terminal examination. Murchan (2018) outlines the reasons for the objections to this form of assessment by the teacher unions as mainly a threat to teacher identity and their role as advocate for students. But there were other factors for the hostile reception to the proposed changes. These factors included the ongoing pay and conditions disputes with teacher unions since 2010 which resulted in pay cuts of 14% and additional 8% in 2013, a moratorium on posts of responsibility and the introduction of a two-tier pay scale for new entrants. These factors, external to curriculum concerns, meant that conditions for change were already unfavourable.

A ministerial welcome is not therefore the only condition necessary for the implementation of change in the educational system. The other element that had a profound impact on the ability of the system to implement change was the shock, and aftershocks, of the world economic crisis from 2008. The impact of recession on the ability of the educational system to implement change cannot be underestimated. As a result of successive recessionary budgets, the spending in areas such as education was drastically cut. This resulted in the ongoing disputes with unions on pay and conditions and the junior cycle framework was caught in the crossfire (Flynn, 2009; Flynn & Holden, 2011; Flynn & O'Brien, 2008).

Despite its difficult implementation and compromised framework, the Junior Cycle Framework has introduced new features into the educational landscape in Ireland. Of these the introduction of Class-room Based Assessments (CBAs), where students produce evidence of learning produced in a classroom environment, assessed by the teacher and moderated at a Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meeting, would seem to have had a positive impact on assessment literacy in Ireland (Darmody et al., 2020). The CBAs allow for learning that could not be assessed under previous arrangements, such as running experiments or giving presentations, and the SLAR meetings allow teachers time and space to discuss the intended and evidenced learning in the work produced (Murchan, 2021). This recognition of the importance of professional time for teachers to discuss the intended teaching and learning in their classroom was significant (Coolahan et al., 2017, p. 43). The varied experience of teachers in the early years of the junior cycle implementation has influenced the perceptions of these aspects of the framework (Byrne & Prendergast, 2020). These changes and the phased implementation of junior cycle subjects has led to increased discourse around the continuity of learning into senior cycle (Donnelly & Kearney, 2019). Along with other research questioning the fitness for purpose of the Leaving Certificate programmes on offer (Banks et al., 2010, 2014; Banks & Smyth, 2015b; Iannelli & Smyth, 2017) and the concerns of the Board for Senior Cycle, this resulted in the review of the senior cycle being included on the plan of work for the NCCA and this review began in 2017.

2.1.7 Senior cycle review 2017-2019

The initial role of the Leaving Certificate examinations to provide a means to fund denomination education and provide an elite class with sufficient education to progress to third level to follow a career in the professions has shifted slightly in the last century. The primary function however, is still widely acknowledged as a sorting mechanism to filter the student cohort to access third level education (Government of Ireland, 1999; Hennessy et al., 2011). Since 1976 this mechanism has been overseen by the Central Applications Office (CAO). A general and widespread misconception is that the CAO is an organisation with independent power to discriminate, and discourse in the media regularly decries the CAO system as the bane of the Leaving Certificate experience. The experience and educational achievement of students over the two or three years of their upper secondary education is often reduced to the grades achieved in the final examinations or even further reduced to the three-digit figure achieved in the CAO points allocation. Students are routinely described as a "600 point-er" to infer their academic prowess. However this reductive view of education as a filter for third level has been routinely challenged (Banks et al., 2010b, 2014; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013; Granville, 1996; Iannelli & Raffe, 2007; McCoy et al., 2014; Symonds & O'Sullivan, 2017) and the broader purposes of senior cycle, such as preparation for the world of work, further training, adult life and personal development, have been raised as the increasing diversity of the student cohort has meant that the Leaving Certificate does not fulfil the needs of a significant proportion of the students.

Within the structures of the NCCA, the Board for Senior Cycle has oversight of the upper secondary stage of education (see 2.3.2 for further detail of the NCCA structures and the role of the Board for Senior Cycle). Increasingly over the 2014-2016 period, discussions at the Board for Senior Cycle focused on the transitions from junior cycle to senior cycle, the suitable pathways available for students and the emphasis on the narrow window for the terminal examinations (unpublished minutes of Board for Senior Cycle, NCCA). The discussions led to a full review of senior cycle in 2017. The positionality of this researcher as minute taker for the Board for Senior Cycle since 2017 and education officer with responsibility for the review of senior cycle has meant an in-depth familiarity with the processes outlined below. The Board began by commissioning Sharon O'Donnell to

complete desktop research into the programmes on offer in other jurisdictions at upper secondary level, identifying key areas of comparison namely: stated purpose of this stage, the structure and organisation of this stage, the pathways available for students, the curriculum available, the assessment and reporting arrangements, inclusion and support, flexibility and transfer arrangements. The jurisdictions examined initially were England, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Ontario (Canada), Queensland (Australia) and Sweden. After the initial review of the report by the Board for Senior Cycle, it was decided to include Ireland in the report for comparative purposes. The full report was published under the title *Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions: Overview Report* (O'Donnell, 2018) with nine further detailed jurisdiction reports available online (https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/international-research/). The report was followed by a national conference held in Croke Park in February 2018, where international speakers such as Beatrice Pont from the OECD and Jan van den Akker from SLO (Curriculum body of the Netherlands) in the Netherlands were invited to comment on their experiences of reforms in upper secondary internationally. This involvement of the OECD and international curriculum developers such as Jan Van Den Akker is interesting in that it intentionally broadened the context of the discussions on senior cycle reform to include international experience and explicitly included the OECD in the process.

In planning for the development of the ideas and areas raised in the international comparative report, a second phase of the review was developed. In this second school-based phase of the review, 41 schools around the country undertook to participate in two cycles of discussions around the purpose and future direction of senior cycle education. Management bodies were asked to nominate schools from their remit who would be willing to participate, and 41 schools were selected according to geographical spread, management body, school type (single sex, co-educational, Irish speaking, DEIS status) to reflect the ratio of schools in the country according to DES statistics. The schools were asked to discuss topics related to senior cycle with their staff, parent body and, initially, students and report back to the NCCA. Schools were asked to appoint a liaison person from staff and together with the principal and a parent representative were asked to attend an induction meeting in Athlone in May 2018, where the review questions were discussed, clarified and in some cases amended to suit the needs of the schools and parents. The

schools were also given a small grant to offset any costs relating to the review such as freeing teachers up to participate in discussion groups and compiling feedback. An NCCA education officer was appointed as link mentor to each of the schools. At the induction meeting in Athlone, concerns were expressed by schools in the gathering of the student perspectives. As a result, the NCCA mentors undertook to visit all the schools to run student workshops to elicit student responses on the issues.

The school-based review began in August 2018 and the first cycle of questions asked schools to consider the most positive aspects of senior cycle in their school and also the challenges faced. It asked schools to consider the future needs of students in senior cycle and how they could be best served by senior cycle. Schools were reminded that senior cycle encompasses four programmes currently on offer: Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). Feedback from the schools was gathered and sent to the ESRI for analysis and the subsequent report was published (Banks et al., 2018). A series of public seminars on the findings was held around the country from November to December 2018 to further stimulate discussion.

The second cycle of questions asked schools to consider the features of the programmes on offer in their schools and what they viewed as the most positive aspects of these programmes. In looking to the future, schools were asked questions in relation to the length and structure of senior cycle; how alternative pathways for students could be structured; and how assessment and reporting could reflect the purpose of senior cycle identified in the first cycle of questions. Again, the results were analysed by the ESRI and published in 2019 (Smyth, 2019). Another series of national seminars was held in February-March 2019 and bulletins were sent to all post-primary schools in the country to raise awareness of the issues emerging.

The third phase of the senior cycle review was a public consultation process. A report on the themes that had emerged from the school-based review was published by the NCCA in July 2019 and a series of consultation questions formulated around these themes (NCCA, 2019b). The public consultation ran from August 2019 to November 2019 and included open consultation events in education centres around the country, bilateral meetings with

stakeholders, an online survey and emailed submissions. The results of this consultation were published in December 2019 (NCCA, 2019c) with advice arising from the entire review to be considered by the NCCA Boards and Council before being sent to the Minister for review. An overview of the review process is depicted in figure 3 below.

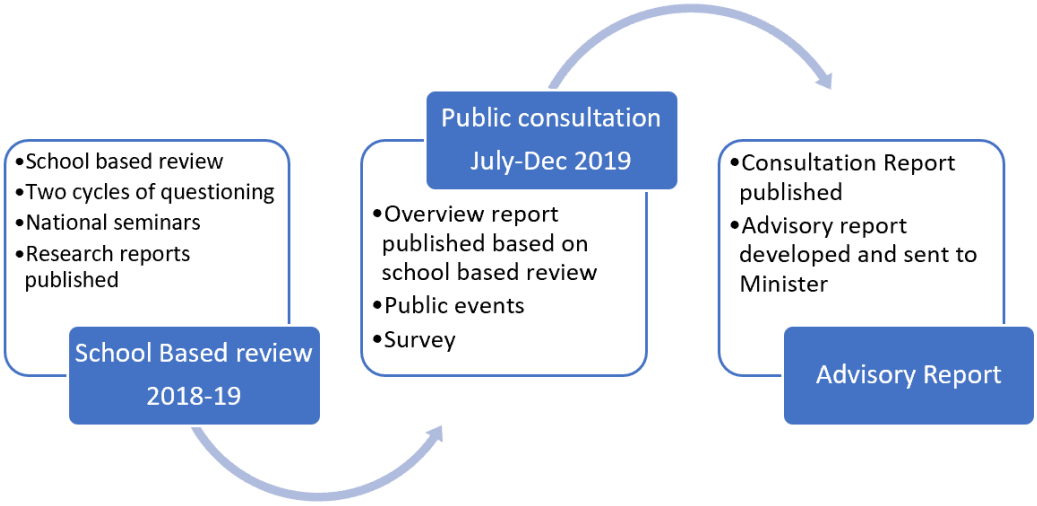

Figure 3 Overview of the Senior Cycle Review

In addition to the school-based review, the advisory report was also informed by an international dimension. In keeping with the development of education policy since the 1960s, agencies such as the OECD have had an impact on the formulation of policy. In the case of the senior Cycle review, the involvement of the OECD was explicit. After the initial stakeholder think tank event in February 2018 in Croke Park where international speakers such as Jan Van Den Akker from The Netherlands and Beatrice Pont from the OECD spoke on their experiences of reform, the OECD were involved in the review as an external observer of events. A delegation from the OECD reviewed the policy documents relating to senior cycle, held interviews with some of the key stakeholders in education such as the Department, the unions and the State Examinations Commission and also visited schools involved in the review to speak to teachers, parents and students. The resultant report was published in December 2020 after the advisory report was completed (OECD, 2020a).

The advisory nature of the NCCA report means that its implementation will be subject to the vagaries of the political system, the willingness of the political/educational/public system to engage with the advice and the capacity of the education system to change. Murchan's advice on what would have been necessary for a mindset change in relation to the assessment proposals at junior cycle may be relevant here, "To win over teachers in relation to new forms and approaches to assessment, perhaps more groundwork needed to be done with teachers, parents, students and the wider public around the function of assessment and certification at lower secondary education" (Murchan, 2018, p. 120). The inclusion of the school-based review phase with the inputs from teachers, parents and students in shaping the form of the policy advice, along with the ongoing public debate on the issues (Donnelly & Kearney, 2019; O'Brien, 2020a; White, 2019) may help to change the cultural mindset that resists change. Margaret Archer describes this as morphostasis and with its opposite, morphogenesis, outlines a conceptualisation of the nature of change in the modern world. Her writings on critical realism offer a theoretical perspective from which to examine the education system in Ireland and its capacity for change.

The Senior Cycle Advisory Report was completed in early 2020 and prepared for presentation to the Minister. However, international events changed the course of the publication of the report.

2.1.8 Covid 19 and its impact on the education system

On March 12th 2020, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar made an unprecedented announcement from Washington closing all schools with immediate effect as a result of the first death recorded in Ireland from Covid 19 (Department of Education and Skills, 2020b). The initial closure of schools, early childhood and further and higher education settings was for a two week period to contain the spread of Covid 19, but by March 24th the entire country was in lockdown where all but essential services were closed and people were restricted to a two kilometre radius from their houses (Varadkar, 2020). This began a series of lockdowns that continued over 2020 and 2021 to try to stop the spread of the Covid 19 virus and had a significant impact on education.

As the longer-term impact of the closures began to become apparent, the impact on the Leaving Certificate examinations was widely discussed in the media and subject to increasingly concerned speculation. By April 2nd, Minister McHugh announced that the Leaving Certificate examinations would go ahead "by hook or by crook" (RTE news, 2020) after alternative arrangements had been announced to compensate students for the cancellation of the oral assessments in March. Students were informed that they would receive 100% of the allocated marks for the oral assessments that were cancelled, and deadlines were extended for the submission of practical coursework. By May 8th, the Minister announced the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examinations and their replacement with a system of calculated grades (McHugh, 2020). The announcement was met with relief from the cohort of students who had experienced the uncertainty of preparing for examinations (O Caollain, 2020), but the inclusion of teacher input for the calculated grades process was not met with equal welcome by the unions who expressed concern that teachers could be sued for their input into the process (Casey, 2020). But, for the first time in the history of the state, the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate examinations did not take place in 2020 and at Leaving Certificate level were replaced by a system of calculated grades based on teacher input. This system was not without its critics, and the Department faced high court challenges to the implementation of the calculated grades and the exclusion of home schooled students from the process (Flood, 2021; O'Faolain, 2022).

The Covid 19 global pandemic continued unabated into 2021 and resulted in a series of school closures and a return to a national lockdown in October 2020 (excluding schools) and again in January 2021 (including schools), with students returning to school on a phased basis from March 1st (Foley & Madigan, 2021). Given the continued school closures and disruptions for students, Minister Foley announced prior to school reopening, that the arrangements for examinations for 2021 would have a options for students to use teacher input into accredited grades or use the input from the SEC external exam or a combination of both (Foley, 2021). For those sitting the final examinations, a revised structure of the exam papers would endeavour to take into account the impact of school closures on the learning of students (State Examinations Commission, 2021). The school year 2021/2022 saw the continued rise of Covid 19 case numbers and the detrimental impact of a further

variant of the virus. Schools however, remained open but for those who were close contacts or who caught the virus, schooling was still impacted due to prolonged absences from school. The adjustment to the examination papers continued for the Leaving Certificate students in 2022 and the Junior Cycle examinations were held in June 2022 for the first time since 2019.

All of the events as a result of the Covid 19 global pandemic are unprecedented. The impact on education and assessment arrangements could not have been foreseen by those participating in the Senior Cycle Review in 2017-2019 and much of the advice gathered for the Senior Cycle Advisory Report had been superseded by events. The Advisory Report had been adjusted in line with contemporary events and was passed by the Council of the NCCA in May 2021 and sent to the Minister for consideration. In March 2022, Minister Foley made her announcements regarding Senior Cycle redevelopment and reform and the Advisory report was eventually published (Department of Education, 2022). The disparity between the announcements of the Minister and the advice in the report can be considered in light of the decision-making powers of each.

2.2 Who makes the decisions about the curriculum? 1924-1984

The shift in focus from curriculum and education developments coming directly from the Department of Education to being the remit of the NCCA did not happen overnight and the development of the curriculum body and its structures plays an intrinsic role in how the senior cycle review was carried out and what its impact may be.

2.2.1 The development of education policy in Ireland 1922-1966: Ministers and Money

The education system inherited by the state in 1922 was a centrally controlled, autocratic system, with all curricular information issued yearly in the form of the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. Prior to the foundation of the state, the edicts were issued by the Intermediate Board for Education and directly tied to the requirements for assessment and therefore capitation received by schools. The Free State, in the grip of a civil war, adapted the existing structures rather than trying to establish new ones and so, the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools* continued to be published setting out the programmes of study for Intermediate/Junior and Leaving Certificate students every year until 2003/2004. The Intermediate Board, founded in 1878 as a result of the Intermediate

Education (Ireland) Bill, devised and administered a system of public examinations. This unpaid multidenominational Board consisted of between seven and twelve members from various educational institutions across the country as well as men representing various sectoral interests. Curricula or pedagogy did not overly concern of this Board (Coolahan, 1981). On June 30, 1923, it was announced via publication in the newspapers that this Intermediate Board was dissolved and replaced by two commissioners of education: Seósamh (Joseph) O Neill and Frank O'Duffy, both of whom were civil servants in the new Department of Education (Irish Times, 1923). Despite occasional musings of forming an academic council to advise on curriculum matters (Akenson, 1975), from 1923 until the 1980s all decisions on curricula were devised within the structures of the Department of Education. The continuation from the previous Intermediate Board was assured as the new appointee, Joseph O Neill, was one of the first secondary school inspectors appointed by the Intermediate Board in 1908 (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009). The role of the inspectorate under the Intermediate Board was quite limited. In the absence of agreed curricula, state funding for schools, agreed qualifications for teachers or a state funded pay scale, the inspectorate could only comment on the efficiency of teaching, the sanitary conditions of schools, the timetable and the equipment used to teach practical classes (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p.79). The role of the Inspectorate in the new Free State broadened to include the responsibility for the preparation and administering of the state examinations as well as work on curriculum development.

The initial development of curricula for the newly formed Department of Education in 1924 took the form of a Commission on Secondary Education that met to discuss the immediate and future needs of the education system in different disciplines, and some of the recommendations formed the basis of the programme for secondary schools which came into operation in August 1924 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 75). This also resulted in the *Intermediate Education (Amendment) Act* (1924) which established the two state certificate examinations, Intermediate and Leaving Certificate. But even this is a misnomer, as the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations had been in existence in this country since 1878, and the Act merely gave the Free State imprimatur to the examinations rather than establishing a new form of certification for students. These examinations did, however, allow for considerable autonomy for schools and teachers by abolishing the

prescribed textbooks of the Intermediate Board and allowing for "programmes … of the widest and most elastic types"(Department of Education, 1926, p. 51-52). *The Report of the Department of Education for the School Year 1924/25* (Department of Education, 1926) lauded this change as revolutionising the education system by mitigating against the recognised negative impact of the examination system to date.

> The schools have been to a large extent freed from the incubus of an over-rigid examination system, for although examinations are retained they have not the cramping effect of the examinations of the old system, since (1) they are not based on prescribed texts, and (2) they are no longer the methods by which the income of each school is determined (Department of Education, 1926, p. 52).

In 1928/29 the Department established 'standardising committees' for the public examination system. This departure saw the Minister invite representatives from secondary school interests to nominate representatives to act with the Inspectorate to advise on the standards of questions, the suitability of papers and marking (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 138). This innovation was short lived and the main responsibility for the examination system returned to the inspectorate.

The influence of key political figures on the curriculum and assessment policies of the state is very evident in the role played by Eamon De Valera in the late 1930s. In 1937 he convened a conference of the Minister for Education (Thomas Derrig), along with the Secretary of the Department and the Inspectorate to discuss reformation of the curriculum. For De Valera fears that this open curricular format was endangering the gaelicisation agenda led to a call for a prescription of set texts, set courses for all subjects and the introduction of honours and pass courses for Leaving Certificate. Despite the discontent of the Inspectorate (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 143), De Valera, who had now assumed the role of Minister for education as well as Taoiseach introduced these changes and set lists of texts for examination were introduced in 1939-41 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 80), and curricular developments were circumscribed by the lists published for the examinations. De Valera also sought to remove the power over the examination system from the Inspectorate by inviting university staff to set the Leaving Certificate papers and control standards in 1942. By the 1950s these duties had once again returned to the Inspectorate.

Even though the decisions and publications came from within the Department of Education, the ideas within were not the sole preserve of the civil servants. From the early days of the Commission on Secondary Education in 1921 and the *Proposed Rules and Programmes* introduced in 1924, each document was commented on by various members of the Catholic hierarchy before being approved for publication. None was more influential than the Rev. Timothy Corcoran S.J. who lectured on Education in UCD. The published version of the courses for English and the resulting examination papers are based almost exclusively on a series of handwritten memoranda produced by Corcoran for the Department (Corcoran, 1924). Even the Secretary of the Department Joseph O'Neill commented on the influence exerted by Corcoran on the curricular developments of the state (Gleeson et al., 1943).

The influential power of the Catholic hierarchy continued in the 1930s and 40s, most effectively seen in the struggles for vocational education described below. Even though curricular thought and the democratic purposes of education were questioned and implemented elsewhere, as seen in the provision of free second level education in Britain in 1944 (British Parliament, 1944), the purpose of education at this level in Ireland was not explicitly questioned. Indeed, Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Education in 1956, claimed that he had no duty to "philosophise on educational matters" (Kellaghan, 1989, p 191) However, the implicit philosophy of education underpinning most of the decisions on curricula and structures in Irish education up to the 1960s was to engender a sense of Irish identity in a nation that was struggling to define itself (O'Reilly, 2014). The dual prongs of language and religion underscored most of the educational documentation produced. Seán Ó Catháin (1956) in his review of secondary education in Ireland found that the difficulty lay in the perceived functions of the Department of Education, namely, to administer the *Rules* in the interest of the schools and so achieve the efficiency of a well-oiled machine, but never to ask the more searching question "is the product of that functioning a good thing?...They do not question the present aim of education nor do they pass judgement on the validity of the means at present adopted to bring about that end" (1955, p. 386).

The structure of the Department, and the central role of the minister at the time, is outlined succinctly by Harris, (1989):

> Educational policy making is ultimately the prerogative of the government; specifically of that cabinet member designated as having particular responsibility for education. Under the Ministers and Secretaries Act, 1924, the significant concept is of the minister as 'corporation sole', a factor which influences greatly the manner in which the Department of Education functions…He or she is deemed responsible for all acts and actions of civil servants working within the Department of Education: a factor which inhibits civil servants when making their own decisions, particularly when it comes to taking risks or introducing change. (Harris, 1989, p. 7)

But not all ministers were happy with the sole responsibility for decision making. In 1950, the Minister for Education, Richard Mulcahy set up a Council for Education designed to "advise the Minister, in so far as pertains to powers, duties and functions of the State, upon such matters relating to educational theory and practice as they think fit and upon any educational questions and problems referred to them by him" (Council of Education, Terms of Reference, 1950, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 24). This body, designed to be a permanent feature of the Department of Education, was tasked with examining the primary curriculum first before tackling the situation at post primary. The socio-religious purpose of education was reiterated by Mulcahy in his speech to launch the Council:

> The state approach to education in the Irish republic is one which unreservedly accepts the supernatural conception of man's nature and destiny. It accepts that the proper subject of education is man whole and entire, soul united to body in unity with nature, with all his faculties, natural and supernatural, such as right and reason show him to be. It accepts that the foundation and crown of youth's entire training is religion. It is its desire that its teachers, syllabuses and textbooks in every branch be informed by the spirit underlying this concept of education, and it is determined to see that such facilities as Ecclesiastical Authorities consider proper shall be provided in the school for the carrying on of the work of religious education. (Mulcahy, 1950, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 25)

It is no surprise then that in its report on the curriculum of the secondary school in 1962, the Council declared that the purpose of schools is "to prepare their pupils to be God-fearing and responsible citizens" (*Report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School,* 1962, as cited in Hyland & Milne, p. 199). In querying what was meant by a "well-balanced" course of general education, the Council responded that it "must have a basic core of humanist and other subjects but that the balance should be in favour of the humanist group" (ibid., p. 200). The reasoning was that as most students left school after the junior course and that this would be of most benefit to them in their future careers. The Council went so far as to conjecture where these students went:

> We have no precise information, but it is possible to conjecture with a degree of probability. Some may go to vocational schools. Others may take a university matriculation examination without presenting themselves for Leaving Certificate at all. A proportion of the girls who leave after taking the Intermediate Certification train for office occupations in special commercial schools. It is probable that many of those who leave school on completion of junior secondary course find employment in commercial and other careers without further formal schooling. (*Report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School,* 1962, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 202)

On the topic of secondary education for all, the Council was very clear that this was a utopian ideal and not in the best interest of education standards as "only a minority of pupils would be capable of profiting by a secondary (grammar school) education…if secondary education were universally available free for all, the incentives to profit by it would diminish and standards would inevitably fall" (Report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School, 1962, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 205).

By the time the Council report was published however, the influence of economic and social development had gained traction and the 1960s saw a shift in focus that saw the purpose of education as more than the development of a theocentric curriculum for the elite few but as a means to develop citizens who could contribute to the economic development of the country, which O'Sullivan (2005) calls a shift from a theocentric paradigm to a mercantile paradigm in educational policy.

On foot of the shift from a protectionist stance to free trade initiated by T.K. Whitaker as Secretary to the Department of Finance from 1956, in 1962, Minister Patrick Hillery invited a survey team from the OECD to review education in Ireland with a view to meeting the increasing economic and social needs of the country. The recommendations from the OECD survey team report (OECD, 1965) were adapted and adopted and, as in the case of the free second level education announced by Donogh O'Malley, ministers often launched programmes or policies without consulting with their cabinet or department colleagues. The OECD report recommended the setting up of a special development unit in the Department of Education to actively initiate the development of educational policy, possibly to replace the ineffectual Council of Education, but even in this recommendation the references to curricula are slight. The report remarks that "The composition of curricula should, for instance, be responsive to new situations" (OECD, 1965, p. 351), but the composition of the development unit was suggested as needing a statistician, an economist and a sociologist, but there was no reference to any expertise in pedagogy or curricular

development. In fact, it was specifically stated that "While not engaging specifically in pedagogical research, the unit would promote, encourage and assist such activities and take cognisance of their results" (OECD, 1965, p. 353). The results of this stilted approach to curricular development can be seen in the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. The curricula, printed as appendices to the Rules, consisted of lists of topic headings with, possibly, an outline of what was expected in the examination paper or a list of recommended reference books (*Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*, published annually by the Department of Education to 2002/3). There was no consideration of the overall aims or objectives of any course of study, or indeed of the purpose of the entire programme, or how that programme should be taught or experienced by the students. This is perhaps unsurprising given the limited staffing of the Inspectorate.

By the 1960s the duties of the Inspectorate for secondary had grown to include the inspection of schools, advising of teachers on pedagogy, setting the examination papers, acting as advising examiners, managing the Registration Council for Secondary Teachers, and advising the Minister on curricular matters. In the 1960s new organisations and state bodies emerged and departmental representation on these bodies was usually fulfilled by members of the Inspectorate. One of these groups was the OECD survey team and two of the department inspectors for secondary school were members of the team (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 168). Unlike their colleagues in the primary branch of the Inspectorate, the duties of the secondary branch had no role in the removal of ineffective teachers and the model of inspection was less regulated than its counterpart at primary level. This fact, added to the limited staffing and increasing duties in relation to the administration of the state examinations and contributions to other bodies and organisations meant that the number and frequency of inspections in secondary schools gradually declined until the introduction of whole school evaluation in the 2000s (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009)

After the OECD report, socio-economic considerations and future planning in the Department of Education, rather than retrospective and reactionary policy making, became more prevalent (Hyland, 2018). But the decisions still originated centrally and were disseminated from the top down. The changes to the educational system initiated on foot of the OECD Report and the programmes for economic and social development resulted in

the establishment of community and comprehensive schools, the opening of the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations to students in vocational schools and the raising of the school leaving age to 15 (Coolahan, 1981), along with the introduction of new subjects such as metalwork, accounting, business and home economics to the secondary school curriculum. These changes to the Leaving Certificate curriculum were layered on top of the previous structures and examinations and the Leaving Certificate still retained its focus on academic attainment. The one specific recommendation of the OECD Report, the establishment of a Development Unit in the Department of Education, was realised in 1966 but even this was limited. Rather than being led by a statistician, Bill Hyland was employed by the Department of Education to work as a statistician in the new Development Unit but not to lead it, and the other professionals required, a sociologist and an economist, were never employed (Hyland, 2014a). The unit was then disbanded by another Minister for Education, Richard Burke by 1973 and long term educational planning based on evidence was once more relegated to the shadows of the Department (Hyland, 2018).

The role of the minister in charge changed significantly over these years (McManus, 2014). Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Education from 1948 to 1951 and again from 1954 to 1957 famously described his ministerial role as that of a plumber.

> I regard the position as Minister in the Department of Education as that of a kind of dungaree man, the plumber who will make the satisfactory communications and streamline the forces and potentialities of the educational workers and educational management in this country. He will knock out of the pipes and will link up everything (Dail Eireann, 1956).

By the time Donogh O'Malley was Minister in 1966, he saw his role in a very different light. Rather than staying away from the philosophising dismissed by Mulcahy, O'Malley saw his role as rectifying the "dark stain on the national conscience" (O'Malley, 1966, as cited in Hyland, 2018, p. 47) that was the absence of free second level education for all students.

The 1960s saw education form a central plank of governmental policy. The reason for the focus can be attributed to the actions, determination and agency of key figures in positions of power during this time. The appointment by Lemass of young dynamic ministers for Education such as Patrick Hillery, George Colley and Donogh O'Malley and his tacit support for their reforming actions enabled the introduction of change in education on a scale not

seen in the brief history of the state (Fleming & Harford, 2014). The work behind the scenes by forward thinking Department officials such as Sean O'Connor and Finbarr O'Callaghan paved the way for the introduction of ground-breaking announcements such as that made by O'Malley on the introduction of free education for all. O'Callaghan had been the primary author of the internal Duggan Report (1962) which had recommended the provision of free education for all students up to the age of 15 (Fleming & Harford, 2014, p. 645). The announcements by O'Malley built on this thinking from within the Department which showed itself to be at odds with the Report of the Council of Education on the matter (Hyland & Milne, 1992)

2.2.2 Vocational and technical education

The inclusion of the more vocational subjects in the curriculum for secondary schools was a definite shift from a theocentric paradigm to a mercantile paradigm of educational policy but, in terms of vocational education, developing an educational pathway to contribute to the local and national economy had been tinkered with since the late 1800s with the establishment of a Department for Agricultural and Technical Instruction in 1899 under the aegis of the Westminster parliament. This Department set up some technical schools and worked with local committees to devise schemes of technical instruction for their areas (Coolahan, 1981, p. 88). After the establishment of the Free State, a commission was established to report on technical education under the chairmanship of John Ingram. The report, issued in 1927, contained a wide range of proposals designed to improve the technical/vocational offerings in primary and technical schools. They included the introduction of an examination for sixth class students to act as a school leaving certificate, the reinstatement of drawing in primary schools and the alteration of the curricula in secondary schools to include science, drawing, manual instruction and domestic economy (Commission on Technical Education, 1927). The Vocational Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1930) following the recommendations in the report, established thirty-eight, 14 member Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to oversee the establishment and development of continuation and technical education provision in their district. In order to clarify and delineate the scope of the vocational schools, the then Minister for Education, John Marcus O'Sullivan, assured the Catholic hierarchy in a letter that the curricula in the schools would not overlap with the 'general education' provided by the primary and post-

primary schools, the only exception being the provision of Religious Education and Irish which was allowed in the vocational schools. (*Letter from the Minister of Education, John Marcus O'Sullivan to Most Rev. D. Keane, Bishop of Limerick*, 1930, cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 219-231). This placating of the Catholic clergy by the Minister in charge of education was not an isolated incident, and the influence of the clergy on developments in education was evident throughout the twentieth century (Clarke, 2012). While the Catholic church had maintained control over the primary and post-primary provision of education, this separate vocational provision of education threatened the primacy of the control of the church. The introduction of the Group Certificate examinations in 1947, certified the achievements of students in vocational schools for the first time but it also reinforced a hierarchical status of educational attainment, where the Group Cert was on a much lower strata than the Leaving Certificate (Coolahan, 1981). Students in vocational schools were also not allowed to take the examinations in the mainstream system, namely the Intermediate or Leaving Certificate examinations.

This division of function between the vocational and secondary schools, one providing education for those entering the workforce directly and one providing education for those who progressed to further and higher education, continued until the 1960s. The introduction of comprehensive schools in 1966 was designed to facilitate the incorporation of small secondary and vocational schools in a locality and, by sharing resources and facilities, make better use of the limited funds available. The introduction of a common Intermediate Certificate course in 1966 gave a wider subject range including more practical subjects to schools and the broadening of access to the traditional Leaving Certificate subjects by students in Vocational schools was designed to facilitate a more combined approach to education. George Colley, then Minister of Education in 1966, stated in a letter to all vocational and secondary schools that his aim was "that Secondary and Vocational schools, by the exchange of facilities and by other forms of collaboration, should make available a curriculum broad enough to serve the individual needs of all their students, and thereby to provide the basis of a comprehensive system in each locality" (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 262). The impact of these changes however was not the intended one. Rather than having students in secondary schools embracing a range of more practical subjects, students in vocational schools accessed the more academic subjects now available

resulting in a detrimental downturn in the popularity of practical subjects available. The push for a more comprehensive education system was thwarted by the societal belief that access to third level was the only valuable educational route (Hyland, 1999). The increased influence of international forces such as the EEC and the OECD, and the increasing technological demands of society and the economy, meant that innovation in curriculum would be sought by forward thinking Ministers in spaces other than the conservative arena of the Department of Education.

2.2.3 Moving curriculum innovation 1966-84

The impact of the increase in numbers of students at second level and the introduction of the new type of schools, the comprehensive schools, led to the planned reform of curricular subjects and assessment. In order to develop the planned changes joint working parties were established, with representatives from the Inspectorate and teachers, aided by the recent development of subject associations, to develop the new courses for mathematics and science and later Latin, Greek and music (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 201). Formal syllabus committees were established in 1965 for Intermediate Certificate courses and in 1967 for Leaving Certificate Courses. These committees included representatives from school management and teachers as well as the Inspectorate. The committees were chaired by the Inspectors. Despite the involvement of voices beyond the Department, the more radical proposals which included the grouping of subjects and the introduction or oral and practical assessments, failed to materialise due to disagreements over the provision of in-service, the introduction of external monitoring and extra payment for teachers.

Curriculum innovation in the late 1960s and 1970s was mainly carried out by units at a remove from the Department of Education. The Shannon Curriculum Development Centre was established under the aegis of the Board of Management for St Patrick's Comprehensive School in Shannon in 1972. As part of the new vision for schools promoted by Patrick Hillery in the 1960s, the comprehensive school aimed to provide a combined academic and vocational education, and the greenfield site of the new town development in Shannon provided a location to develop new curricula and programmes designed to suit the diverse cohort of students attending the school. Some of the programmes developed in Shannon were supported by the European Community Projects funding and one project,

the Spiral II project, focused on developing programmes for students of post-compulsory age who wished to remain at school but for whom the traditional Leaving Certificate offered few opportunities (Gleeson, 1990).

The City of Dublin VEC Curriculum Development Unit was another independent curriculum body developing programmes and units for schools across the country such as the Junior Cycle Schools Programme and the modules that formed the basis for the development of Youthreach (Crooks, 1990). Another curriculum development unit in the Tipperary (N.R.) VEC developed alternative mathematics programmes for senior cycle and health education and life skills modules (McKernan, 1990). This disparate innovation in curriculum matters was funded by various European projects and was allowed to develop projects and curriculum based on examples from other jurisdictions such as the modelling of the Shannon CDU on the Schools Council system in the UK. But all of these developments would remain on the periphery without a centralised curriculum body. It was not until the 1980s that a centralised agency for curriculum development was established.

The evolution of curricular development from the centralised control of the department of education, albeit with the weighty influence of the Catholic hierarchy, to the innovative hubs of curricular development in CDVEC, Shannon and Tipperary marked a significant shift of emphasis over the course of sixty years. The international influence of the OECD, initiated by the report in 1965, brought a socio-economic context to the discussion on what a curriculum should aim to achieve. Up until that point the aims of a curriculum were unquestioned as the development of an Irish citizen with the correct spiritual context. By the early 1980s, other influences were felt, in particular the need for all voices to be heard in the curriculum development space and for the previous a priori assumptions to be called out and discussed.

2.3 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: origin, structures and limitations

As far back as the Molony Report in 1919, there were calls for a statutory body to advise on curriculum matters. The Intermediate Boards of Education that pre-dated the Free State comprised of between seven and twelve commissioners for education (all male), including the Lord Chief Justice, the Bishop of Galway and the Provost of Trinity College, and two

assistant commissioners. Even with this degree of experience in education, the Molony report called for:

> An advisory committee with defined statutory powers, comprised of representatives of the teaching profession and of persons connected with intermediate education in Ireland should be established and that this committee should be consulted by the central authority (or the Intermediate Board, as the case may be) on all questions concerning syllabuses, curricula and other matters affecting the educational policy. (Molony, 1919, p. 33)

Despite calls for such an advisory committee repeatedly in Dáil and Seanad debates in the intervening years (Dail Eireann Debates, 1949; Seanad Eireann Debates, 1941) and the calls from the OECD report on the need for a curriculum advisory section in the Department, it was not until 1984 that the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board was established. The evolution of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment from the CEB to its establishment in 1987 to its statutory status in 2001, and its partnership model approach to curriculum development has shaped how the curriculum is developed in Ireland. In trying to explore perspectives of the current review of senior cycle, an understanding of the Council and its structures can inform the insights of the development processes at work.

2.3.1 NCCA: Origin

Curricular developments had been the remit of the Department of Education up to 1984 when the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was established and then replaced by the NCCA in 1987 with more limited remit over assessment (Coolahan, 1981; Granville, 2004; Mulcahy, 1981) but it took a further 14 years before its statutory status was finalised. This transfer of power from the dark recesses of the Department of Education to the more transparent, partnership model that exists today was, according to Granville (2004, p. 69) underpinned by the model of social partnership which was at the heart of the growth of the Irish economy at the end of the twentieth century.

The possibility of a curriculum council to oversee the development of curriculum matters had been mooted since the foundation of the state, but the political wrangling over the power and remit of the CEB changed with the frequent changes of government and minister in the years preceding its establishment (Gleeson, 2000a). The establishment of the Curriculum and Examinations Board was a key tenet of Fine Gael education policy in

1980 and when Gemma Hussey became Minister for Education in 1982, she outlined the broad scope of the partners who would be involved in the new CEB to include parents, managers and teachers. The interim CEB was to initiate a review of curriculum and examination arrangements until a statutory arrangement could be agreed (Hyland, 1990). The working group established by Minister Hussey to advise on the establishment of a national board for curriculum and examination made a number of recommendations. The working party, under the Chairmanship of Seán Mac Cárthaigh, noted that in considering the remit and structure of the Board "the greatest care will be needed in order to reconcile Ministerial prerogatives with the freedom that should be given to the Board"(Department of Education, 1983, p. 14). The recommendations included:

- That the Board have an advisory, evaluatory and developmental function in relation to curriculum at first and second levels
- That it have a major responsibility in the area of pupil assessment
- That in its statutory phase it also be responsible for a range of state examinations
- That it be known in both in its interim and statutory phases as An Bord Curaclaim agus Measúnaithe (The National Curriculum and Assessment Board)
- That transfer of functions from the Examination Branch of the Department of Education to the Board be scheduled for November 1987 (Department of Education, 1983, p. 53-55)

The Working Party also acknowledged some of the difficulties that could be faced by such a Board. While the Minister had advised that members of the Board would be chosen as a result of their expertise and experience rather than a representative basis, the report notes "representation by direct delegation could cause problems brought about by conflicting interests and could slow down the pace of decision-making" (Department of Education, 1983, p. 15). The report also notes the major implications for the structure and role of the Department of Education in the establishment of the Board and the difficulty in achieving a degree of independent autonomy for the Board while also maintaining that the ultimate responsibility for policy decisions would remain with the Minister. It is obvious from the extensive deliberations of the working group, that the Board was envisaged as akin to other

state boards that had been established in the 1980s and that a representative council was not on the agenda in 1983.

When the NCCA was formally instituted in 1987, the remit for examinations was downgraded to assessment advice and the formal running of the examinations continued to remain with the Examinations Branch in Athlone. One of the considerations in this political move may lie with the change of Minister in the interim. By 1987, the Minister for Education was Fianna Fail's Mary O'Rourke. In her role as opposition education spokesperson in the preceding years, O'Rourke had repeatedly raised the issue of the possible downgrading of the Examination Branch, located in her political heartland, her hometown of Athlone (Dail Eireann Debates, 1984) and the detrimental impact this would have. The administration and oversight of the state examinations had been within the remit of the Inspectorate since the foundation of the state and the dissolution of the Intermediate Board. Since 1922, the duties of the Inspectorate had grown and the pressures of running the examination system had caused the inspection duties of the Department at second level to be practically non-existent (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 171). The system of examinations had also come under increasing pressure as reports on the Leaving Certificate by Madaus and MacNamara(1970a) and on the Intermediate Certificate (Department of Education, 1975) were increasingly critical of the system of assessment at work. The establishment of a separate examinations board had been proposed in the 1970s with a proposed Bill for an Examinations Board submitted to government in 1976. However, a change of government meant that all plans for the Board were shelved. The establishment of a Curriculum Development Unit within the Department in 1977 was never fully realised and the recruitment embargo initiated in the early 1980s meant that the staffing never matched requirements. The Inspectorate were deployed to fill the gaps and worked on the development of the White Paper for Educational Development which proposed the initial Curriculum Council that evolved into the CEB (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009, p. 209). The interface between the new CEB and the Inspectorate was blurred by the appointment of an Inspector to the role of Chief Executive of the new body, Albert Ó Ceallaigh.

The structure of the Interim CEB was not representative as the Minister herself nominated the twenty voting members from the lists compiled by the interested groups in education.

This group was joined by two representatives from the Department of Education. The full-time executive staff of the CEB consisted of only three people, the third of whom was only appointed eighteen months into the intended two-year life span of the Board. Despite the lack of resources, the Board produced a number of significant documents overviewing the curriculum and assessment needs of the state such as *In Our Schools* (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1986a), *Senior Cycle: Development and Direction* (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1986b) and *Issues and Structures in Education* (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1984). The turf wars with the Department and the lack of clarity over the remit have been extensively examined by those directly involved at the time (Gleeson, 2000b; Granville, 1994; Hyland, 1990). But the replacement of the CEB with the newly instituted National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1987 brought a different model of partnership to the fore.

The NCCA was formally reconstituted as a non-statutory but representative body in 1987 under the new Minister, Mary O'Rourke. The shift from a nominated board to a representative council with the partners in education, echoed the political influence of the social partnership model that gained traction in Ireland in the late 1980s. The model of social partnership emerged from post-war West Germany where the economic stability was underpinned by institutionalised co-operation between organised labour unions, business interests and government (Streeck & Hassel, 2010). Since Ireland's membership of the EEC in 1973, Irish civil servants and ministers were increasingly involved in trans-European committees and interest groups and the model of social partnership as a means of dealing with Ireland's mounting national debt and rocketing unemployment and emigration figures looked increasingly appealing (Ó Riain, 2013). The official policy of social partnership was formalised in the first three year social partnership agreement signed by the state with unions and industry in 1987, and these agreements continued unbroken, though not without difficulty, until 2008 (Ó Riain, 2013). The use of these partnerships to provide stability but also to remove historical barriers to growth has been well documented (Garvin, 2004; Girvin, 2010; Ó Riain, 2006, 2013) but the introduction of partnership institutions also provided a deliberative policy negotiation space and a "flexible network of governance" (Hardiman, 2006, p. 344). In light of this changing political and social dynamic, it is no surprise that the newly reconstituted NCCA followed a 'partnership' model.

The first order of business for the NCCA was to oversee the revision of subject syllabi for the new Junior Certificate due for implementation by 1989. The new representative structure retained some of the members from the previous CEB, nominated due to their expertise in curriculum matters (Gleeson, 2000b, p. 132) along with representatives from teacher unions, management groups and the National Parents Council. By 1991, the membership was extended to 22 members to allow for additional representatives from the unions and parent body. In the 1998 Education Act, the NCCA became a statutory body, and this was enacted in 2001. At its core was a representative structure, the Council, that oversaw all development of advice and contained representatives of the key interested bodies in education including the unions, parents and the Department itself.

But this model did not underpin the other statutory body in education, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), established in 2003 with the remit to oversee the state examinations. Unlike the NCCA, the SEC is not based on a partnership model. It replaced the Department of Education Examinations Branch but stayed in the same building in Athlone, retained the same civil servants as staffing and has a commission constituted by five commissioners appointed by the Minister. The fragmented separation of curriculum, assessment and examinations, reveals a level of disjointed thinking. While the NCCA advise on curriculum and assessment, and in the curriculum documentation extensive reference is made to formative as well as summative assessment, the SEC oversee the state examinations only. The alignment between the broader aims of the curriculum and the narrow purpose of the state examinations appears to fall between the two bodies.

According to its remit set out in the Education Act, the purpose of the NCCA is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on:

a. The curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and
b. The assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum. (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.38).

The advice is formulated through the deliberations of the representatives on the Council itself and its substructures.

2.3.2 NCCA: Structures

The structure of the NCCA has changed very little since its establishment in 1987. The twenty-four-member Council consists of nominated representatives from the various stakeholders in education. These groups were designated as the three teacher unions (INTO, ASTI, TUI), other union representation (IFUT, ICTU), National Parent Councils (NPC-P, NPC-PP), IBEC, the Department of Education and Skills, the State Examinations Commission, school management bodies (JMB, ETBI, CPMSA, NAMBSE, CIBE, ACCS), Irish language group (Foras na Gaeilge) and ministerial nominees. This Council meets approximately seven times a year and is supported in its work by a structure of Boards, Development Groups, the Chief Executive and a full-time executive and corporate staff (NCCA, 2022a).

The Boards and development groups have a similar representative structure to the Council itself. The three boards (Board for Early Childhood and Primary, Board for Junior Cycle and Board for Senior Cycle) oversee the development of curricular documentation, consultation on that documentation and research on relevant topics to the work of the Board. The executive staff consists mainly of seconded teachers with particular areas of expertise to oversee curricular developments as they happen and a corporate staff of civil service employees to support the work of the organisation. The structure of the Council, Boards and development groups is outlined in Figure 4, and the structure of the executive staff is outlined in Figure 5.

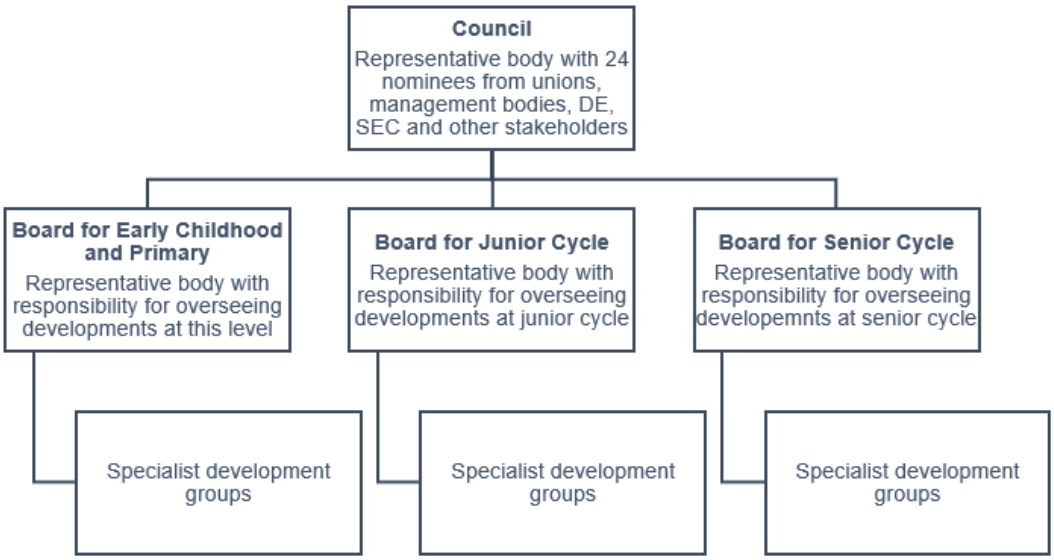

Figure 4 Structure of Council, Boards and Development Groups.

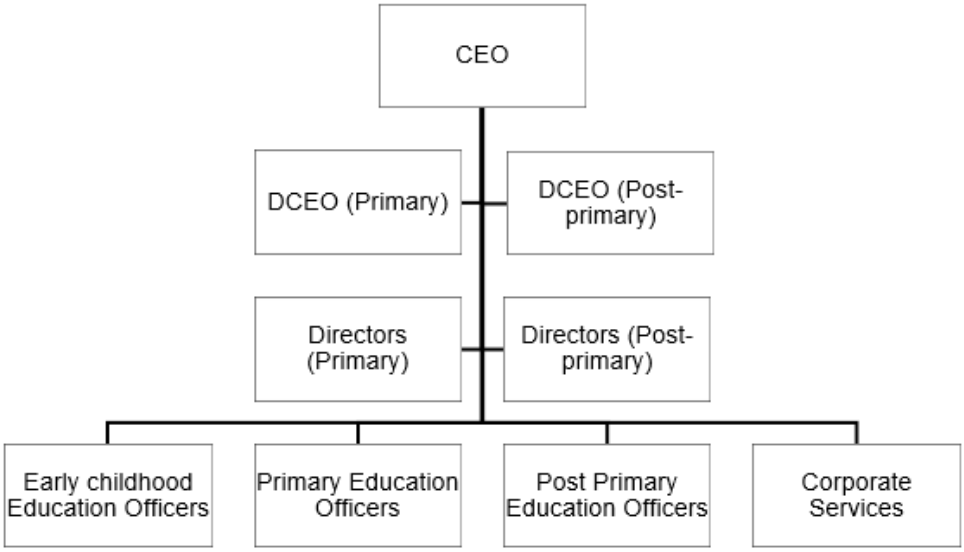

Figure 5 NCCA Executive Staff structure

The process of curricular development usually begins with the identification of an area of curriculum in need of revision that appears in the strategic plan of the NCCA or the Department of Education Action Plan for Education. These strategic plans and action plans are published yearly and usually have a top-down impact on the work of the NCCA. Items highlighted for development in the Departmental Action Plan appear on the NCCA Strategic plan and then the yearly Plan of Work. Occasionally a request for review will emerge as a

result of political influences at the time such as the review of Relationships and Sexuality education, but the more usual route is via governmental plan. The NCCA executive staff will undertake an initial scoping of the scale of the review and recruit specialist staff (usually a seconded teacher) to oversee the review. A development group is established to carry out the bulk of the work in the review. This development group is composed of the same representative structure as the Council and Boards, namely representatives from unions, management bodies, DES, SEC, and relevant subject associations or relevant specialist groups. This committee then discuss, deliberate and make decisions on the shape of the reform. This model of policy development bears some resemblance to the linear stages model outlined by Laswell (1956) and adapted by Porter and Hicks (1995). In the Porter and Hicks iteration the seven stages of policy development are: the identification of policy problems; agenda setting; the formulation of policy proposals by policy organisations; the adoption and legitimation of policies; implementation of policies; the evaluation of implementation and impact. The work undertaken by the NCCA could be seen as falling into the formulation and adoption stages of this policy process.

2.3.3 Limitations of the structures

An obvious limitation of the role of the NCCA is that it is an advisory body. The final decisions relating to curriculum and assessment rests with the Minister for Education. The second factor that has an influence on the work of the NCCA is that although it has the authority to advise on assessment, the State Examinations Commission, another statutory body established as a result of the Education Act, designs and implements the assessment procedures for the state examinations.

In Granville's analysis of the NCCA structures (2004) the limitations of the committee structure are apparent. The nominated delegates can reasonably be expected to agree with the policy decisions and viewpoints of their parent body. The impact of this on the development process according to Granville (2004, p.75) is that "there may be negative implications in this for imaginative, innovative thinking on curriculum planning. If participants do not experience some tension between the development work with which they engage and the policy positions previously adopted by their parent bodies, there may be cause to question the essence of that development process". In his survey of committee members Granville (1994) explored the self-perceived strengths and weaknesses of

committee members. In their responses, members noted their strengths as subject specialists but more worryingly acknowledged their weaknesses as curriculum developers. The members noted the key role of the NCCA Education Officers and the Chair of the committees in leading the work of the group. At the time of Granville's research, the Education Officer post was a part-time seconded teacher. At present in the NCCA, this role is a full-time seconded position. This development may have both positive and negative consequences. In a full-time position, the Education Officer has the dedicated time to support curricular development, but this also results in some distancing from the classroom experience; whether this is beneficial to the role as curriculum developer has not been researched.

The symbolic importance of the committee structure cannot be underestimated. Granville claims that the NCCA and its committees "become not simply official instruments of national policy formulation, but also theatres of action, negotiation and diplomacy, wherein the education partners act out dramas of conflict and conciliation" (Granville, 2004, p.87). The experience of any development group bears out this belief. At a development group, where the thorny issues of syllabus developments and assessment alignment are thrashed out, the political positions of the members are laid bare, and the role of the Chair and Education Officer often becomes one of skilled negotiators trying to find common ground while maintaining curricular coherence. Unfortunately, as outlined by Granville (2004, 2010) one of the first casualties of this approach is innovation. From an entrenched perspective, no real change is possible, and the result is often tweaking and minor adjustments rather than radical change. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of assessment (Gleeson et al., 2020; Looney, 2014; MacPhail et al., 2018). The negotiations around the development group tables are also increasingly the subject of external scrutiny and commentary on the developments of the science curricula (Hyland, 2014b) and the reimagined dual courses for Irish, T1 and T2 (Hyland & Uí Uiginn, 2021), have been the subject of national debate and discussion at Oireachtas level.

The clarity or lack of clarity over the relative roles and responsibilities of the other structures in the education system has been felt by the NCCA since its inception. The role as an advisory body to the Minister, the intertwined roles of the Department, Inspectorate and the SEC in the business of developing, implementing and assessing the curriculum can

lead to the 'turf wars' referenced by Granville and Gleeson. The dominance of some partners in the negotiating spaces and the use of powerful veto can stem innovation and developments. Against this background of partnership and discourse on senior cycle, the Senior Cycle Review took place.

2.3.4 The importance of a name: the Department and the Inspectorate

The references to the Department of Education vary throughout this study, just as the name of the Department itself has changed with the shifting focus of the time. At the outset of the Free State, there was no Minister for Education, but instead a Minister for Irish, John J. O'Kelly, from June 1920 to August 1921. This reflected the concern of the Free State government that saw the rejuvenation of Irish identity and education as one in the same thing. From 1921 until 1997, the Minister for Education oversaw the newly founded Department of the same name. The first minister in 1921 was indeed the same John J. O'Kelly. Subsequent ministers had varying levels of dedication to the role. Eoin MacNeill, Minister from 1922 until November 1925, spent most of this time dealing with the ill-fated Boundary Commission. Eamon De Valera took over as Minister, in addition to his role as Taoiseach and while dealing with the Emergency in 1939. Several Taoisigh held the dual role over the last century including Jack Lynch in 1968 and Charles Haughey in 1982. By 1997, the shift in emphasis reflective of the evolving role education was seen to have in the development of the country, resulted in the Department being renamed, the Department of Education and Science. It retained this name until 2010 when it was again renamed to recognise a further shift as the Department of Education and Skills. After the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020, the Department returned to its original moniker of simply the Department of Education.

The Department itself is not a singular entity. It is comprised of numerous administrative branches including branches that deal with social inclusion, school transport, building, planning and finance and the Inspectorate. Within these two major divisions there are further sectoral divisions between primary and secondary education and up until the 1990s, the Technical and Vocational Instruction branch. Despite this internal fragmentation, all decisions nationally have to go through the same central administration.

Within the Department, historically the work of the Inspectorate was stretched across branches dealing with the state examinations, teacher registration, in-service provision, policy development, curriculum planning, school support, student grants and special education in addition to their role in the inspection of schools. As a result of numerous reports such as the OECD Country report (OECD, 1991) and the Cromien Report (Cromien, 2000) along with the developments outlined in the Education Green Paper (1992), the Education White Paper (1995) and the Education Act (1998), the role and structure of the inspectorate within the Department was clarified. Other agencies were established to deal with functions traditionally managed by the Inspectorate such as the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) in 1998, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2002, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in 2003 and the Teaching Council in 2005. The role of the Inspectorate in supporting the in-service of teachers was gradually moved to external agencies such as the Primary Curriculum Support Programme in 1999, the Second Level Support Service in 2005, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) in 2010 and the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) in 2013. The primary function of the Inspectorate as quality assurance was explicitly stated in the education Act (1998) but the Inspectorate still work closely will all of the newly established agencies. In the area of curriculum development, inspectors are represented on all of the structures of the NCCA. On the Board for Senior Cycle, there are two Departmental representatives, one from the Inspectorate and one from the Curriculum and Policy Unit.

2.4 Conclusion

Granville notes "Irish schools have been operating in a culture of premise controls for many generations. Education achieved a certain status in Irish society. Uncontested assumptions were commonplace: so, schooling is a good thing, teachers know what they are doing and assessment schemes are almost godlike in their integrity" (2004, p. 91). The uncontested assumptions noted by Granville in 2004 are still prevalent in any discourse on senior cycle at present. The unwavering belief in the status of the Leaving Certificate examination and the high international esteem in which it is held is an unsubstantiated belief that is held to be self-evident. The fairness and integrity of the examination system has not yet been

tarnished by the levels of appeals, upgrades or court cases brought against the SEC (O'Faolain, 2018; O'Kelly, 2019). There is a cognitive dissonance that allows for the statements to be issued that claim that teachers cannot examine students for certification as it must be carried out by the distanced and objective SEC and yet the actual marking of examinations under the auspices of the SEC is carried out by teachers.

Gleeson (2004) notes the considerable dichotomy between rhetoric and reality in curriculum discourse in Ireland. In particular, the dearth of educational research in relation to policy is identified as adding to the technical view of education that dominates the discourse on reform (Gleeson, 2004, pp 100-106). Gleeson (2004) supports his view by pointing to the enormous attention given to the technical aspects of curriculum and assessment at post-primary namely: "the introduction of additional levels and a wider range of grades; the priority given to the publication of Examiners' reports; the inclusion in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) of legislation to do with appeals; the inclusion of assessment objectives in syllabus documents. It is ironic that the only available definition of Leaving Certificate grades is in terms of points for third-level entry" (Gleeson, 2004, p. 110). While this article was written in 2004, in the intervening years it would appear that very little has changed. In the discourse around the review of senior cycle the issues that caused most discontent were not the philosophical questioning of the purpose of this stage of education or inclusion, but concerns with levels, grades, external assessment and entry to third level (Banks et al., 2018; NCCA, 2019c), in keeping with Gleeson's assertion that "Irish educational debate has largely eschewed ideological issues within the context of the dominance of positivism" (Gleeson, 2004, p. 125). The gap between rhetoric and reality noted in the discourse by Gleeson, is evident in the repeated efforts of curricular reform in Ireland. While many may agree with the rhetoric of reform and the need for change in senior cycle, there is no agreement on how that reform may be created or implemented in reality.

This chapter has outlined the long history of the Leaving Certificate examination and its dominance in the upper secondary stage of education in Ireland. The resistance of the institution to change may be grounded on its enormous success as a symbol of social mobility and equality. Prior to the introduction of free education, achieving success in the Leaving Certificate ensured a career pathway through university and the promise of social

mobility out of the poverty experienced by previous generations. The impact of free second level education has meant increasing numbers and a more diverse cohort remaining in school until the Leaving Certificate examination. This in turn is placing pressure on third level to provide spaces for and provide a diverse education for the cohort now wishing to continue on into third level. Whether this examination, and indeed the entire senior cycle, still serves the needs of the nation is a fundamental question that the senior cycle review sought to answer

Whenever change in the structure or status of senior cycle education has happened, such as the introduction of free education in 1966 or the development of LCA and LCVP in 1995, there has been a confluence of forces that enabled change. The prevailing economic winds, presaged by the OECD report in 1965, along with the positioning of a particular Minister in O'Malley who had an appetite for change and a shift in the underpinning values and principles held by society from a theocentric paradigm to a mercantile paradigm allowed for the introduction of free education in a system that was not ready or prepared for its advancement. Similarly in the mid 1990s, a shift in economic fortunes that would lead to the Celtic Tiger of the turn of the century, a change in power structures that prioritised 'partnership' arrangements and the presence of key figures in curriculum development units around the country, enabled the development of programmes such as the LCA and LCVP. These forces and underpinning values and principles that enable change could be described as morphogenic forces.

One of the statements by Donogh O'Malley from 1967 reveals interesting insights into the values and influences present at the time. In his speech to the Seanad on February 9th, 1967, he stated:

> I am up against opposition and serious organised opposition, but they are not going to defeat me on this. I shall tell you further that I shall expose them, and I shall expose their tactics on every available occasion whoever they are. I see my responsibilities very clearly to the Irish people and to the Irish children. No vested interest or group, whoever they may be, at whatever level, will sabotage what every reasonable-minded man considers to be a just scheme. (Seanad Eireann Debates, 1967)

In the discussions with participants in this research similar references surfaced: concerns about 'vested interests' dominating the discussions on change; the responsibilities to the

Irish people and Irish children as the focus of decision-making; and, the underpinning value of a just and fair system. The exploration of these underpinning values that influence, impede or engender change emerged as a central concern for this research.

The role of society and social structures, identity and beliefs, international structures and pressures, personal agency and motivation for change, are all evident in this brief overview of the evolution of the Leaving Certificate in the twentieth century. In undertaking an examination of the processes of policy development in the review of senior cycle, the same themes are of concern and form the context for any discussion in later chapters. The application of a critical realist approach to the study allowed for the consideration of these underlying influencing factors. Further detail on this approach is outlined in Chapter 3. In using a partnership model to undertake this review, the views of schools, parents and students, in addition to stakeholders in education were sought. This study aims to examine the perspectives of those involved in the review to gain an insight into the underlying structures, agency and influences on policy development and identify the characteristics and determinants of this partnership model.

3. Literature Review

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins the work reported in this thesis. It also outlines the epistemological stance that underpins the research. This addresses a broad understanding of what curriculum is and how it has evolved and developed internationally and so places the current developments in Ireland in context and aids understanding of the complexities and connections present. In order to fully explore the perceptions of the actors in the review at all levels, this chapter also examines concerns for agency, student and parent voice, and the unique and specific partnership model of policy development used in Ireland. Following this discussion, a set of research questions is presented at 3.5, deriving from both the literature and the observed realities of curricular reform in Ireland.

3.1 Theoretical framework underpinning the research

This research will explore the perceptions of various actors in the review of senior cycle from various levels in the policy arena. Each of these policy actors represent multiple identities. In examining and exploring the experiences of these actors an ontology is needed that recognises the complexity of interacting forces that have an effect on their experience of policy development and implementation. The inter-relationship between structures and society, between the individual policy actors and the multiple structures they inhabit and the changing contextual interpretation of policy language itself, all require a theory that encompasses these attributes. The aim in this research is to gather greater understanding and explanation of the processes at play rather than a more positivistic stance of identifying generalisable laws or an interpretive stance of identifying the experience or beliefs of the actors involved, and so critical realism offers a perspective from which to generate this understanding (McEvoy & Richards, 2006).

3.1.1 Epistemology: Finding a way to represent cultural and social forms of knowledge

Any discussion on education and the curriculum must have some stance on epistemology and a theory of knowledge that encompasses what knowledge is included, whose

knowledge and for what ends. Alderson (2020) challenges the hierarchical theory of knowledge described by Young (2008), Young and Muller (2013), and Muller and Young (2019). In Young and Muller's iteration, powerful knowledge (PK), based on the theories of Durkheim and Bernstein, is specialised and differentiated from everyday thinking (Young & Muller, 2013) and exemplified most succinctly by STEM[3] subjects. The arts, literature and the humanities are seen as relying on traditions rather than the universal and democratic truths observed by STEM subjects and so "the humanities represent the cultural 'knowledge of the powerful'(Young, 2008) in a world where such knowledge compares less and less favourably, on universal criteria with STEM subjects" (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 233). There are many criticisms of this view of both power and knowledge (Bhaskar, 1998; White, 2018, 2019) as it ignores the social and cultural forms and processes that power and knowledge can take. Alderson in her critique of the social realism propounded by this view, argues the case for critical realism as a means of revealing the levels of influence that have an impact on our understanding of the world beyond the observable, empirical level and actual level. Critical realism, she argues, "sees the reality in these levels, and considers most important, the origins, working and explanations found at the third deeper unseen *real level*: powerful influences and causal mechanisms that are only apprehended in their effects." (italics in original, Alderson, 2020, p. 29). Critical realism, she argues, has a dialectic nature that can be summarised in four stages of recurring cycles:

- Understanding the real seen and unseen world, absences and deeper hidden meanings, historical contexts (e.g., theories of different curricula, who designs them and why, students' and society's needs, justice and flourishing);
- interventions to negate problems and their effects (how schools actually adopt and provide curricula to serve these needs and overcome ignorance);
- larger whole contexts (how national and global structures, political economies and inequalities influence schools);
- transformative change over time (e.g. how curricula affect personal and political, individual and social progress into the future). (Alderson, 2020, p. 30)

These stages provide a useful heuristic to not only examine the observable empirical world of curriculum development in Ireland but also to examine the influences, seen and unseen, on this development, and how these influences change over time.

[3] Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

3.1.2 Critical Realism as a means of understanding structure and agency

Critical realism, as iterated by Margaret Archer (1985, 1995, 1998), building on the writings on Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1975, 1998) and Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), posits a view of society that places the relationship between the individual and society as the central sociological problem and understanding the link between structure and agency an implicit concern (Archer, 1995). According to Archer, the linking of structure and agency can only be analysed by examining the interplay between them over time (Archer, 1995, p. 65). Agency can be defined as individual's will and capacity to act, this individual agency is strongly linked to identity and identity formation, but, when examining teacher agency in the enactment of policy change, the individual teacher is subject to multiple identities. Lasky (2005, p. 900) states that "teacher agency is part of a complex dynamic; it shapes and is shaped by the structural and cultural features of society and school cultures." Individual identity as a teacher is shaped by school culture, status, personal context as a parent/sibling/child, personal educational history and experience. In the enactment of policy, all of these individual influences on identity may emerge and influence how the policy is enacted. In addition, the collective group of teachers in a particular context, such as a particular school, locality, or union grouping, may react to policy change in collective ways. A parent involved in the review may also have experienced the curriculum themselves, they may have different experiences as a parent with different children, they may also work in the education sector and have a different perspective as a special needs assistant (SNA) or teacher. It is also possible that this agency may change in relation to other events, actions or reactions over time. An actor who was a student at the time of the review may have since experienced education in a third level setting or in another country and so have developed different perspectives than the one they first held in relation to their experience of the review. Manyukhina and Wyse (2019, pp.223-225) identified critical realism as providing a sound theoretical foundation for the view of agency as a "multi-dimensional, dynamic and contextualised entity".

The examination of the culture of policy change in Irish society over time requires a theoretical framework that can aid the analysis of these complexities while also acknowledging the temporal aspect of such analysis. Again, Manyukhina and Wyse (2019, p. 239) succinctly explicate the role that can be played by critical realism.

> The key strengths of critical realist philosophy as far as curriculum thinking is concerned is that it recognises the ontological reality and the epistemic significance of subjective experiences and considers them with reference to objective contexts, thus enabling understanding of the drivers, patterns, and influencing factors of agentic behaviour in educational settings.

The aim of using a critical realist perspective is not to find the positivist generalisable laws or to identify the beliefs of social actors but rather it is to develop deeper levels of understanding and explanation of reality (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). This use of critical realism is distinct from theories of social realism proposed by theorists such as Young (2008).Whereas Young may use the term critical realism to support the case for trusting the academic community as a guarantor of truth, as Terry Wrigley points out "trusting in the scholarly community as the guarantor of truth - or at least as good as we can get - is not what Critical Realism is about. Critical realism is essentially a recognition that science (natural but also social) seeks to dig below the surface of appearances and identify the underlying forces or depth-structures" (Wrigley, 2018, p. 18). This 'digging beneath the surface' and understanding the complex nature of the actions and interactions involved in developing and enacting curriculum change is the heart of this study. In light of the strengths and possibilities outlined above, Critical Realism seems to present the most promising framework through which the analysis can be conducted and was adopted as the underscoring methodology for this study.

3.1.3 Critical realism within the realm of constructivism

Elder-Vass (2012) argues for an understanding of critical realism that places it within the realms of social constructivism. While realists see the social world, like the natural world as being driven by causal processes, critical realism sees all events as caused by multiple interacting causal powers (Bhaskar, 1975). These causal powers include those of the individual person and social structures, but these causal powers may never be realised as they may be overcome by other contingently present powers (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp 10-11). A realist constructivist "would see language, discourse and culture as products of interacting causal powers and also potentially, as causal forces themselves … By developing a social ontology of language, discourse and culture we can then develop an understanding of the entities, powers and mechanisms at work" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p 12). This discursive

constructivism is strengthened by a combination with a realist ontology as it allows for the mechanisms for the construction of discourse to be examined. It also allows for the agency of the individual to support or reject normative discourse. Elder-Vass also discussed what he calls a 'norm circle'. Here he argues that every norm has a 'norm circle' of people ready to defend and support the norm, and, punish and criticise those that stand against it. By virtue of these sanctioning behaviours, individuals may develop what he calls dispositions to conform to the norm. The recognition of the individual as a subject but also as a real physical human being capable of reflection and choice means that the capability to resist conformity is an emergent property of humans.

> The realist construed subject thus has the autonomy of the agentic subject…to make resistance and change possible. The extent and form of that autonomy may vary according to historic conditions which influence the range of options within which we may have realistic possibilities of making choices as well as the kinds of people that we believe ourselves to be. (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 19)

This placing of critical realism within the realm of social constructivism, allows for a hermeneutic approach to analysis. Allied to this, utilising the core practices of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) allows for a social constructivist approach to discourse while allowing a critical realist analysis of the structures, mechanisms and agency at work as causal powers in the development and implementation of policy. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.1.4 Stratified Ontology: Empirical, actual and real domains

Critical realism acknowledges the existence of the physical, observable world, while also acknowledging that there are structures and mechanisms that influence that world that cannot be seen. Sayer (2000) outlines the three overlapping domains defined by critical realism: empirical, actual and real as defined by Bhaskar (1975). The stratified levels of reality proposed by critical realism are: the empirical domain which consists of the observable experiences, the actual domain which consists of actual events caused by the mechanisms at work and the real domain which consists of the unobservable mechanisms beneath that have generated the events and experiences (Withell & Haigh, 2018). In the real domain, the structures, powers and mechanisms that constitute reality can be analysed. The structures are the internally related physical and material objects or human practices, while on a societal level the structures can refer to large social systems (De

Souza, 2014). The domain of the actual consists of the events or what happens when powers in natural and social objects are activated. In the empirical domain, the domain of experience and observable outcomes, some structures may not be observable but the observable effects of these structures exist (Sayer, 2000).

In this stratified ontology, the world is characterised by emergence, where the conjunction of two or more features or aspects can give rise to new phenomena which have properties beyond the reducible parts (Sayer, 2000, pp 10-14). The properties of a structure or whole may be greater than the sum of the individual parts or may not be possessed by individual parts, such properties are emergent properties (Elder-Vass, 2007). Social entities and their emergent properties exist independent of our knowledge of them (Priestley & Miller, 2012). This leads to another central tenet of critical realism, analytical dualism.

3.1.5 Analytical Dualism in complex social situations

Analytical dualism allows for the separation of the individual from society when undertaking social analysis and can differentiate between the roles played by culture, structure and the individual in social interactions (Priestley & Miller, 2012). In complex social interactions that exist in schools, analytical dualism enables the disentanglement of aspects that contribute to any social situation and theorise on the relative causal weight of those aspects of social reality. Archer (1998) outlines these aspects of social reality as cultural forms such as beliefs, values and ideas; structural systems such as social structures; and, the relationships between the constituent parts and individual human agency. Humans as reflexive individuals can act and interplay with cultural and structural systems, this gives human agency. According to Priestley and Miller (2012, p. 105) this analytical separation "allows us to weigh up the relative causative weight of culture, structure and individual action in any given social interaction".

Critical realism views reality as an open system where multiple mechanisms operate simultaneously and events that may be activated under certain conditions may not be activated under others (De Souza, 2014). This relational conception of society was outlined by Bhaskar (1998, p.28), where "society does not consist of individuals (or …groups), but, expresses the sum of the relations within which individuals (and groups) stand". Sayer (2000, p. 15) describes how the same mechanisms according to context and spatio-temporal relationship with other objects can not only have different outcomes but can

trigger, block or modify its action. This conception of causality allows for the multiplicity of structures and actors at play in the development and implementation of curriculum policy and the analysis of this complexity. Critical realism also requires a complementary methodology. Whereas positivist research will draw upon repeated observations from large numbers of actors in order to discern significant relationships, critical realism acknowledges that the same actions may result in different outcomes and so in order to explore causal relationships more intensive methodology involving the study of individual agents in their causal contexts through interviews and qualitative analysis is a more suitable methodology than large scale surveys (Sayer, 2000). In developing this study each of these factors must be held to account, as described by Sayer:

> Explanation of the social world also requires an attentiveness to its stratification, to emergent powers arising from certain relationships, and to the ways in which the operation of causal mechanisms depends on the constraining and enabling effects of contexts. Realists also recognize the concept-dependence of social phenomena and the need to interpret meaningful actions, though since reasons can be causes, this is not something separate from or alternative to causal explanation. (Sayer, 2000, p. 27).

Critical realism also acknowledges the value of interpretivist methodologies that focus on discourse and relate that discourse to the underlying social structures, while also allowing for the fact that participant discourse may be partial or distorted (McEvoy & Richards, 2006, p.70). The key strength of a qualitative methodology from a critical realist perspective is that it is open ended which will allow themes to develop as the research progresses. The analysis of gathered data should therefore, from a critical realist ontology, maintain an interpretive stance and so a broadly grounded approach to coding following Saldana's open coding (Saldana, 2016) will be utilised in the analysis and interpretation of data.

3.1.6 Archer on morphogenesis and morphostasis: ways of understanding change

Archer refers to a morphogenetic approach, based on Buckley's theory of morphogenesis and morphostasis. Buckley (1967, pp 58-59) defines morphostasis as referring "to those processes in complex system-environment exchanges that tend to preserve or maintain a system's given form, organisation or state" and morphogenesis as referring to "those processes which tend to elaborate or change a system's given form, structure or state". Archer argues that the separability of structure and agency or individual action allows for an examination of the interplay and inter-relationship between the two, based on the

premise “that structure necessarily pre-dates the actions(s) which transform it; and that structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions” (Archer, 1995, p. 76), but as clarified by Elder-Vass (2007, p.26) this does not imply that action determines structure or vice-versa but instead this offers “a methodology for analysing the interaction between the two, always in the context of other causal factors”.

In the case of examining the emergent properties of an organisation, Elder-Vass (2007) describes how any organisation is an emergent entity composed of human individuals. The roles these individuals hold can be defined by the organisation and define the relations between people but do not determine a necessary outcome. In the case of curriculum development, implementation and enactment, this is more complex as the roles played by individuals are multiple. While a teacher may be a member of a development group, by virtue of being nominated as a representative of the union, these roles aggregate in the development space. The teacher may consider the implications of decisions through the lens of his/her own experience of the classroom, while also considering the implications for the union and also considering his/her own context and prior situation. In addition, the constituent parts of the group will interact and the roles and relationships between the roles have an impact on the decision-making process. The same multiplicity of roles and perspectives have an impact on the implementation process of change and so engender a state of morphogenesis or morphostasis as the relational roles impede or encourage change. Morphogenetic causes are those that combine to bring an entity into being and the morphostatic causes are those that enable the continued existence of the entity (Elder-Vass, 2007). Archer (1998) outlines the three main types of outcomes that occur: the new supplants the old (morphogenesis); the old remains and the new is rejected (morphostasis); or a merged option where elements of the new that don’t conflict with previously held beliefs or values are incorporated into the old. In their study of curricular reform in Scotland, Priestley and Miller (2012) examined the introduction of new policy using a critical realist approach. By viewing policy introduction as a set of cultural forms migrating into a social setting where they were subject to social interaction and causal influences, using a critical realist approach allowed further analysis of the causal influences “of existing social structures, cultural forms and individual capacities” (Priestley & Miller, 2012, p. 106). This enabled analysis of the factors that support and inhibit change beyond

the observable structures. The depth ontology allowed for the inclusion of underlying causative mechanisms such as culture, structures and individual action.

3.1.7 The advantages of applying critical realism to this research

The key concepts of critical realism then are the stratification of world into the real, actual and empirical domains; the interaction between structure, culture and agency in open systems; the concept of emergence to quantify the properties pertaining to social or cultural structures that may be beyond the sum of the individual parts and the concept of analytical dualism to allow for the differentiation between the individual and society while acknowledging the influences of each in a temporal process. The usefulness of these concepts in undertaking research on policy implementation and change was summed up by Priestley and Miller (2012, p. 114):

> For change to be sustained, it is necessary to address the wider social, cultural and policy environment within which teachers operate and to look more closely at how these interact with the dynamics of the classroom and school environments in which the curriculum enactments are carried out.

To address these wider concerns in this research, to fully recognise the influences and implications of the complex array of social, structural and individual actions and forms, an ontology that includes these layers and levels is necessary and critical realism aims to fulfil those requirements. These layers are necessary when considering the curriculum itself. As outlined by Pinar (2019, p. 15), “The school curriculum communicates what we choose to remember about our past, what we believe about the present, what we hope for the future. Because the curriculum is symbolic, its study requires situating curriculum historically, socially and autobiographically”. These three situations referenced by Pinar acknowledge the social structures that influence the curriculum, the personal agency exerted by actors within the educational sphere and the temporal change that exerts direct and indirect influences on curriculum. Critical realism provides a theoretical framework that will underpin the research and allow for the recognition of the array of social and structural structures that exert an influence on the curriculum development processes that are the subject of this research.

3.1.8 Applying a critical realist framework to understand agency

Archer's social realism perspective locates agency between the two extremes of social theory that place humans as solely formed by their society or rationally separate from their society. Her theory of agency grants humanity "(i) temporal priority, (ii) relative autonomy, and (iii) causal efficacy, in relation to the social being that they become and the powers of transformative reflection and action they bring to social context" (Archer, 2002, p. 11). The agency achieved by humans as social beings can be viewed as emergent over time, changes with experience and reflection, and is dependent on the immediate context.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) outline agency as a configuration of influences from the past, while looking to the future and engaging with the present. They term these aspects as iterational, projective and practical-evaluative influences on agency. For Emirbayer and Mische (1998) analysis of this triad of influences on the agentic actor allows for the analytic dualism referenced by Archer. The actor in the iterative space has the experience of their life history to draw upon; the projective space allows for future imagining of desirable outcomes and the practical-evaluative space encompasses the temporal moment of action along with the beliefs, values, priorities of and structures inhabited by the actor. At any one moment in time these forces interplay to give an expression of agency. The combination of this temporal element to the examination of agency is pertinent in this study as the influence of past events and experiences, along with concerns for possible futures has a direct impact on the engagement of actors in the present and their agency in that moment. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) look specifically at teacher agency and examine the role of beliefs in teacher agency. Biesta et al. take the temporal forces outlined by Emirbayer and Mische and produced a model for understanding agency (see Figure 6).

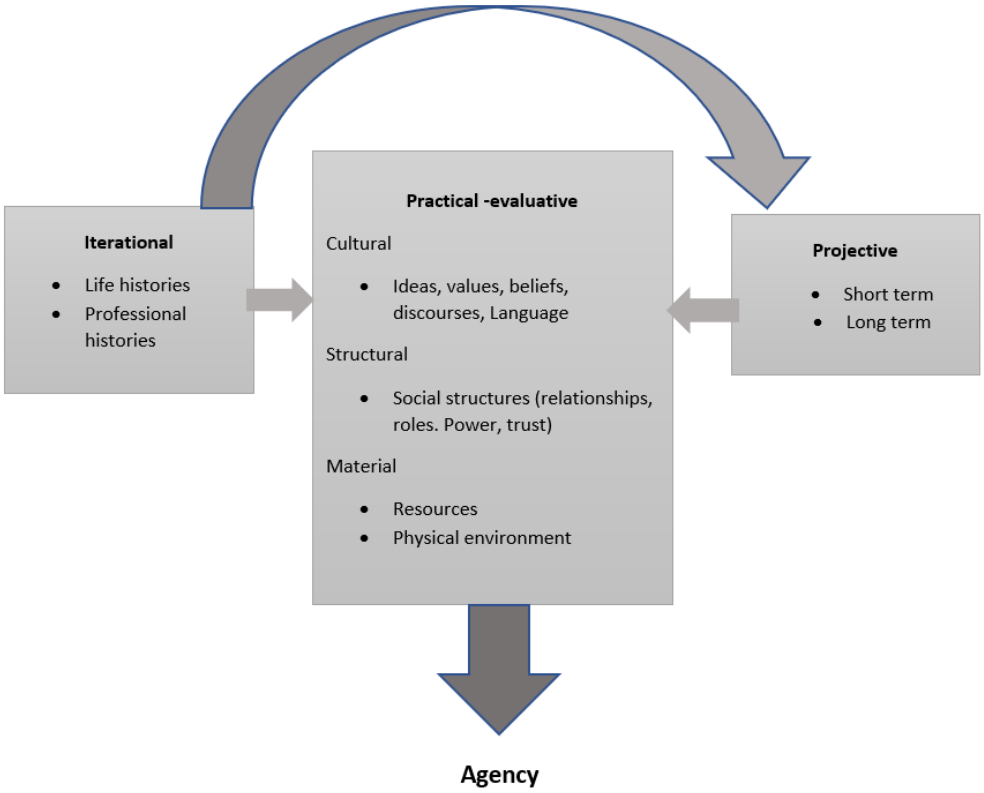

Figure 6 Understanding Agency Emirbayer and Mische model

(Biesta et al., 2015, p.627)

The application of this framework for understanding the agency of actors engaged in the policy development process, and those involved in the wider consultation as part of the senior cycle review, was seen as a promising way of opening out the understanding of the emergent agency of those actors. Priestley et al. (2012) draw attention to the fact that agency is often regarded in a solely positive light but obviously, agency can be negative as well as positive. This negative agency can manifest as resistance, conspiratorial mediation or creative mediation (Priestley et al., 2012). The resistance to education policy reforms in the recent years may be viewed as an agentic response to what has been viewed as top-down reform of education. The implication for this phase of senior cycle reform is whether the inclusion of the different voices in the review is enough inclusion to allow for agentic response to be positive change rather than negative resistance.

3.1.9 Applying grounded theory methodology to support critical realism

Fletcher (2017) outlines one of the difficulties of adopting a Critical Realist approach to qualitative research in that there is little information on precise methods to use for data collection, coding or analysis that align with the Critical Realistic ontology. As a central tenet of Critical Realism is that "ontology (i.e. what is real, the nature of reality) is not reducible to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality)" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182), the application of pre-selected codes to the data becomes problematic. Hoddy (2019) illustrates how techniques from grounded theory methodology can be utilised in the data collection, coding and analysis of data in order to support the identification of critical realist causal mechanisms. In particular, Hoddy recommends the use of open and axial coding techniques to identify causal mechanisms through an abductive approach rather than applying pre-conceived coding to the data. This application of Grounded Theory techniques builds on Grounded Theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In Grounded Theory there are two basic methodological strategies: making comparisons and asking questions of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 90). Many of the techniques for the application of Grounded Theory outlined by Corbin and Strauss such as the use of sensitising questions, thinking about various meanings of a word, the 'flip-flop' technique, looking at emotions and coding for context (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 90 - 160) can be applied to the data in this study in order to identify the causal mechanisms at work. Charmaz (2017) builds on the work of Corbin and Strauss to define a constructivist grounded theory approach. In particular she notes that grounded theory "facilitates studying processes at multiple levels of analysis and fosters making invisible processes transparent" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 299). For this study, the application of grounded theory methodological techniques allowed for a simultaneous strategy of data collection and data analysis which meant that early ideas could inform subsequent data collection and the use of memo writing as an intermediate step in analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p. 3). Further detail of the use of Grounded Theory methodology to support the Critical Realist ontology is outlined in Chapter 4.

3.2 What is meant by curriculum?

Throughout this study there is a discussion of the development of curriculum policy, but for this there needs to be an understanding of what exactly is meant by 'curriculum' in this context. The word curriculum derives from the Latin word '*currere'* meaning 'to run' and curriculum can mean a running course, and since the early nineteenth century has been used to describe a course of study. Curriculum development seeks to identify what students should learn in a course of study to achieve a particular end. Education theorists from Plato on, have discussed what it means to be educated, what purpose education serves and what elements are central to the learning experience and so deserve inclusion in a curriculum. Curriculum theorists, and many may not accept this nomenclature, range broadly in their views as to what should be included in the curriculum and how it should be structured. Certain curriculum theories also become dominant in certain societies. One discourse on curriculum theory that has been dominant in the English-speaking world, including western Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia, can be broadly described as a rationalist/modernist theory of curriculum.

3.2.1 A Rationalist/Modernist theory of curriculum

In John Dewey's philosophy of education and the curriculum (Dewey, 1902), where the experience of the child was central, the curriculum should begin with the interests and life experience of the child. For Tyler (1949) the curriculum should be aligned with the purpose of education and the learning experiences, learning instruction and evaluation should follow and a technical consideration of curriculum has emerged from Tyler's writings. Building on this work, for Glaser (1962) the development of criterion measurements should shape the design of instructional systems but for Bruner (1966) a more spiral curriculum would favour the development of self-directed learners. For writers such as Freire (1985) it was not the shape of the curriculum but its potential for political and societal change that was paramount. The extent to which the curriculum can deliver on all of its intentions and how it delivers on unintended intentions, is also questioned by writers such as Jackson (1968), Apple (2019), Lynch (1989) and Giroux (2001). Stenhouse (1975) grappled with the gap between the intended learning and what actually happens in classrooms and defines curriculum as "an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an

educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 4).

For Pinar (2019), the curriculum is a 'complicated conversation', the central question of which is *What knowledge is the most worth?* Unlike Young and Muller's (2013, 2016) conviction that the STEM subjects provide the powerful knowledge required for a curriculum, Pinar places the curriculum primarily in the lived experience of students, teachers and schools. In this way, the knowledge that is of the most worth must include subjectivity as it has an influence on and is influenced by the world as experienced by students and teachers. Eisner (1971) had previously fore fronted this concern with student engagement with the curriculum. For Eisner, curriculum must retain relevance for the lives actually lived by the students it serves and the society it hopes to build, "Many of them [students] are objecting to content which strikes them as irrelevant to their immediate concerns, irrelevant to the proper concerns of society and irrelevant to the type of life that they believe to be worth living" (Eisner, 1971, p. 163). This link between the curriculum of the present and the past that created it with the future it creates resonates with Pinar. In answering the question of what knowledge is the most worth, he states that it:

> invokes in its answering subjectivity, society and the historical moment, as it encourages us to articulate what is at stake not only for us as individual teachers and students but as citizens struggling to survive in this politically polarized, economically unequal society at this dangerous/techno-authoritarian historical moment. (Pinar, 2019, p. 115)

In this conception of curriculum, the past has an influence on the present and also therefore influences any shaping of the future. The individual is part of an interconnected series of relationships that shape and influence how one engages with the world and interprets the knowledge presented. This implies that the curriculum must be constantly critiqued and reflexively examined. The political interference in the evolution of the curriculum and schooling in the U.S and the role of competing ideologies and scapegoating of political failures by gaining control of the public education system is effectively outlined by Pinar (2019). The influence of ideologies and political interference must be included in any examination of curriculum development. As Pinar warns "whatever the school subject, the curriculum is historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological and international. It is the symbolic character of

the curriculum that renders debates over the canon struggles over national identity itself" (Pinar, 2019, p. 106). The aims of this curriculum then, is to continue the complicated conversation. Pinar's stance is that "in addition to providing competent individuals for the workplace and for further study, we must renew our commitment to the democratization of subjectivity and society, an interrelated and decidedly communicative process (Pinar, 2019, p. 123). This definition of the purpose of a curriculum goes some way towards encompassing the multiple layers contained in a curriculum document, reflective of the multiple influences on its formation. This is similar to the description of curriculum offered by Looney (2014, p. 13) that "curriculum is the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next". This image of 'stories' by Looney, involves not just the technical element of curriculum (the content of the story) but also the process (the choosing and revision) but also the practice (the art of storytelling itself). These three interrelated elements of curriculum: the knowledge or content to be included, the process of the curricular policy development and the pedagogical interactions in the classroom that inform the enactment of curriculum, are all relevant to the discussion and understanding of curriculum. For this study however, it is the process of the curricular policy development that will be the focus of the discussions with participants and the influences on this process rather than the contemplation of what knowledge is most worth or how the interactions in the classroom can impact the gap between the envisaged and the enacted curriculum.

As outlined by Michael Apple (2019, p. xxvii) "Education is also a site of conflict about the kind of knowledge that is and should be taught, about whose knowledge is 'official' and about who has the right to decide both what is to be taught and how teaching and learning are to be evaluated." The curriculum may be considered the result of this conflict, the nationally mandated intended learning. The development of curricula and assessment procedures, in national and international contexts, is often the site of conflict where the knowledge and learning deemed appropriate in any system are debated and given legitimacy. Fundamentally then, education and decisions around the curriculum are political. As outlined by A. V. Kelly, (1999, p. 165-167) "education is essentially a political activity, that the education system is the device by which an advanced society prepares its young for adult life in the society… the curriculum can be seen as the battleground of many

competing influences and ideologies." These influences can be seen not only in the finished product but also in the curriculum development processes.

Goodson (2014) describes the period since 2000 as one of tumultuous change and instability, where the global society has moved from a market economy to a market society. The international discourse on curriculum since 2000, has broadened beyond the knowledge worth knowing to include the skills, competencies, values and attitudes worth knowing, due in no small part to the influence of supranational organisations such as the OECD. In this era, curriculum discourse has, in political circles, moved to a denial of expertise, where curriculum experts are viewed as a "talking head with no education experience" (Goodson, 2014, p. 774) by the politicians in charge of making policy decisions. The resultant policies are resisted by those in the education system that would have been internal change agents, but now they take the role of conservative respondents to change rather than initiating change. This policy change then does not trickle down to the classroom level and for Goodson, "the key lacuna in externally mandated change is the link to teachers' professional beliefs" (Goodson, 2014, p. 771). What teachers believe is worth knowing and how that knowledge is accessed in the curriculum often defines how a mandated curriculum is experienced.

3.2.2 An alternative theory of curriculum: Didaktik traditions

The tradition of curriculum theory outlined above is based primarily on an Anglo-Saxon philosophy of education, but it is obviously not the only tradition. For Deng (2018), one tradition that offers an alternative to the OECD discourse on competencies is the perspective offered by the *Didaktik* tradition. Hopman and Riquarts (2000) outline the *Didaktik* tradition of curriculum theory that views teaching as a triadic relationship between the curricular content, the teacher and the learner. In this conception of curriculum, the professional agency of teachers is centrally situated to make sense of the subject content to be shaped to suit the needs of the students in their context. This *Didaktik* tradition is very different to the didactic view of instruction characterised by a teacher centred, knowledge transmission model which views students as passive receivers of knowledge (Nie & Lau, 2010). The *Didaktik* tradition has remained central to curriculum developments in Nordic and Germanic countries, but relatively unheard of outside of that

space. For Hopmann and Riquarts, (2000) this tradition has been retained in the Germanic and Nordic countries as the curriculum making described by the theorists such as Tyler and Pinar is dependent on very different structures in education. The regional and local levels of curriculum making evident in the US and the UK "did not fit with the still predominant system of state curriculum making separated from local planning and instruction" evident in the Germanic and Nordic countries (Hopmann & Riquarts, 2000, p. 9). Although the centrality of student experience in the *Didaktik* tradition does place it more in line with the child centred work of Dewey, Frobel and Bruner.

One of the central aims of *Didaktik* is *Bildung*. This has been translated at times as 'educating' but is more accurately translated as 'cultivating' the whole being. In the fragmented writings of Wilhelm von Humbolt in 1793 (Humbolt, 2000), *Bildung* is described as having a dual focus on interior cultivation as well as the external application of scientific principles. Early theorists such as Kant built on this the theory of self-formation, but as Klafki (2000) warns, every theory is historically situated and subject to the context from which it was formed. So while early theorists such as Comenius spoke of '*omnes omnia docere'* (teach everything to everyone) (Hopmann & Riquarts, 2000), the context of these writings meant that 'everyone' only referred to the male half of the population. Humbolt, himself an educational politician, designed a graded system of comprehensive school for Prussia and because of his recognition of the significance of vocational *bildung* demanded the expansion of the vocational education system (Klafki, 2000). Latter influences and the impact of increasing industrialisation resulted in a dichotomy emerging between cognitive and vocational education, not only in the Germanic tradition but in other education systems across the world.

The triadic relationship between student, teacher and content recognises the holistic view of curriculum not as dry curriculum document, but as something that is experienced through the classroom interactions between student and teacher. The *Didaktik* tradition centralises the professionalism of the teacher to choose the content and select and utilise pedagogical methods to best suit the students in their context. Westbury (2000) sees this developing professionalism in the difference between the US system that views teachers as employees of the education system after they have been 'trained' and 'certified' and

the Germanic system that was professionalised in the mid-19th century with the licencing of teachers. This licencing allowed for a professional autonomy that established a language for professional reflective practice, "Through and by way of *Didaktik* reflection each and every teacher must determine, as an expert professional, what must be done in this setting, with this material, with these students, in light of the values associated with *Bildung*" (Westbury, 2000, p.29). This view of the professionalism of teachers becomes more important in an era where the 'what works' agenda becomes a dominant political discourse (Biesta, 2009, 2011). This focus reduces education to a washing powder commercial, where what has 'proven to work' is applied liberally by political agenda setters to education systems world-wide, regardless of context, and when it doesn't improve performance outcomes, the next solution is applied. Hordern, Muller and Deng (2021, p. 144) warn that this results in side-lining important questions about "educational purposes, knowledge and content, curricula and pedagogic relations, but also increasing limitations on the intellectual resources available to educational practitioners leading to constraints on their abilities to make well-reasoned judgements in practice contexts." In the absence of these discussions on the aim and purpose of education, the notion of what successful education looks like is warped to assume that "achieving improvements in measuring learning outcomes is the sole objective of educational work, and to technicise the work of teachers, who are left without the powerful educational knowledge to make critically engaged judgements about their practice" (Hordern et al., 2021, p.145). Deng (2022) makes a call for a middle ground that recognises the crucial role played by teachers in the unlocking of educational potential of the content of a school subject in the development of human powers in a curriculum that "aims at the formation of autonomous and responsible individuals who can thrive and flourish in the present and future world" (Deng, 2022, p. 14).

Gleeson (2021) examines the evolving landscape of curricular reform in Ireland through the lens of Anglo-American vs *Didaktik* curriculum theories. The delineation of the curriculum as a list of subjects in policy documents such as the Rules and Programmes for Secondary School and the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) seems to point to the dominance of the Anglo-American tradition, where the Minister of the day can prescribe the number of subjects offered, the syllabi and the associated instruction time.

This top-down approach leaves little autonomy for teachers to devise a curriculum for their students in their context. Gleeson points to the ICE report on the Intermediate Certificate Examination (Department of Education, 1975) when it proposed the introduction of school-based assessment and claimed "our dependency on public examinations reflected a notable lack of confidence in the professional ability of teachers to decide what to teach and how to teach it" (Gleeson, 2021, p.7). The proposal in 1975 for school-based assessment was not implemented, neither was it implemented when it was proposed as part of the Junior Certificate reform in 1992, nor in the proposals for senior cycle in 2003 or in the Junior Cycle Framework in 2012. The classroom-based assessment eventually introduced in the 2015 Framework for Junior Cycle was a far cry from the 40% for school-based assessment proclaimed by Ruairi Quinn in 2011 (Quinn, 2011), where now the classroom-based assessment is not included in the SEC statement of results but it is reported separately by the school. The discourse of the unions and media on this issue is that teachers in Ireland have an advocacy role rather than one of adjudicator of student work (ASTI, 2013). This is very different to the role of teacher professionalism as enacted in other jurisdictions. In a protracted industrial dispute in Australia, teacher unions argued that teachers are the sole valid adjudicator of student achievement and argued against external assessment on that basis (Gleeson et al., 2020).

The perspectives on professionalism may be traced back to the origins of initial teacher education. Biesta (2011) traces the development of teacher education in the UK from the periphery of universities in teacher training colleges to inclusion within the university proper from the 1960s. This coincided with the development of education studies as an interdisciplinary area incorporating philosophy, sociology, history and psychology. A similar situation can be traced in Ireland when the peripheral teacher training colleges of Carysfort in Blackrock, St. Patrick's in Drumcondra, St Angela's in Sligo, St Mary's in Marino, Mary Immaculate and Thomond in Limerick, all gradually came under the aegis of larger universities from the 1970s after criticism of the lack of coherence in a series of reports in the 1960s (Commission on Higher Education, 1967; OECD, 1965). The focus of educational studies in these institutions moved from the practiced-based focus to more interdisciplinary study of the philosophy, sociology, history and psychology of education. The place of curriculum, or of teacher ownership / interrogation / creation of curriculum

was absent from initial teacher education, but this was not surprising as the description of curriculum in official documentation was restricted to the list of content for examination. The focus on assessment of the curriculum rather than the what, why or how of curriculum can be seen as an evolution from the payment by results of the Intermediate Education Board as a means of negotiating the rocky terrain of denominational education in Ireland from the 1870s. The description of curriculum was adopted by the Minister for Education in the Free State and went unquestioned since then. The success of an education system based on such principles, must be found in the results of these examinations. The reluctance to adopt teacher-based / school-based assessment can be seen as a fundamental lack of confidence in professional ownership of curriculum.

How the curriculum is presented by official documentation gives a sense of where on the spectrum of curriculum ideology the Irish landscape sits. For Gleeson (2021), the introduction of a *Framework for Junior Cycle*, where learning is described by 24 statements of learning rather than through specific subjects, along with a focus on the collaboration of organisations such as the Inspectorate and the JCT to develop teacher capacity, were a step towards a more *Didaktik* approach. But, the about turn by the Minister for Education and Skills as a result of media pressure on the primacy of the subject history as core to the curriculum along with English, mathematics and Irish, was seen as a return to the dominance of Anglo-American culture along with the sensibilities of the global education reform movement.

In examining the process of curriculum development in the senior cycle review, the spectrum of curricular theory provides a basis from which to orient thinking on curriculum and its purpose. The purpose of curriculum often defines the process of its development and that is often contained in the context from which it comes. For the purpose of this study then, the term 'curriculum' encompasses the centrally devised intended learning and structure of that learning for students. It is based on the "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2019) between the present and the past, and the present and the future. It also recognises the importance of the triadic relationship conceptualised in the *Didaktik* tradition between the teacher, the student and the content, and realises the importance of the holistic development of the student beyond the limitations of centralised examination structures.

It also recognises the importance of agency (Biesta et al., 2015) and teacher beliefs in the engagement of teachers and schools with curriculum.

3.3 The socio-cultural context of curriculum policy development

The development of curriculum is therefore a multi-layered process. The factors that can have an impact on the curriculum in how it is designed, implemented, enacted and experienced are vast and in 1982, Gail McCutcheon effectively summated the vast array of those factors. This is well captured in the following extract, and so is worth quoting at length.

> Curriculum phenomena include a host of matters such as sources of the curriculum and the curriculum in use, its enactment. Examples of some sources of the curriculum that might be accounted for through curriculum theories are processes of curriculum development, the politics of curriculum argumentation, social forces (such as federal or state mandates, local regulations, and court or board of education decisions), the sociology of knowledge, and the development and the nature of educational materials (such as textbooks, filmstrips, curriculum guides). Examples of aspects of the enactment of the curriculum might include teachers' planning; how teachers and materials render the curriculum accessible to students; the received curriculum (the sense students make of it); the relationships among the enacted curriculum, society, human development and learning theory; organization of the curriculum; influences on its use (such as teachers' conceptions of schooling, parents', students', and other teachers' pressure about deviation from the norm); and what students learn through the overt, hidden, and null curriculum. (McCutcheon, 1982 p.19)

McCutcheon's broad range of influences on curriculum touches on the social, political and economic forces that exert influence on how and why curriculum is developed. Once developed and sent out into the system, the curriculum continues to evolve and change as it is implemented by teachers in individual classrooms. For many teachers, the process of curriculum development is a mystery and something that is delivered from an authoritarian source with little or no connection to their classroom practice. Many may find changes to the curriculum to be an intrusion on their sense of what works and matters in their classrooms if they feel the changes do not align with their sense of identity and personal beliefs (Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017; Harris & Graham, 2019; Priestley et al., 2012).

This inherent inertia hinders any real curricular change and leads to what Cuban (1993a, p.1) calls “the apparent invulnerability of classrooms to change”. This lack of ownership of the curricular development process is not unusual (Cerych, 1997; Kallen, 1996; Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Mikser et al., 2016) and yet the lack of teacher ownership and agency in the curricular development process leads to the inertia referenced by Cuban. Many states and nations have moved to a more decentralised system of curricular development where schools are encouraged to be the creators of curriculum based on a national framework, but as outlined by Mikser et al. (2016), quite often this development is limited to decisions around instructional methods rather than the substantive issues of deciding what is relevant for a national curriculum.

The elements outlined by McCutcheon have an impact on how curriculum is experienced but also many of the factors also have an impact on the process of development. The overt, hidden and null curriculum exert seen and unseen influences on the processes of development (Eisner, 1979; Jackson, 1968; Lynch, 1989). However, as well as the sites of conflict outlined by Apple, the development of curricula also results in the creation of what Antonio Gramsci calls hegemony (Gramsci, 2009). This hegemony goes deeper than mere ideology. As described by Williams (2006, p. 134-135) hegemony “supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or super-structural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which…even constitutes the limit of common sense for most people under its sway”. For many, the curriculum represents a sense of ‘what has always been’ and so cannot be changed. Curriculum and its development often bear the weight of history. It is seen as unchanging and static. A powerful nostalgia surrounds it as policy makers and commentators alike approach it from their own experience of it without the benefit of viewing it from an objective stance. Much of this nostalgia can be recognised when discussing the Leaving Certificate with any actor in the review.

Academics can assess and discuss curriculum from an external viewpoint but those at the heart of the curriculum and experiencing it, the students, are not involved in any conversations about its development or suitability. The inclusion of students in the discussions around the evolving situation to hold examinations in the summer of 2020 and 2021 marked a change in direction in policy development in Ireland and a further

exploration of the role and function of student voice in policy development is discussed below.

The national curriculum is often viewed as a panacea for all society's ills; if only the curriculum included x, y, z then society could avoid a, b, c, but this is rarely the case (Cuban, 1993b). While often items are added to a curriculum, rarely are items removed. This in turn can lead to curriculum overload and initiative overload. Each of these can exacerbate the experience of inertia in the system as too many changes means that nothing changes. In examining the curriculum development processes at work, the influence of these concerns, economic, political, historical and personal, were all referenced by the participants. The approach to the research then sought to find a way to represent the multitude of social, structural and cultural influences on the processes of development.

3.3.1 How and why is curriculum policy developed?

In examining how and why curriculum is developed, both in Ireland and within an international context, the advice of Michael Sadler in 1900 is relevant:

> A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and "of battles long ago". It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. It reflects, while it seeks to remedy, the failings of the national character… *The practical value of studying, in a right spirit and with scholarly accuracy, the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to understand our own*. (Sadler in Phillips, 2006, p.46, emphasis in the original)

In order to understand the curricular development process in Ireland, the overview of the "forgotten struggles and battles of long ago" and the impact they have had on the process and outcomes of curricular development in Ireland in Chapter 2 was necessary. The emergence of the NCCA in 1989 is one such battle. The development of the NCCA as a separate entity to the Department of Education responsible for the development of curricula and advice on assessment is not a common phenomenon across nations. In order then to better understand the curriculum development processes in Ireland, as alluded to by Sadler above, an examination of the processes of foreign systems must also be undertaken.

3.3.2 The evolution of national education policies

The comparison of education policy making across nations, presupposes the existence of nations and of a national policy on the education of the majority of the population. Neither

of these suppositions was always the case. Cowen (1996) gives a very succinct overview of the stages and patterns of educational policy development for comparative purposes. In his overview, he describes the initial pre-modern educational pattern of curriculum development as for the purpose of administration of the political empire, some of these patterns emerged as secular and some were based around religious beliefs. In this stage, education was not seen as the preserve of the majority but explicitly for a minority, the elite who would supply efficient administrators for the working of the state. There was no recognised obligation for the state to provide a schooling system for the majority of the population. This pattern of education can be found in pre-modern empires from China, the Middle East, Egypt to Rome. More recent but similar versions can be found in the French and British Empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The purpose of education was the training of the political and administrative elites. As outlined in Chapter 2, this pattern can be easily recognised in the Irish system where the system of state sponsored national schooling was introduced focusing on the attainment of basic literacy and numeracy for all and a system of progression to academic success and professional career for a small elite.

The various revolutions that happened across Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eventually resulted in a different focus for educational policy. The emergence of nation states rather than autocratic empires and the rejection of previous orthodoxy becomes more evident as outlined by Cowen:

> …we first get the notion of the necessity to school whole populations and the idea of a 'national' system of education - a pattern of educational institutions organised by the state. The notion of the citizen becomes explicit. At the level of principle, if more slowly at the level of implementation, it becomes the duty of the citizen to receive education and the responsibility and the duty of the state to provide it. (Cowen, 1996, p.157).

As the focus shifts from educating the elite to educating all of the citizens of the state, education and the curriculum that constitutes it becomes broader and aims to provide basic education to all.

Cowen identifies the modern education patterns emerging from the revolutionary politics of the nineteenth century as having a *culturally specific focus*. In France and the USSR, the rejection of the feudal past led to a focus on a universal system of education where enlightenment principles were emphasised. The impact of colonialism, the collapse of

political regimes, absorption into the world economic system and marginalisation from socio-economic growth all have different distortions on the evolution of the modern education patterns in different countries. The revolutionary politics of the early twentieth century in Ireland and the establishment of a Free State resulted in a form of educational policy that emphasised the development of the citizen, and more specifically an Irish citizen, and so echoed what Cowen describes as modern educational policy.

> However, a distinguishing feature of the modern educational system is that it is state created and state driven, though the timing of that intervention and the range of partnership with other agencies varies. The cultural and political project of the state is the formation of the nation …The moral messages insisted on by the state have to do, in the modem educational system, with the formation of the citizen and the construction of political loyalty and modes of civic behaviour. (Cowen, 1996, p.158)

The results of a national curriculum driven by these culturally specific aims: the formation of a nation, can be seen in the curriculum policy developments in Ireland outlined in Chapter 2 in the dominant influence of the Catholic clergy, the precedence of the Irish language and the absence of forward planning beyond logistical concerns. The increased globalisation of education and increasing international and supranational influences can be seen in the second half of the twentieth century.

3.3.3 The western tradition[4] of education policy in the twentieth and twenty-first century

In Dodds (2013), the modern factors influencing educational public policy are summarised as: the requirements of the state, the influence of economic factors and, increasingly, international and supranational influences. Government control of education systems through the development of national curriculum varies according to the historical precedent evident in the structure, funding and autonomy of schools and districts. Educational structures vary considerably across the world from the local *lande* in Germany where the gymnasium schools have sole control of the academic pathway through secondary education, to the various iterations of public high schools in the federalised USA, to the Local Education Authorities in the UK. Where curriculum policy development happens and to what ends, is similarly diverse. Comparing curriculum development

[4] The development of education policies varied globally. For the purposes of this study, the focus on what can be described as a broadly western tradition encompasses the development of policies in Europe and the United States.

practice in Ireland with other international jurisdictions must be handled with the caveat that the development processes may differ and may have different outcomes but by examining these, as Sadler points out "it will result in our being better fitted to understand our own" (Sadler, in Philips, 2006). Much of the discourse on curriculum development is focused on jurisdictions where the school is the arbiter of the curricular decision making. This is particularly true of writers such as Tyler (1949), Stenhouse (1975) and Apple (2019). In this thread of the discourse, the process of curricular developments often originates in local authorities or from a national federal action plan, but, are mediated by the schools to suit their contexts.

Sweden is a state that does have a centralised process for curricular development. According to Lundgren (2015), the *Läroplan* (plan for learning) was introduced in the 1960s with the nine year comprehensive school system. The development of the curriculum was centralised in the Royal Board of Education and here "Experts and civil servants wrote the curricula with support from educators and psychologists" (Lundgren, 2015, p.6). Before that point, changes in the schools system and curriculum were "planned by ad hoc governmental committees, the members of which very often were 'enlightened laymen'" (Dahllöf, 1973, p. 224). Since the 1991 reform and the subsequent 2011 curriculum redevelopment, the process of reform has become more decentralised with school autonomy to interpret and enact policy change, but policy development is still centrally devised by officials (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012).

Van den Akker (2012), examining curriculum development from a Dutch standpoint, views curriculum developments on multiple levels from the supra level in international debates, through the macro national level, the meso school level, the micro classroom level to the nano level of the individual. In this formulation of curriculum development, Van den Akker posits that this "is usually a long and cyclical process with many stakeholders and participants in which motives and needs for changing the curriculum are formulated; ideas are specified in programmes and materials; and efforts are made to realise the intended changes in practice" (Van den Akker, 2012, p. 180). The reasons why so many large-scale curricular reforms fail (Cuban, 1993a; Fullan, 2007) can be attributed according to Van den Akker to a combination of three reasons:

> Firstly, many curriculum reform efforts are characterised by overly big innovation ambitions (especially those of politicians) within unrealistically short timelines and with very limited investment in people, especially teachers. Secondly, often there is a lack of coherence between the intended curriculum changes with other system components (especially teacher education and assessment/examination programmes). And lastly, but not least, timely and authentic involvement of all relevant stakeholders is often neglected. (Van den Akker, 2012, p. 184)

According to Van den Akker (2012), successful curricular reform incorporates more evolutionary, spiral and cyclical approaches with integrated research activities to feed into the process of curricular design.

However, there are similarities in the processes for curricular development evident in different jurisdictions that may be useful for this research. In Jan Van den Akker's *Comparative Analysis of Developing Curriculum Frameworks* (Van den Akker, 2018) he outlines four typical phases of the curriculum (re)design process: preparation, design and development, implementation, evaluation and review. He noted that other than Finland, where the autonomy of schools is central to the development process, "we see less attention to such a deliberate school-based approach to curriculum development" (Van den Akker, 2018, p.10).

According to Van den Akker (2018), for education systems in the 21st century the motives, aspirations and principles for curriculum redesign contain elements that appear to be common to many counties such as the aim to provide an "all-round education for learners" broader than cognitive elements to include "social, oral, ethical, physical and aesthetic aspects" (Van den Akker, 2018 p. 12). There is also a concern to prepare students for a vague and unknowable future with variously defined "21st century skills" (ibid, p.12). The desire for curriculum coherence, both vertically across learning stages and horizontally across learning strands and interdisciplinary approaches, emerged as common themes. Van den Akker and Thijs (2009), building on the work of Tyler (1949), outline the possible aims as of this stage of education as:

- Knowledge: academic and cultural heritage for learning and future development
- Social preparation: issues relevant for inclusion from the perspective of societal trends and needs

- Personal development: elements of importance to learning and development from the personal and educational needs and interests of the learner themselves. (Thijs & Van den Akker, 2009, p. 14)

In later work Van den Akker calls these qualification, socialisation and personal development (Van den Akker, 2018). These headings, with the addition of a separation between knowledge and qualification, were useful in analysing the responses of participants in their reflections on the aims of senior cycle education.

Across all the counties in the study common obstacles/problems or limitations to curricular design were identified. Prevalent among these were the lack of resources (time and money) for professional development, supportive curriculum materials and expert input; insufficient readiness for schools and teachers for curriculum change even with significant investment in professional development and complexity for teachers of new curriculum-related assessment approaches, deviating from routine approaches (Van den Akker, 2018, p.16). In light of these commonalities any foray into curricular redevelopment must be cognisant of the need to in some way allay these obstacles before they stall any implementation progress.

Van den Akker identifies the alignment of curriculum and assessment emphases as the crucial factor in the development process, (Van den Akker, 2018, p.20). This alignment needs to be clear throughout the curriculum documentation.

In his article *What is Education for?,* Biesta (2015) argues against the increase in what he calls the 'learnification' of education discourse and practice, where focus is increasingly put on the 'facilitation of learning', the creation of 'learning opportunities' and a 'learning environment'. For Biesta, "the point of education is *not* that students learn… the point of education is that students learn *something*, that they learn it for a *reason*, and that they learn it from *someone*." (Biesta, 2015, p. 76, italics in original). The multidimensional and overlapping purposes of education for Biesta can be classified in three domains as qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Subjectification here, similar to Van Den Akker's personal development, is "the way in which children and young people come to exist as subjects of initiative and responsibility (rather than as objects of the actions of others)" (Biesta, 2015, p. 79). Focus on one of these domains, to the detriment of the

others, according to Biesta, comes at a price. In the discussions with participants in the research, the dominance of the qualification aspect of education was seen to have a detrimental impact on the other aspects of a "good education".

3.3.4 Influences on vernacular curriculum policy: supranational, economic, social

Van den Akker (2018) recognises the common goals of curriculum developments across nations as the development of 21st century skills and an increased concern for the development of skills and competencies. The origin for these shared goals for education is the increasing importance of supranational organisations, such as the OECD, on education systems worldwide. The influence of the OECD on Irish education was felt from the 1950s when they first came to Ireland to examine the economic possibilities of this country on the fringe of Europe. The result was a report on the need for investment in education (OECD, 1965) that resulted in an unprecedented restructuring of education in the Republic of Ireland including the introduction of free second level education, introduction of comprehensive schools and broadening of subject options for students beyond the traditional classical humanist tradition. In the 21st century, the OECD and their transnational standardised testing unit PISA, as well as other transnational standardised testing in mathematics and science (TIMSS) and literacy (PIRLS), operated by the International Association of Educational Achievement (IEA), have immediate impact on the development of curriculum in countries around the world. Poor performance on a PISA, TIMMS or PIRLS test for a country can result in immediate reassessment of national goals, standards and achievements. The acceptance of these student assessment surveys as criteria for good educational performance have become perceived determinants of the success of entire education systems (Sahlberg, 2011). The drop in literacy rating for Ireland in the PISA 2009 results (OECD, 2010), led to an immediate report commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills by the Education Research Centre (Cosgrove et al., 2010). The instant focus on the improvement of literacy and numeracy based on this international standardised test resulted in the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) complete with standards and targets to be achieved. While the results and validity of such testing has been challenged as factors

such as an increase in non-English speaking students in the tested cohort is not taken into account (Cosgrove & Cartwright, 2014), the influence and impact on national policy is clear.

Recent OECD publications (OECD/Asia Society, 2018; OECD, 2014, 2018), focus on three challenges to society in the 21st century: economic (developments in biotechnology, technological innovation, financial interdependence), environmental (climate change and sustainability) and social (migration, cultural diversity, inequality and war). The solution to these challenges, according to the OECD, is to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that combine to develop competencies to produce agentic students and teachers in flexible, evolving school systems. This concept of going beyond knowledge to include skills, attitudes and values to develop competencies is evident in most of the curriculum documentation produced in OECD countries, including Ireland. The Junior Cycle Framework (Department of Education and Skills, 2015) describes learning in terms of eight key skills that include being literate, being numerate, working with others and managing information and thinking. There are repeated references throughout the framework to the knowledge, skills and competences that can be expected of students. The draft primary curriculum framework currently in consultation (NCCA, 2020) lists seven key competencies that roughly align with the junior cycle key skills. The recently published advisory report for senior cycle (NCCA, 2022b) describes knowledge, skills, values and dispositions as interconnected elements for developing competent learners. For this study, it will be interesting to note if these supranational influences have any impact on the macro, meso or micro level of the review and if the discourse around competencies has penetrated the discourse at these levels.

The economic impact on the development of curriculum in Ireland was evident in the late nineteenth century with the increasing demand for literate and numerate civil servants fuelling the rollout of widespread primary and limited secondary education across the UK and Ireland. The push of industrialisation was felt more in the UK in the increasing demand for vocational and technical education and restructuring of education under the control of Local Education Authorities under the 1902 Education Act (Titley, 1983). In Ireland in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the limited development of technical schools and agricultural colleges reflected the limited economic opportunities as well as the

dominance of a denominational educational provision. The shift from the theocentric to mercantile paradigm in educational ideology in Ireland was evident from the 1950s on (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2005). The economic drivers of curriculum development have been evident ever since. The introduction of new subject specifications in technology-related subjects in recent years, Design and Communications Graphics and Technology in 2005, Computer Science in 2019, are indicators of where the political forecasting of economic return are focused. The lobbying of economic and industrial groups such as the Irish Business and Employer's Confederation (Ibec) on the Ministers of the day have had an influence on projects that get greenlit for development. A quick search on www.lobbying.ie reveals that Ibec have lobbied on education and training 103 times in the past six years on matters such as entrepreneurial education, the digital strategy for schools, skills development for the biopharma sector and increasing the scope of apprenticeships (Lobbying.ie, 2022). The focus on diverse skills and alternative pathways through secondary schools is evident in the various reports on the senior cycle review (NCCA, 2019b; Smyth, 2019). For the purposes of this study, the focus on overt economic issues such as job creation or latent economic pressures such as skills development and pathways in the interviews will form an interesting aspect of the analysis of factors that influence developments.

The social context of curriculum development can be traced through a historiographical analysis of curriculum in Ireland. As outlined in Chapter 2, the introduction of the Free State in 1922 and a profound impact on some aspects of curriculum, such as the mandatory nature of Irish as core to the curriculum at all levels, and yet had very little impact on other aspects, such as the assessment arrangements which continued the previous procedures of the Intermediate Board of Education (Akenson, 1975). In countries such as France, the impact of post-revolutionary politics in the nineteenth century is still relevant to the centralised nature of curriculum in France today (Gauthier & Gouvello, 2017). The post-colonial experience of countries such as India, New Zealand, Australia and Canada has a long-lasting influence on the structure and orientation of the curriculum particularly in relation to the place of language and identity (Elliott et al., 2021; Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996; Visanathan, 2014). In Ireland, the post-colonial influence on language provision and complicated relationship with the Irish language has dominated some aspects of

curriculum debate (Murray et al., 2021; J. Walsh, 2016; T. Walsh, 2021). The increasing diversity in the Irish population due to changes in patterns of migration has not been reflected in the curriculum provision or mandatory nature of some subjects at senior cycle, namely Irish. This has been increasingly questioned as a plausible curriculum standpoint in the post-compulsory stage of education (Murray et al., 2021; Smyth, 2019). For this study, the relevance and importance of this aspect of curriculum provision across the different levels of participants may provide interesting insights into the shifting ground that may exist closer to the diverse school classroom than in the heterogeneous policy making arena.

Catastrophic international events, such as war or famine, have an immediate impact on society but a more subtle impact on the slow evolution of curriculum. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the processes of education was immediate with the closure of schools and the cancellation of state examinations in most countries worldwide. Ireland was no exception and the repeated closures of schools over the 2020-2021 period had knock-on impacts on the structure of curricular programmes to be completed, examinations undertaken and by far the greatest assessment experiment this state has ever experienced, the introduction of calculated and later accredited grades for the Leaving Certificate students of 2020 and 2021. Some of the immediate impacts of Covid on education have been the subject of recent national and international studies (Doyle et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2021; Schleicher, 2020).

The impact of the global Covid 19 pandemic on education and curriculum discourse has yet to be fully felt, but the initial reflections on the curriculum needed for a changed world reveal a fundamental shift. Boin et al. (2009, p. 83) describe how a crisis narrative "can be an important force for non-incremental changes in policy fields otherwise stabilized by the focus of path dependence, inheritance and veto-playing". For Goodson and Schostak (2021, p. 35) the impact of the global pandemic requires a move from "pre-active planning by elites and top-down transmission into a more collective, co-operative, mutual pattern of learning". This returns to the ideas of child-centred curriculum theorists (Bruner, 1966; Dewey, 1902; Eisner, 1971; Stenhouse, 1975) where curriculum is negotiated and led by student enquiry. The closing of schools and continuance of education required a radical shift in the concepts of curriculum, teacher, student, assessment and sites of learning.

Radical shifts that were non-incremental in nature such as the move to mass online learning. In this new space, the traditional roles of teacher as transmitter of knowledge and student as receiver were radically altered. Goodson and Schostak (2021) call for change to the role of teacher and pupil and a move toward more co-operative and mutual learning as a result of the impact of the pandemic. This is echoed in *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2021), where although the irreplaceable role of schools is acknowledged, the broader inclusive access to education provided by online learning is recognised, and the transformative work of teachers is predicated on collaboration. The aim and purpose of education has moved beyond the limited aspirations of national politicians to promote their pet projects, towards developing critical citizens for a more sustainable global future. The need to develop this critical citizenry is illustrated by Goodson and Schostak (2021, p.37), "when a president can propose – and be taken seriously – drinking disinfectant as a cure for Covid-19, future adults need to be able to reflect back upon their curricular experiences of critical debate in order not to be fooled into thinking it is a sensible course of action."

For the purposes of this study, much of which took place in the turbulent period of December 2020 to June 2021, it has been interesting to examine how the Covid 19 pandemic changed or influenced perceptions of what is important in curriculum, in development processes and possible change in the curriculum at this level.

3.3.5 Curriculum as policy

As outlined by Looney (2001) the study of curriculum policy has often been approached from the curriculum perspective and dominated by a technicist paradigm, rather than being approached from a policy perspective where process and product are subject to analysis. In Looney's article she argues for a unitary perspective of curriculum as policy where the macro questions of curriculum can be discussed rather than fragmented issues of assessment, pedagogy or organisation. Viewing curriculum as policy allows for a recognition of the multi-layered policy process of policy development and implementation, of policy as text and as interpretation. Looney cites the cycle of policy development developed by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) which involves a triad of contexts that form the policy cycle: the context of influence, the context of practice and the context of text

production. This study takes a similar view of curriculum as policy, where the multi-layered, non-linear process of curriculum policy development is subject to multiple influences and is a result of the actions, interactions and relationships of the policy actors involved along with the contextual influences of culture and society. The development of curriculum policy cannot be separated from the context from which it has come, or the actors involved in its development.

Theories of policy development processes have ranged from the stages heuristic of Lowi (1972) to the complex processes envisaged in the Advocacy Coalition Framework developed by Paul Sabatier (Paul A. Sabatier, 1988, 1991; Weible et al., 2009) and the Multiple Streams Framework developed by John Kingdon (Kingdon, 1984). Kingdon's model tries to capture the many competing interests and actors that have an influence on the non-linear process of policy development by describing three separate streams: the policy stream, the problem stream and the politics stream (Kingdon, 1984). The initial model has been extensively developed and refigured to allow for experiences in a European context and the inclusion of a consideration of the importance of policy entrepreneurs (Howlett et al., 2015; Paul A. Sabatier, 1991; Zahariadis, 2014). The Multiple Streams Framework, however, focuses on the agenda setting stage of policy development and does not include consideration of the latter stages of policy development through implementation and evaluation. The work of Jones and McBeth (2010) on Narrative Policy Frameworks recognises the importance of context and characters in the analysis of policy development as does the work of Hajer (1993) in utilising discourse analysis to analyse where actors in the policy arena embrace a particular discourse to promote a certain view or interpretation of events.

Each of these theories can be of benefit when analysing the development of curriculum as policy. The importance of the multiple streams of policy, problems and politics can be easily recognised in the events of the 1960s where economic and international policy intersected with the increasing problem of pupil retention in schools and the influence of key policy actors in Donogh O'Malley, Sean Lemass and Sean O'Connor resulted in the introduction of free second level education for all students from 1966. The embracing of certain policy narratives in relation to the Leaving Certificate is a continuing trope in political discourse

on the Leaving Certificate, namely that it is fair, just and widely recognised as an arbiter of educational attainment (Baird et al., 2014; Flynn, 2005a; Looney, 2006). But in all of these theories for policy analysis, a common thread is the importance of contextual understanding. In the Irish context there are certain policy actors, outside the official political arena, who have been influential in policy development and an overview of these actors is necessary to fully understand the context.

Curriculum, however, is different from other policy decisions. Curriculum is devised but then it is implemented, mediated, adapted, and experienced in the classroom in a myriad of different ways. The mediator of curriculum is the teacher in the classroom and many studies of curriculum change have concluded that if teacher belief doesn't accompany curricular change then the changes made can be superficial and the experience in the classroom remains the same (Cuban, 1993a, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves, 1989). For curricular change to be embedded in a system it must be accompanied by robust teacher professional development and resourcing (Coolahan et al., 2017; Sinnema et al., 2020; Van den Akker & Thijs, 2009). But more importantly, it should connect with teacher identity and agency. "Effective and sustainable curriculum development has to win the hearts and minds of teachers, and the organisations which require them to introduce changes must inspire confidence and trust" (Humes & Priestley, 2021, p. 194). The importance of these underlying values is reiterated throughout this research as the participants at each level spoke of the importance of their beliefs and trust.

3.3.6 The Republic of Ireland context: church and state in education

The ideological dominance of the Catholic church over education in Ireland had been well documented (O'Donoghue, 1999; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021; Titley, 1983; T. Walsh, 2012). The control exerted by the church on the structures of schooling, employment and advancement opportunities, buildings and patronage has been well described and examined elsewhere (for example Akenson, 1975; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021; Titley, 1983). For secondary education, the primary purpose of the curriculum was to provide a steady stream of recruitment into the ranks of priests and nuns for domestic and

international service. The continued emphasis on the classical humanist tradition in the curriculum of the previous Intermediate Board, allowed for the uninterrupted focus on English, mathematics, Greek and Latin with the addition of Irish in the early years of the Free State. The continued popularity of subjects such as Latin and Greek in a mainly agricultural society speaks to the availability of employment in the only other sector willing to recruit broadly which was the church. Secondary schools, and the curriculum provided therein, served the purpose of recruitment and the creation of a middle class laity with values, ethos and tradition in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic church (Titley, 1983). The ideological vacuum in the educational thinking of the Free State government, created by the death of Padraig Pearse in 1916 (Akenson, 1975), resulted in a government that were quite happy to let the church continue its control of schools and schooling in the denominational system that had been allowed to develop in the late nineteenth century. The church also provided another resource to the impoverished Free State government in addition to a ready-made educational ideology, and that was wealth. The ownership of school buildings by religious orders, and their willingness to borrow to build additional school buildings, obviated the need for any large scale investment in education by the state (Titley, 1983, p. 154). This was only challenged in the post-war society of the 1950s where economic concerns demanded more of education than clergy.

The shift in focus to developing a technically and scientifically educated workforce in the 1950s and into the 1960s was cemented by the OECD report in 1965 *Investment in Education.* Previous attempts at developing vocational education had been studiously resisted by the Catholic Church as the development of state owned vocational schools challenged the church control over the curriculum and practices within these schools (Clarke, 2012). The fact that the Minister for Education had to personally reply to various members of the Catholic hierarchy in response to their difficulties with the introduction of the Vocational Education Act in 1930 and resulted in a Memorandum in 1931 that enshrined the inclusion of religious instruction in the curriculum of vocational schools reveals the extent of the power of the Catholic hierarchy in education matters (Clarke, 2012; Hyland, 1999; Hyland & Milne, 1992). Part of the difficulty with the development of vocational education was the co-educational nature of the schools. The conditions “least conducive to the recruitment of the clergy existed in co-educational day schools run by the

laity" (Titley, 1983, p. 150). The church resistance to co-educational schooling persists and the vast proportion of secondary schools in the 'voluntary secondary school sector' remain single sex schools. But these schools are slowly being outnumbered by the growth in the vocational and community and comprehensive school sectors. As of 2020, the Department of Education school figures lists 224 schools of the 728 total number of secondary schools as single sex schools (Department of Education, 2021).

The decrease in church control over education in secondary schools can be dated from the shift in emphasis in the 1950s. The growth of the vocational sector due to economic necessity meant that the Apprenticeship Act (1959) opened up training in vocational schools and additional vocational and comprehensive schools were built by the state. While church leaders continued to meet with Department officials before any new announcements were made, the steady decline in church influence reflected the societal changes evident in the increase in passage of legislation that contravened church teachings. The 1980s saw the introduction of the eighth amendment to the constitution in 1983 and the divorce referendum defeated in 1986 and reflected the unabated power of the church in state affairs. The introduction of divorce in 1996, the thirty fourth amendment to allow same sex marriage in 2015 and the repeal of the eighth amendment in 2018 which allowed for abortion services in the Republic of Ireland were all representative of the decline of the power of the church in politics and society (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021).

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) solidified the state's intervention into education and further pushed the control of the church to the periphery. Details on the functioning of schools includes reference to the principal and teachers, the parents' association, student council, inspectorate, the NCCA, the Boards of Management and the Department of Education. But there is no special mention of the place of the church or religion in school. The only references are to the duty of the board to uphold the "cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school" (Government of Ireland, 1998, 15) and the removal of a prohibition of holding examinations in religious instruction, thus opening the way for religious studies to become an examination subject,

removing its recruitment purpose. Outstanding vestiges of church control remain in the ownership of school buildings and school patronage but the increased marketisation of the curriculum in senior cycle seen in the growth of the 'grinds school' has meant that schools are under increasing pressure to cater to the needs of students who wish to maximise points for college entry, and the inclusion of teaching of church doctrine is less of a priority for lay schools (Lynch & Moran, 2006).

On the structures of the NCCA, there is still representation of the management bodies, two of these retain church affiliation: the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) and the Joint Managerial Body (JMB). The CPSMA have a more overtly Catholic stance, reflected in the membership of their board of directors who include members of the clergy. The stance of the CPSMA on issues such as the introduction of ERB and Ethics to state run primary schools has been one of resistance (Sullivan, 2018), and the organisation still hold some sway in debate on educational issues at primary level. At secondary level, the JMB, while it represents the management of voluntary secondary schools, the make-up of their executive body is exclusively lay people. The JMB council is composed of representatives of the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS) and the Irish School Heads' Association (ISA) which represents the Protestant schools in the state. The input into curricular developments at secondary level by the JMB has not been obstructionist in nature and has been concerned with broader educational issues than the indoctrination of students.

With the decline in influence of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the traditional dominant player in curriculum development in Ireland, the power vacuum could be seen as being taken up by the teacher unions.

3.3.7 Republic of Ireland context: influence of the teacher unions

Teachers are one of the most unionised workforces across the world, and Irish teachers are no exception. In a study in the UK, NFER reported that approximately 97% of teachers were members of a union. In the reasons stated for joining most (72%) stated that it was to have support in relation to problems at work, with only 1% stating that pay and conditions were a reason for joining (Ager & Pyle, 2013). The defensive attitude to teaching may be

symptomatic of the position of the profession in the UK, but the numbers of Irish teachers in unions are roughly similar. Coolahan (2003) estimated that 98% of primary teachers and 91% of post primary teachers were members of unions. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest union in the state representing approximately 40,000 primary school teachers. At second level teachers are represented by two teacher unions, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI). There was a traditional delineation in the membership of the two unions with the ASTI representing the teachers in voluntary secondary schools, the TUI representing teachers in vocational school, further education and higher level. The community and comprehensive sector was traditionally split between the two unions with most of these schools having members in each union. This situation changed dramatically in 2017 when as a result of lengthy industrial disputes with the government, the ASTI had withdrawn from the Haddington Road agreement and the membership suffered financially as a result. Over 2017, ASTI lost close to 2,000 members and TUI gained 1,200 members in the same period (O'Brien, 2018). The result led to the ASTI taking a case to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) over alleged poaching of members which is not allowed while disputes are ongoing, and TUI had to pay compensation to the ASTI of approximately €280,000 as a result (Wall, 2019). The settlement cannot, however, force the membership to return to the ASTI, and most voluntary secondary schools now have representation in both union structures. The shift in membership means that the TUI are now the largest second level union in the sector and on their Twitter, page boast a membership of over 19,000, while ASTI report membership numbers of 18,500 on their Twitter account.

This shift in membership is evidence of seismic shifts in the relationship between teachers and their unions that have been more visible in the past two decades. The early days of all of the teacher unions in Ireland were focused on acquiring a recognised status for their teachers. The INTO, the earliest of the unions founded in 1868, looked to reconcile inequalities of pay and status of lay teachers in clergy run schools (Milliken, 2021).The ASTI, founded in 1909 looked to raise the status of second level teaching which resulted in the establishment of the Registration Council for Secondary Teachers in 1918 (Coolahan, 2004). The TUI emerged from the Vocational Teachers' Association, renamed the TUI in 1973, and fought for the equal recognition and status of teachers in vocational schools.

The introduction of common examinations to be held in both secondary and vocational schools from 1966 resulted in the introduction of a common pay scale for teachers in national, secondary, vocational and comprehensive schools, paid by the Department of Education, in 1968 (Dail Eireann, 1968). An equal pay scale for women and single men, and their married male counterparts was not introduced until 1977 under the Employment Equality Act (Government of Ireland, 1977). The central concerns of unions with the status, pay and conditions of their membership was always in addition to projecting a concern for professional issues and from 1987, the unions were involved formally in a series of partnership agreements on economic and social planning (Coolahan, 2003).

The teacher unions have seats on the Councils of the NCCA and the Teaching Council since their inception and their representation is built into the structures. Through these organisations the unions have negotiated on professional issues such as curriculum, teacher registration and induction. Of the three teacher unions, the ASTI have been the union most likely to remove itself from the processes of negotiation in these partnership arrangements. In 1992, an NCCA working group on assessment worked on a report on proposals for broader assessment in the new junior certificate programme. The ten-person committee had three members from each of the two second level unions. The proposals of the working group broadly echoed the findings of the 1994 National Convention on Education (Coolahan, 1994) in its proposals to include oral, aural, project and practical school-based assessments. Despite having three members on the ten person committee, when the proposals were published, the ASTI rejected the report on the basis of its opposition to school-based assessment (Leydon, 2018). In the partnership negotiations under the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF), where teacher salaries were bench-marked across professional standards in return for additional changes in working methods, the ASTI walked out of the process and balloted its members on industrial action (Flynn, 2000). The resultant proposals included a phased increase in teachers' salaries in return for a synchronisation of the school year; in-service, parent-teacher meetings and school planning days to happen outside of school time and an agreed payment for supervision and substitution hours. The proposals were agreed by the INTO and TUI but rejected by the ASTI. The resultant media coverage and disruption to schooling drew negative commentary from the public on the teaching profession (Coolahan, 2003).

The introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2012 by then Minister Ruari Quinn, with its emphasis on school-based assessments and reduction in state certified, externally assessed examinations at junior cycle, drew a similar response from the ASTI. While both unions disagreed with the terms of the framework, the agreement negotiated by external mediator Pauric Travers (Travers, 2015), was signed by both unions at the negotiating table. However, when the proposals were put to their membership, ASTI called for their members to reject the proposals while TUI called for acceptance of the proposals. The resultant rejection by the ASTI membership led to a complex and frustrating situation in schools where schools that had exclusively ASTI membership refused to engage with the new framework, specifically the introduction of the first subject in the Framework, English, while schools that were exclusively TUI engaged with the new specifications. For schools with dual membership, there arose significant difficulties for staff, students and parents (Byrne & Prendergast, 2020; NCCA, 2018). The application of the Financial Emergency Measures in Public Interest (FEMPI) legislation to teachers refusing to comply with the agreed framework, and therefore the Lansdowne Road Agreement, resulted in ASTI teachers not receiving pay increments, promotions or CID contracts (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). The resultant exodus of members from the ASTI to the ranks of the TUI revealed the level of dissatisfaction with the increasingly militant actions of the union in the preceding years. Many of the recent ballots by the ASTI were passed by a minority turnout of the membership, the ballot in October 2020 was just 42% of the membership (ASTI, 2020). The position of an increasingly militant union that repeatedly calls for rejection of agreements they have been involved in negotiating, in a partnership model of policy development does not promote stability or trust. Leydon (2018, p. 62) issues a warning in her study of the events of 2012-2017, that when there is unease over the inability to achieve consensus within the NCCA structures that governments will increasingly look to alternatives to the partnership structures to achieve policy goals, as the Travers agreement signified.

But the disjoint between unions and their memberships can also be seen in the actions and reaction of the INTO membership in January 2021 when after discussion with the Department, the executive of the INTO had agreed to proposals to reopen schools published on January 15th (INTO, 2021a), but following widespread revolt from the

membership on social media had to update their stance and re-engage with the DES on guidance for reopening schools particularly for special education classes by January 18th (INTO, 2021b). The revolt was led by the *Voice for Teachers* Facebook and Twitter pages, which held a webinar on January 17th to instruct disgruntled members about how to make their voices heard by the INTO leadership (Voice for Teachers, 2021). The extent of the dissatisfaction with the leadership was such that the Central Executive Committee (CEC) held an emergency meeting to reengage with the Department and delay plans for school reopening. Each of these events reveal a widening gulf between the purposes of partnership and the levels of consensus available. It also raises questions about the ability of the partnership model to deliver or for the unions to be able to guarantee their membership will accept negotiated proposals. For the purposes of this study, the perspectives of the union members, and those of their colleagues, to union actions and involvement in partnership, should provide interesting insights on this theme.

3.3.8 Implications for this research

In drawing together these threads of the influences on the curriculum development processes and a comparison with the way in which curriculum development processes in other countries have developed along similar lines, there are a number of factors to consider in any examination of the curriculum development process in Ireland. Firstly, as was in the case in many other post-colonial countries, the notion of a national curriculum is often bound up with a sense of nationhood and as identifying the nation and citizen as 'other' in comparison with the previous colonising power. Secondly, as the twentieth century progressed, other international and supranational influences begin to make their impact felt in the development of curricula and in the focus of curricula across counties such as the increased emphasis on the development of 21st century skills. Thirdly, while these comparisons may indicate that the curriculum development path is well worn and has common pitfalls across countries, the "forgotten struggles and battles of long ago" (Sadler in Phillips, 2006) leave an indelible mark on the curriculum processes. The battles over language and identity, over control and innovation, over centralised authority and local autonomy, over partnership and authoritarianism, have all left their mark and continue to influence the processes of curriculum development in Ireland.

3.4 Hearing the voices in curriculum development

The process of curriculum development happens at many levels, often at the same time and the curriculum is constantly made, remade, interrogated, adjusted and evolves over time. The multiple sites of curriculum development is described by Priestley (2019) as including "multi-layered social practices including infrastructure, pedagogy, and assessment, through which education is structured enacted and evaluated." The multiple layers and sites of practice all form part of the development process and in the senior cycle review multiple levels were asked to contribute their views formally to the process of development. The views of teachers, students and parents were combined with the inputs of the other stakeholders in education to devise an advisory report for the Minister. At the macro level the multiplicity of inputs is also coloured by the partnership model of policy development enacted in Ireland since the late 1980s. In order to better understand the unique perspectives of each level of involvement a brief overview of the concept of partnership and how it is realised in curriculum development in Ireland in addition to the relevance of parental and student involvement is outlined below.

3.4.1 Partnership model and stakeholder involvement

The particular and specific partnership model of policy development that has been a staple of the Irish policy context since the mid-1980s (Gleeson, 2004; Granville, 2004), emerged from the public private partnerships in the late 1980s driven by economic need, (Gleeson, 2000), introduced into the education sphere in the Green Paper *Partners in Education* (Department of Education, 1985) and formalised in the Programme for a Partnership Government (Fianna Fáil & Labour Party (Ireland), 1993), the education sector embraced the principles of partnership in the policy development space through engagement with events such as The National Education Convention in 1993. The partnership agenda was outlined in the Green Paper on Education: *Education for a Changing World* (Department of Education and Science, 1992) which listed partnership in management, and, parents as partners, as some of the key features of its plan. The Education Act in 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) enshrined the partnership composition of agencies such as the NCCA and formalised its statutory status.

The discourse around policy development through partnership in education internationally has been criticised for its links to a neoliberal agenda, an application of soft governance to education structures, and the masking of a dominant political elite (Gewirtz & Ozga, 1990). In their research into the power dynamics in policy partnerships in Western Australian policy processes from the 1990s to the early 2000s, Griffiths, Vidovich and Chapman (2009) found that despite discourses around collaborative processes to create a 'shared' curriculum, that they don't take enough account of embedded hierarchical systems of power and can result in limited collaboration, regulated consultation and state control of policy agendas. The study reported that limited collaboration between the partners in education was due to "a lack of trust between interest groups; conflict over roles; the dominance of particular actors over policy processes; and cultural differences as well as power differentials between interest groups" (Griffiths et al., 2009, p. 198). These findings on the limited collaboration possible is interesting in relation to the collaboration essential to the running of organisations such as the NCCA, where there are a range of power differentials between the partner organisations, lack of clarity over roles and a lack of trust between interest groups.

According to Harford and O'Doherty (2016) this use of the discourse of partnership has led to assumptions of partnership but without the levels of support, nurturing or interrogation that an authentic partnership would require. Harford and O'Doherty posit that this has led to top-down implementation of policy decisions with little more than lip-service being given to authentic consultation with stakeholders. While the policy agencies such as the NCCA and the Teaching Council are representative bodies, the authors state that "the process of representation is not always apolitical" (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016, p. 42) and this can lead to the dominance of a political elite. For Harford and O'Doherty, partnership "is not just about adequate consultation, joint goal setting, establishing respective goals and responsibilities, but also about setting a structure in place to support and scaffold partnership" (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016, p. 51-52). This list of the required characteristics of partnership provides an interesting heuristic to examine the experiences of the participants in the Senior Cycle Review as part of the discourse on partnership.

3.4.2 Previous research on the partnership model in education policy in Ireland

The partnership arrangements and limitations at work in the NCCA and other partnership structures has been examined by numerous 'insiders' to the process (Gleeson, 2000b, 2000a, 2004; Granville, 1994, 2004, 2010; Looney, 2001, 2014; Sullivan, 2018). For Gleeson (2000a) there was an overwhelming need to develop alternative participatory models of partnership due to the dominance of sectoral and technical interests and fragmentation of education issues in the structures. The absence of critical debate on macro issues and the relatively small number of participants across education structures had, according to Gleeson, resulted in "cosy consensus and compromise born out of familiarity" (Gleeson, 2000a, p. 170-171). One of the limitations identified by Gleeson was in the clarity of roles between the structures of the NCCA and the Department of Education. One of the interviewees, Albert Ó Ceallaigh, in Gleeson's thesis referred to the 'bamboo curtain' between the DE and the NCCA (Gleeson, 2004, p. 113), where documents prepared by the NCCA would then be passed over to be implemented and assessed by the Department. However, Gleeson wrote in a time where "reforms once agreed at Course Committees and Council have not encountered opposition from the teaching force" (Gleeson, 2004, p. 116), the same cannot be said of reforms since the Junior Cycle Framework implementation industrial action from 2014-2017. In fact, the unions would be very quick to point out that there has not yet been agreement of the implementation of junior cycle, just a pause in the process until the publication of research on its implementation. Indeed, it has been argued the level and impact of the industrial relations dispute arising from the implementation of the Junior Cycle Framework had a negative impact on the workings of partnerships in the NCCA (Gleeson et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2018).

In Granville's analysis of the processes and structures of curriculum development, the importance of the representative nature of the Council and committees of the NCCA is stressed. These structures are "not simply official instruments of national education policy formation, but also theatres of action, negotiation and diplomacy where the education partners act out dramas of conflict and conciliation" (Granville, 2004, p. 87). But despite providing the space for negotiating the curriculum, the limitations of these partnerships for Granville are the limited number of participants and therefore the 'usual suspects' are

represented, and other voices are not heard, and, the resultant conservatism in the curriculum that is produced by the system of negotiation. For Granville, the most innovative reforms and curricular initiatives were introduced outside the representative committee structure, namely the Leaving Certificate Applied, The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Junior Cycle Schools Programme. The space on the periphery of curriculum development, in the Dublin and Shannon Curriculum Development Units (CDU) had allowed for innovative structures such as credit accumulation and modularisation to be introduced that would not have been possible in the conservative space of the committees. One of the most worrying findings of Granville's research, is the recognition by committee members of their own lack of confidence in their curriculum development expertise (Granville, 1994). The lack of expertise in this area, as opposed to their assertion of their subject knowledge expertise, meant that any innovation outside the realms of their own subject experience was unlikely to be presented or accepted by the committee. The inherent conservatism of the structures and the limits on the voices heard, echoes some of the calls by Gleeson (2004) to engage in more participatory models of engagement and more critical debate on educational issues.

Looney (2014, p. 12) outlined the issues faced within a partnership model for the NCCA "The intractable tension between attempts to reach consensus and to consult and engage as widely as possible is acknowledged and identified as a potential weakness". However, Looney, herself a onetime CEO of the NCCA, is quick to point out the importance of having an organisation, based on partnership principles, to the forefront of curricular development in Ireland.

> Despite the shortcomings of the partnership and representative structure, the existence of the NCCA ensures that the political 'line of command' is at worst more dispersed and at best entirely displaced by a deliberative process that represents more public engagement with curriculum development and a view of curriculum as process. (Looney, 2014, p. 11)

The efforts to include networks of schools in the development processes for junior cycle are recognised by Looney as "an attempt to include curriculum practice in the process of developing the national curriculum" (Looney, 2014, p.12). The move beyond just the conservative deliberative space of the committees and boards to include networks of

schools was not enough to ensure the smooth passage of junior cycle reform, but part of this difficulty lay in the not so silent partner in the development space, the Department of Education and the Minister.

3.4.3 The political partners

For politicians the lure of the curriculum is very real. This political involvement in curriculum can be seen in the perhaps exaggerated comments by Jenkins (2010) outlined below:

> Nothing appeals to a politician so much as the chance to rewrite a curriculum. He would not dare operate on a brain tumour or land a jumbo jet or design the Forth Bridge. But let him near a classroom, and the Jupiter complex takes over. He goes berserk. Any fool can teach, and the existing fools are no good at it. Napoleon might lose the battle of Waterloo, but he reformed the French curriculum. (Jenkins, 2010)

However, a similar argument was made by a sitting politician in the comments of the then Minister for Education in Australia, Christopher Pyne MP in 2014 when announcing a review of the curriculum: "everyone has been to school…everyone is an expert on education in one way or another" (Ministers' Media Centre, 2014). This disregard for the expertise of curriculum developers and the assumption of lived experience as a substitute for expertise is uniquely felt in the education field. The impact of the appointment of a Minister or change of government can change the direction of travel or development priorities in an education system overnight (Harris, 1989; McManus, 2016). For the NCCA, a system built on partnership and trust between stakeholders, this can have an impact of the functioning of the structures.

The impact of individual Ministers on curriculum is commented on by Gleeson (2004, p. 111-112), "the Minister of the day can be enormously influential and a trend has developed whereby individual Ministers adopt 'pet projects' with relevance to the curriculum e.g. O'Rourke emphasised European languages, Bhreathnach championed CSPE while Martin chose ICT as his initiative." For Granville, the evolution of the relationship between the NCCA and the Department and Minister over time is often dependent on the language used in documentation. In commenting on the declamatory tone used in the Senior Cycle proposals of 2004/5, where the proposals were presented as a 'fait accompli' and used

statements such as 'The senior cycle will…', Granville remarks: "Relations between a dominant government department and an executive or advisory agency will invariably ebb and flow in terms of leadership and authority, a constant strain is bound to exist even at times of mutual support. The impact and significance of language tone and register on affecting this relationship should not be underestimated." (Granville, 2010, p. 99). A detailed examination of the role played by various Ministers for Education since the beginning of the Free State has been carried out by Antonia McManus (2014, 2016) which confirms this view as outlined by Granville.

In his thesis examining the development of the Education on Religious Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics curriculum, Sullivan (2018) reflects on the difficult situation faced by the NCCA in backing Ministerial proposals for Junior Cycle reform that went beyond the advice agreed by the Council. The failure of the NCCA to question or query the scope of the new proposals and instead to fully support the Department in the implementation plan is evidence of the subservient relationship between the NCCA and the parent body, the Department of Education. The impact this has on partnership, according to Sullivan is "to influence perceived credibility of the organisation in the eyes of the partners" (Sullivan, 2018, p.127).

3.4.4 How partnership works on Boards and Development Groups

As the most recent study on the functioning of the partnership structures of the NCCA, and recognising that the functions and agency of any organisation evolve over time and do not have static temporal characteristics, the commentary by Sullivan on the difficulties faced by the committees and Board structures of the NCCA is interesting to note in light of the earlier comments by Granville and Gleeson. The development of a curriculum for religious beliefs and ethics for the primary curriculum calls into question the dominant ideological underpinning of the majority of primary schools, that of the Catholic church. Such a landscape is bound to be fraught with deeply held beliefs and ideological standpoints of stakeholders that will be exposed in the negotiating space of the development group meetings. Granville's comments on the lack of expertise admitted by committee members in 1994 is echoed by Sullivan in his discussion of the assumptions raised in the partnership model "that nominees are coming to Board or Council with the experience and expertise required to engage fully in the deliberative space" (Sullivan, 2018, p.93). According to his

interviewees, this was not always the case, and some felt limited in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the discussions. Gleeson's comments on the dominant and often obstructive role of unions in the development process was echoed by Sullivan in his discussion on the strategic nominations to committees made by organisations and the impact this had on the ability of a development group to broker agreement on issues, "the role of brokerage seems to be challenged by the potential for partner organisations to remain steadfast in their obstruction of developments" (Sullivan, 2018, p.94). For Rizvi and Lingard, in a democratic society the competing political interests involved in policy development "are clearly negotiated, resulting in policy outcomes that most stakeholders can live with" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, p. 71). The negotiation of curriculum within the structures of the NCCA such as the Development Groups, the Boards and Council represents the space where the political interest groups meet to formulate a curriculum that all stakeholders can live with. The discussions with the participants in the research reflected some of the concerns outlined by Sullivan, where obstruction of developments as a default position by some political interests was not a situation that all stakeholders felt they could live with. The role of partnership within these structures comes under pressure if the democratic ideals underpinning the partnership arrangements are not valued by all parties. The role of underpinning values and beliefs became one of the main themes developed as part of this research.

3.4.5 Involving the public: Consultation

One of the stakeholders in the partnership structure is the general public. The involvement of the public in the development of curriculum has been confined to consultation on developments as they occur. The finding of Griffiths et al. (2009) in relation to the use of regulated consultation is interesting in the Irish context given the centrality of consultation in the policy and curriculum development processes here. In their study they found that consultation was used as a legitimising tool for public policy decisions, where the state could claim credit or shift the blame for policies based on the outcomes of the public consultation. The Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) delineates citizen participation into eight levels that range from non-participation to citizen

participation (see Figure 7). Consultation is viewed as midline tokenism, with full partnership and delegated power much further up the participation hierarchy.

8	Citizen control	Degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	Degrees of tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	

Figure 7 Arnstein ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969)

There are other models of public participation in policy formation, mainly emerging from the development of policy around environment concerns such as Robinson's matrix of participation (Robinson, 2002) and the typologies described by Rowe and Frewer (2005) and Fung (2003). Most of these are built on a normative typology with a hierarchical structure adapted from Arnstein. Dean (2017) describes public participation without the normative bias and describes public participation as dimensional (see Figure 8).

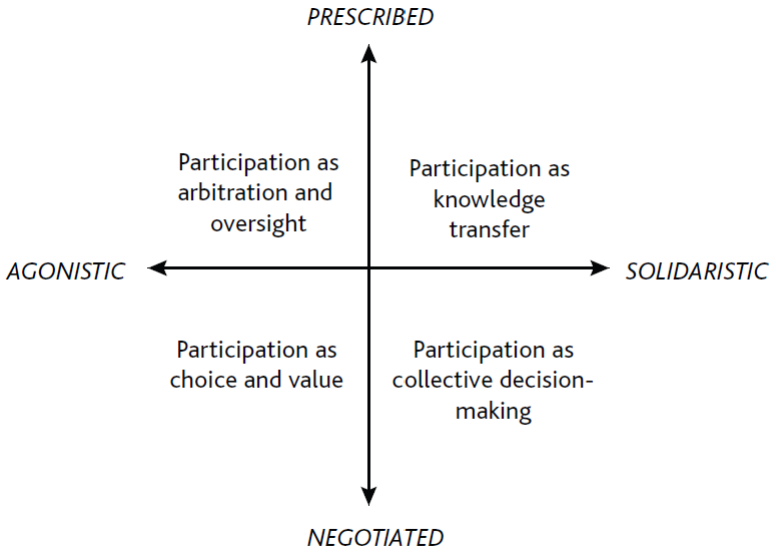

Figure 8 Four modes of public participation in policy decisions (Dean, 2017, p. 216)

Dean's matrix (2017) outlining four quadrants of public participation can be used to examine the specific and particular model of partnership used in policy development in Ireland. The move from the prescribed space of the earlier phase of curriculum development to the more negotiated space of the representative bodies such as the NCCA can be seen as a move down the central axis of the model. However, as the NCCA is an advisory body, the actions of a Minister can steer developments back along the axis towards the prescribed dimension. Within the negotiating space, the horizontal axis can be used to describe the actions of the actors involved, moving from the solidaristic orientation in trying to find shared common interests on which to build an agreed curriculum, to the agonistic orientation in questioning and contesting decisions made. For an examination of the role of the partnership model in the actions of the actors who participated in the Senior Cycle Review, this matrix provides an opportunity to broader understanding of the partnership model at work.

Using this matrix, the role of consultation in the policy development space is often within the 'participation as knowledge transfer' dimension, with consultations often being the first indication to the education system that changes are afoot and raising awareness of same. The role of citizens as partners in democratic structures, outlined by the OECD (2001), ensured that consultation was viewed as one of the key tools for information transfer and active participation of citizens across democratic states. Its success in those areas may vary however, with most governments using consultation in the knowledge transfer area greater than in the active participation zone (see case studies in OECD, 2001). In its narrowest form, consultation emphasises information exchange, with its intent to "elicit responses, or gauge reaction rather than include or incorporate" (Stewart, 2009, p.5-6). The increased use of technology to facilitate engagement in consultation has not resulted in a broader or more inclusive base for that engagement but has instead resulted in a narrowing of contributions to those who are already actively involved and can distort responses as a result (Liu, 2017). This was evident in the mass email responses to the open consultation as part of the senior cycle review where over 2,000 emails from various accounts responded with the same cut and paste call to ensure that Irish remained central to the reformed senior cycle arrangements, regardless of the fact that language or core subjects were not part of the discussions.

Fishkin (2011) examines the requirements of a deliberative democracy and the threats to that deliberative process posed by methods and technologies designed to capture the public will and he warns of "letters or phone calls, emails, text messages or internet tabulations of opinion that appear to be representative of the general public, but are really only from specific and well-organised interest groups" (Fishkin, 2011, p.1). In the processes of policy development, how then do you engage with the broader public, but specifically with the groups most concerned with the policies developed, the teachers, parents and students without the risk of having interest groups dominate the results? For Fishkin (2011), the key is in the deliberative space. He cites the example of candidate selection for the PASOK party in Greece in 2006, that rather than rely on a decision by party elites or mass ballot, instead selected to employ deliberative polling. In this case a scientific sample of random voters who had responded to a survey were asked to attend a day of deliberations with the candidates and as a result of intense discussion on the issues with the candidates, the random sample voted for the candidate they wished to be selected as representative of the party in the upcoming elections. This process allowed for the sample to become informed on the issues, engage in deliberative discussion and hear the outlooks of others to better understand other points of view. This incorporation of a town hall style discussion can lead to greater understanding of the issues than can be ascertained in an online forum.

The senior cycle review incorporated some of the features of this style of representation. The schools involved in the review were proportionally selected from a self-selected list of interested schools compiled by the management bodies. The selection of schools sought to reflect the spread of schools on the post primary database in terms of geographical location, urban/rural location, DEIS designation, language of instruction, school type (voluntary secondary/ community/ vocational school) and gendered/coeducational structure. These schools then sent representatives (teachers, management and parents) to attend an induction day to outline the structure of the review and give feedback on the requirements of the review. The schools were encouraged to hold feedback sessions with their staff to respond to a series of questions on the aims and purpose of this stage of education and schools were provided with a range of research resources to inform the discussions on these issues. The aim in this consultation design was to get a more nuanced

and considered response from teachers and schools around the issues that are central to any future plans to reform senior cycle. Whether this was successful was dependent on how well the schools implemented the arrangements for discussions. The responses from schools analysed by the ESRI (Banks et al., 2018; Smyth, 2019), give a more rounded view of the issues than the similar responses to the online survey as part of the broader public consultation.

3.4.6 The place of student voice in curriculum policy development

"One glaring weakness in the current structures, for instance, is the lack of voice for the learners themselves – the school pupils and adult learners returning to education" (Granville, 2004, p. 93)

In Granville's 2004 reflections on the curriculum development process, the absence of the voice of students from the partnership model was one of his striking conclusions. In the intervening years, it may be seen as obvious that the voices of those at the centre of the curriculum should be included in the decision-making process around curriculum, but that has not been the case. The work of Laura Lundy (2007) points out that the rights of children and young people to have their say heard on matters that affect them are enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is therefore a legal imperative, not just a tokenistic gesture. But the practice of collecting and more importantly implementing student voice in a meaningful way has been very limited. The structures of the NCCA, based on a partnership model with stakeholders in education has yet to include a representative from the body of students the curriculum will impact, although this is about to change with the nomination of a representative from the ISSU to take a position on the NCCA. There are notable problems with this inclusion that must be acknowledged. The age and stage of the learners involved may be seen as prohibiting their involvement with the decision-making process, the difficulty of recruiting students that are representative rather than just the 'articulate voice' and the lengthy time that curriculum policy takes to develop means that those involved in the development process may have

left the system by the time implementation takes place. Even the concept of 'student voice' is problematic. How can students have a singular voice?

However, there have been some developments in this area. In more recent curriculum developments such as the development of specifications for the junior cycle, students were consulted across a variety of schools to contribute their opinions on the subject areas to the background papers and development of the brief for the subject development group. The use of student voice in this way, while not directly members of the development group, had some influence on the work of the development groups and on the decision-making process of the groups. The NCCA have worked with partner organisations to develop student voice in schools, one of which is the work with Erasmus schools across Europe to develop tools and guides for schools (Voice of Students, 2019), another was working with ACCS to develop models of good practice for student voice (ACCS, 2019).

In the senior cycle review, the consultations with students went a little further. In the 41 schools that formed the school-based review, students as well as teachers and parents were asked for their opinions on the purpose and structure of senior cycle education. The role of student voice and the impact and influence it has as part of a holistic view of the process is difficult to quantify for this research. As part of the research protocol that outlined the areas under discussion in the interviews with participants, the role and impact of the student voice was one of the framework questions. This helped to ascertain the perceived value placed on this input by the other key stakeholders involved.

It would be remiss to ignore the student view of their participation. As part of this study a relatively small cohort of students from widely disparate school settings may provide an initial sense of the lived experiences of the students involved in the study. The purpose of a qualitative study, as opposed to a quantitative study, is to find the thick description of experience. Sandelowski (1986) in exploring the search for rigor in qualitative research emphasises that while the criterion of external validity may be applied to quantitative research to prove applicability, in qualitative research 'fittingness' is a more useful concept. As qualitative research emphasises the study of phenomena in their natural setting, then the general can be found in the particular and the idea of generalisability is an illusion. In this way, "any subject belonging to a specified group is considered to represent that group.

Anyone's experience, if well described, represents a 'slice from the life world' and is therefore appropriate subject matter for qualitative inquiry" (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 32). The inclusion of four students who participated in the review from very different school types (single sex girls voluntary secondary, and mixed voluntary secondary) and geographical locations (rural Mayo, and Kildare) may well give a 'slice from the life world' of those who were involved in the review but from a very different perspective than those who routinely are involved in the process of policy development. Further details on the selection process and ethical issues surrounding the student involvement can be found in Chapter 4 Methodology.

The perspectives of these relative outsiders to the process of development, but insiders to the process of curriculum experience, may well reveal some of the 'glaring weaknesses' observed by Granville in 2004 and possibly, may point to a better structure for policy processes in the future. The impact of the Covid 19 crisis on the Leaving Certificate students of 2020 may have influenced the reflections of the students on their inputs into the review. Unlike the other stakeholders, the students have a transient relationship with the curriculum and once they have left it behind, it may not be of any further concern. But the reflections they can give on the experience of the process may inform future decisions on the inclusion of student voice in policy development.

3.4.7 Parental representation

The link between parental involvement in their children's schooling and educational attainment has been well documented (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2001, 2018; Saltmarsh, 2015). Some, such as Robinson and Harris (2014), would argue that the link is not linear and causative but a result of multiple complex interactions. Epstein (2001) asserts that student success is amplified when three overlapping spheres of influence, home, school and community, work together to support student learning. The framework set out by Epstein in 2001 and modified in 2018, has been used as a starting point to frame parental involvement in education by many jurisdictions, including Ireland (National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, 2007). The work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) sets out the motivational aspects of parental involvement in their children's education. The factors influencing this involvement include beliefs in role construction for

involvement and a sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school. These beliefs are often socially constructed and are influenced by parents' experience over time with education structures. Negative experiences with education structures will therefore have a demotivating impact on parental involvement in education.

The challenges of engaging parents has been widely researched internationally and issues such as language barriers and parental socio-economic background have been seen to have a negative impact on parental involvement with schools (Piller et al., 2021; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Vinopal, 2016). According to Ule, Živoder and du Bois-Reymond (2015) in researching patterns of parental involvement of education, there is a growing emphasis on the role of parents as co-educators. Their research across eight European countries focused on schools in disadvantaged city areas and found, despite the uneven distribution of social and educational resources, there was an awareness of the "all-encompassing importance of a good education" (Ule et al., 2015, p. 346). Parents were concerned with making the right transition choices for their children and don't trust the education system, schools or teachers, to make those choices for them.

The challenges of engaging parents in the Irish context have not been the subject of the same scrutiny. This is interesting given that the rights of parents as the primary educators of their children is enshrined in article 42.1 of the Irish constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937) and their role in the partnership model of curriculum development was guaranteed by the Education Act (1998). However, the act also reduced the representation of parents to the newly formed bodies the National Parents Council - Primary and the National Parents Council – Post Primary. The efficacy of these organisations to represent the views of their members is dependent on the range of parents who choose to become involved in these organisations. The homogeneity of the representation in parental organisations in terms of ethnic background, socio-economic class and gender both in Ireland and internationally has been documented elsewhere (for example Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Helgøy & Homme, 2017; Saltmarsh, 2015). The importance of parental involvement at a national level has been explicitly stated by Department of Education in the *Looking at Our School* documents (Department of Education & Skills Inspectorate, 2016) where involvement of parents is stated as an indicator of standard. The quality of the engagement at national level in

Ireland may be inconsistent however, and the role of the National Parents Councils at primary and post primary level may be influenced by their dependence on the Department of Education for their continued existence (Bennett, 2015).

In order to ensure a more representative cross section of parental involvement than has traditionally been the case, a more explicit focus on surmounting the barriers to parental involvement should be implemented. Language barriers are often an immediate cause of parental disengagement. Piller, Bruzon and Torsh (2021) found that monolingual school websites were a significant barrier to parental engagement. Given the diverse linguistic range in the parental body in Ireland a significant consideration should be given to providing information in multiple languages. According to CSO figures for diversity for the 2016 census (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2016) there were 12 countries with over 10,000 non-Irish nationals resident in Ireland and an additional 32 countries with between 1,001 and 10,000 non-Irish residents in Ireland. The extent of the diverse range of language in use was exemplified by the range of languages used in the publication of information leaflets for schools by the Department of Education during the Covid 19 pandemic. Letters to parents detailing antigen testing arrangements were published in twenty different languages[5]. Despite this recognition of the diversity of parental background, the information available to parents on education websites is still predominantly available in English only, or, in English and Irish for national agencies.

The involvement of parents in the Senior Cycle Review bypassed the national representative structure of the National Parents Council - Post Primary and instead linked directly with the schools and their networks with parents, formal and informal. As part of the induction process schools involved in the review were asked to bring parental representatives to the initial meeting in Athlone to outline the process of the review and engage in feedback sessions on the survey tools to be used. In the parent feedback session, there was discussion on the use of acronyms within the documentation that would be barriers to engagement with parents unfamiliar with these names and one school discussed the possibility of translating the documents into the home languages of

[5] Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, French, Georgian, Hindi, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Spanish and Urdu

significant groupings of their parent body to aid engagement in the process. Some revisions were made to the parent information documents to align with the discussions held but the translation of the documents was prohibitively costly and was not undertaken. The representative nature of the parents involved in the review then is questionable. In this study, the selection of parents is detailed in Chapter 4, but the homogeneous nature of the participants here is likely to reflect the homogeneous nature of the parent group involved rather than be truly representative of the diverse parental body that exists.

3.6 Conclusion

While faults in the structures, curriculum and assessment of senior cycle in Ireland may be well documented (Baird et al., 2014; Banks et al., 2014, 2018; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013; Madaus & MacNamara, 1970b), any efforts to change the system have been met with resistance (Gleeson et al., 2002; Gleeson et al., 2020; Granville, 2004, 2010; Murchan, 2018). In the words of John Dewey, "familiarity breeds contempt, but it also breeds something like affection. We get used to the chains we wear, and we miss them when removed" (Dewey, 1902, p.28). The institutional status garnered by the Leaving Certificate has become almost beyond reproach despite a century of unchanging criticisms. The global pandemic that plunged the education system into chaos in March 2020 exposed some of the major failings of an assessment system with a crucial dependence on an externally assessed summative examination concentrated on three weeks in June. But other factors were also exposed: the cohort of disaffected students for whom the Leaving Certificate and senior cycle offered little by way of education for the world beyond; the ability of students who wished to transition to college to succeed without the trapping of a traditional examination; and the agility and flexibility of the education system to change and adapt quickly when the stakes were high.

Based on a broadly constructivist paradigm, critical realism offers an ontological approach to examining the process of curriculum development in this context. The broad overview of the evolution of curriculum development in Ireland and internationally reveals the myriad of factors that can help or hinder the development process, factors that Archer calls

morphogenesis or morphostasis. In the evolution of senior cycle in Ireland, there appears to be a constant state of morphostasis despite the number of reforms introduced over the intervening years. In this cycle of senior cycle review, the examination of the processes involved, the roles of the stakeholders involved, and the influence of external factors should enable a greater understanding of the processes, both hidden and overt, at work in curriculum development in order to better assist the development process in the future. As outlined in Chapter 1 and based on the context of curricular change in Ireland outlined in Chapter 2 along with the theoretical underpinnings detailed in this chapter, the research questions that frame this study are:

- What are the characteristics and determining features of the 'partnership' activities that underscored the Senior Cycle Review (2017-2019) in Ireland?
- How did this exercise in partnership manifest across the range of interests and roles of the participants? Who engaged in the work and what was their experience of this engagement?
- What insights in terms of the processes and methodologies of policy development does a critical realist analysis of the Senior Cycle Review bring forward?

The following chapter, Chapter 4, outlines the methodological considerations and practices undertaken as part of this research.

4. Methodology

4.0 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of the actors involved at various levels in the review of senior cycle. By doing so, the research gains an understanding of the influences on a policy development process based on a partnership model during the evolution of the senior cycle review and advisory report. The outlined research design is qualitative in approach. The case study, and in particular the vertical case study approach is the most suitable to elicit the range of influences and experiences at different levels gathered in this research. In order to gather these different levels of experience some of the interviews were elite interviews and these bring their own set of considerations outlined below. The use of a grounded perspective was central to the analysis of the interviews, informed by a critical realist ontology in order to establish the influences and experiences of the policy processes at work. In this type of research, the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher was central in establishing the rigor and validity of the research and how this rigor was framed is also outlined. This chapter also outlines the methods used in the selection of participants, the gathering of data and the analysis of the data underpinning the findings, discussions and conclusions in the succeeding chapters.

4.1 Key considerations in approaching case study design: validity, sampling, generalisability and scope.

In order to solicit emic viewpoints to assist in determining the meaning and purpose that people ascribe to their actions, qualitative methods are the most appropriate in this case (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For research questions that are focused on "developing an in-depth understanding about how different cases provide insight into an issue"(Creswell et al., 2007, p. 239), a case study would appear to be the most fitting methodological approach. The narrow focus of a case study, where a contemporary phenomenon is examined in its real-world context, allows for rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973) where the "highly detailed accounts enable the reader to appreciate and ultimately derive a deep understanding of the social conditions being studied" (Yin, 2015, p. 197). Creswell et al., (2007) define a case study as:

> a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio visual material, documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 245)

A case study according to Flyvbjerg (2011) is not so much a methodological choice as a choice of what is to be studied. He outlines the five misunderstandings of case studies that are used to undermine the status of the case study as a scientific method in that they question the validity and reliability of the case study as a method. The trustworthiness of a case study may be undermined by the sample selection, but as iterated by Patton (2002, p. 244) "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry". While the size of the sample can vary depending on the orientation of the research, getting the right participants was key to eliciting the rich description necessary to illuminate the study. For this research, purposive sampling aided the selection of participants who yielded rich descriptive data as " the goal or purpose for selecting specific instances is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data – in essence, *information rich* – given [the] topic of study" (Yin, 2016, p. 94, emphasis in the original). It should be noted that in this case, the purpose of the sampling is not to find a representative sample but to provide a maximum variation sample, where the broadest range of information and perspectives on the study can be obtained (Yin, 2016). The range of perspectives sought therefore included participants at various levels from the macro and international level to the meso national organisation or school level to the micro level of teachers, students and parents. As the aims of the study are similar to the process tracing aims outlined by George and Bennett (2005) in trying to trace causal mechanisms in policy development, the non-probability sampling outlined by Tansey (2007) is more suitable than random sampling. Tansey (2007, p. 769) makes the case for non-probability sampling where the aim is not to make generalisations but to "obtain the testimony of individuals who were most closely involved in the process of interest".

Numerous researchers have identified triangulation as useful in establishing the validity claims of a qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2013). For Creswell and Miller (2000, pp 126-128) triangulation features strongly in research design when a post-

positivist paradigm is central to the research and favours researcher reflexivity as method of establishing validity in a more critical paradigm. In addition to maintaining a research log to aid reflexivity, Yin (2015, 2016) also recommends establishing a research protocol to maintain the central line of enquiry and efforts to triangulate the findings, while also acknowledging that this type of qualitative research often yields unexpected results and so the research design may need to be amended or changed in order to reflect emerging themes or issues. Yin advises that the research protocol should be a broad list of topics to be covered in the interviews rather than scripted set of questions and should contain the substantive ground to be covered in the enquiry, "but the actual wording and sequence of the spoken questions will be customized to the specific interview situation" (Yin, 2016, p. 109). In this study, establishing trustworthiness rather than triangulation is a more valid concern and the inclusion of the external participants to give alternative perspectives aims to establish that trustworthiness.

One of the challenges in case study research is the generalisability of the research findings. Unlike the physical sciences where large data sets are investigated in order to find empirical generalisable laws, within the social sciences and particularly in educational research, the aim is to find the "thick descriptions" that reveal the depth of the experience or phenomenon that is the subject of the research. Bassey (2001, p.7) argues that one of the problems with educational research is that researchers are "expected by policy-makers, practitioners and the public at large to make scientific generalisations, but cannot because they cannot identify, define and measure all of the variables that affect the events that they study". The answer, according to Bassey, is in 'fuzzy generalisations', best guess estimates that broadly describe that in this thickly described situation this was the outcome, and so some predications may be drawn from this outcome that may be of benefit to other researchers and users of the research and so to "develop a cumulative approach to the creation of educational theory" (Bassey, 2001, p. 20).

While case studies tend to closely examine an event or sequence of events in one location, for the purposes of this research, a vertical case study was the most appropriate approach. A vertical case study acknowledges that the macro forces of political, economic, national and international influences can be examined in how they interact and change when in contact with other influences at the meso and micro level. Bray and Thomas (1995) outline

the need for more research to include multilevel analysis in order to achieve a fuller more balanced understanding of its subjects. Bartlett and Vavrus (2009) in their book on comparative education studies, explore the possibilities in vertical case studies. The "reification" of macro forces means they are taken for granted in a focus on a single site locality rather than exploring how changes in national and international institutions, discourses and policies influence practices at local level. The goal of a vertical case study is "to develop a thorough understanding of the particular at each level and to analyse how these understandings produce similar and different interpretations of the policy, problem or phenomenon under study" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009, p.11). The vertical case study is then conceptualised as a multi-sited, qualitative study that traces linkages across and among national, international forces and institutions that shape and are shaped by interaction across the macro, meso and micro levels. In the portfolio of methods to be utilised in a vertical case study Bartlett and Vavrus (2009) include: the examination of archival records; consideration of geopolitical events; survey methods; discourse analysis and multi-sited ethnographic techniques such as interviews and observations.

4.2 Considerations for elite interviews: access, anonymity, vulnerability, power differential and insider research.

One of the aims of the research is to examine the influence of policy networks on the creation of policy in this area. However, as noted by Duke (2002, p.41) "focusing on policy networks as a unit of analysis presents a unique set of problems and dilemmas for the researcher." One of the issues referred to in the literature is access to the elites. Whereas corporate elites may be readily identified by their corporations and can be accessed via 'cold calling' or by accessing via established networks (Ostrander, 1995; Useem, 1995), those who develop policy are not as visible or easily identifiable. Interviewing elite persons in the arena of public policy in Ireland is quite different from the traditional view of elites. Unlike the view of elites as the public face of an issue, in the policy development arena, policies are developed behind closed doors and so the personas are not as well known to those outside the policy-making area. However, some of the same issues around obtaining authentic interviews remain. As concluded by Mikecz (2012, p.484), one of the challenges is to get the respondent's honest opinions as "[m]any of the elite research participants are trained in how to represent their organisation to the outside world" and so a sanitised

version of events is presented. Some of the people identified by the researcher as significant in senior cycle review process and so suitable for interview, were identified as elites. They were individuals who, as outlined by Mikecz, "were either key decision makers and/or had a major influence on policy choices and/or were first-hand witnesses to decision making" (Mikecz, 2012, p. 485) in the area of senior cycle reform since the foundation of the NCCA or have a role in the development or analysis of policy nationally or internationally.

One of the other issues in participating in the research is the possibility of a potential impact on the future career or decision making of the research participant. As outlined by Laurila (1997, p. 409), they "may consider sensitive much of the knowledge that may be relevant to social scientists. An examination of managers' activities has the potential to impact on their reputation." This is even more difficult in the world of bureaucracy where all knowledge is considered sensitive, this can lead to bureaucrats frustrating the aims of researchers by ignoring requests to participate or refusing participation on the grounds of political sensitivity (Marshall, 1984).

As there is a very small pool of people involved in the development of educational policy in Ireland, the possibility of preserving anonymity in the course of the research is limited. Walford (2012, 2018) doubts the possibility of maintaining any degree of anonymity and confidentiality in today's socially interconnected world, and recognises that while promises of anonymity are often made to respondents in order to gain access, they are rarely possible to fulfil. Conti and O'Neil (2007) give examples of devising ad hoc agreements on confidentiality with elite interviewees rather than promising complete confidentiality and anonymity. The compromise agreement reached in their research was the removal of identifying information from the data.

Another challenge is delving into the policy-making process while it is being carried out in real time. One of the challenges outlined by Lancaster (2017) is if the aim of the research is to study "dynamics, contestation and multiple perspectives, rather than trying to document an 'official' account of events" (p. 94) that studying these policy processes in real time "produces particular methodological and ethical challenges for collecting, analysing and reporting participants' accounts of policy processes" (ibid, p. 94). In dealing

specifically with government departments, one aspect that will be particularly pertinent to this research was outlined by Lancaster:

> The impact of work culture was especially pronounced in relation to interview encounters with policy makers working within government departments. When approaching multiple policy makers within the one department, I invariably became aware of a process of co-ordination between invited participants behind the scenes. (Lancaster, 2017, p. 95)

It was anticipated that this co-ordination behind the scenes would form a significant part of the research experience in dealing with current governmental employees. The selection of former employees, the first-hand witnesses to the decision-making process, were a more suitable choice in this regard as they are no longer subject to the same pressure to coordinate responses as those who continue to depend on their reputation as gatekeepers in the furtherance of their career. Selwyn (2012) describes this advantage of accessing elites who are now outside the spectrum of political influence but as noted by Walford (2012, p. 112) there is always the potential for these individuals to attempt to "ascribe an importance to their own actions that is unjustified." The role of the interviewer then is to check the perceptions of the participants and try to triangulate the data with the perceptions of other participants or with documentary evidence.

Lancaster (2017) had to deal with the difficulties posed by identifying a small number of participants from a small sampling frame necessary due to the focus of the research on a particular policy development process. In Lancaster's work, she recognised that due to the small number and the public accessibility of the memberships of the committees involved, while participants may not be identifiable to the general public, their identities would possibly have been identifiable by other participants. In this case, the usual method of anonymising data through the use of pseudonyms would not have served its purpose. The broad purpose of the research had to be kept in mind and the broad descriptors of roles or organisational affiliation were used, but as acknowledged by Lancaster, they too may have been enough to identify the participants. Duke (2002) also points to the fact that as elites within a small network, quite often her participants had discussed her work with each other and were keen to know the identity of who else she had spoken to. Neal and McLaughlin (2009) experienced the same phenomenon in their research and noted:

> … anonymity was not a sufficient enough tool to avoid particular voices (and perspectives) being recognised. This was especially so in a research setting in which all the respondents

> were known to each other through various professional and social networks and linked by their involvement in a specific event. (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009, p. 694)

This observation was extremely accurate for this research. The pool of people involved in the development of education policy at this level in Ireland is extremely small and the same people may be present at different levels of development. The use of multiple case studies and multiple voices may help to obscure some identification of the participants while also allowing for cross-case analysis. Walford (2012, p. 114) notes the difficulties with maintaining the anonymity of the participants in such research "for it is not only what is said that is important but also who said it." The positionality of the participant can offer greater insight into the policy processes involved and lend greater weight to the perceptions offered depending on their proximity to the policy decision making. But the researcher also needs to be aware of self-censorship in these regards as it is clear that there may be differences of interpretation between participants and that the results of the research may not be welcomed by all (Walford, 2012). For this reason, the de-identification of data is the only reasonable promise that could be made to the participants.

One key observation by Lancaster is the notion of applying the term 'vulnerable participants' to the elite interviewees as "the disclosure of information and accounts provided by some participants in some cases could potentially expose them to retaliation from others in the policy sphere, embarrassment, potential job loss, or compromise organisational partnerships, damage relationships and jeopardise delicately balanced politicised policy processes underway" (Lancaster, 2017, p.99). In order to maintain the trust of the participants, they were assured that they could see any quotations by them that would be used in the final published version of the research. Providing a full transcript for the participants to clarify or edit was not deemed to be in the best interests of the research. Mercer (2007, p. 12) argues that belief in the trustworthiness of member check-ins "fails to take account of the fact that the perspectives of individual informants may be ambivalent at any given moment, may change over time, and may contradict one another to such an extent that consensus is impossible". Participants in interview, particularly elite participants, quite often like to edit what they had originally said to give greater authority to their impression, to remove any stray observations or to make themselves seem more coherent. In the transcription process the inclusion of sentence fillers or sentence

fragments makes the transcription authentic, but it will rarely make the interviewee feel like they have given the researcher a coherent answer. For these reasons, like Mercer (2007), I decided not to give the interviewees the transcribed interviews for validity checking.

However, limiting the ability of the interview participants to exert control over what could or could not be reported in the analysis and interpretation of data while also allowing for participants' ongoing consent is a fine balance to be achieved in this research. This is particularly true as the research is being carried out in real time and so subject to the fluctuations of power and influence that the time scale brings (Lancaster, 2017). Ostrander (1995) discusses the need to protect the research and the researcher. As there is a power/status differential between the researcher and the interviewee, the importance of clearly establishing what the research can and cannot do as well as the limits of interference allowed can be more difficult in elite interviews "because of the power of elite subjects to shield themselves from exposure and criticism" (Ostrander, 1995, p. 138). The establishment of boundaries and expectations before the commencement of the research is vital in this methodology and Ostrander (1995) makes suggestions on how to establish these boundaries such as drawing up agreed memoranda before research begins, establishing mutual respect and not being overly deferential in the interview process. The different power relations present in interviewing elites in comparison to other research subjects has been well documented (Duke, 2002; Ostrander, 1995; Lancaster, 2017) but Neal and McLaughlin (2009) question the linear perception of a power relationship where the researcher is viewed as having less power than the policy elite participant. Instead they reflect that "Power is rather statically defined as residing in the explicit structural positions of either the researcher or the research participant rather than as an ambiguous, fluid, multi-directional dynamic, which can flow unevenly across and between different positions in the research relationship" (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009, p. 695). Conti and O'Neil (2007, p. 68) also question the existence of a rigid, hierarchical power dynamic and understand power "not as an intrinsic property of an individual but as flowing from complex relationships between individuals, organisations and institutions". This conception of power and of a fluctuating power differential between researcher and the interviewee was more accurate than a rigid structure in the conceptualising of this research. The

positionality of the researcher, further detailed below, means that a power differential was not a static concept given the prior relationships and ongoing interactions with the interviewees.

Duke (2002) outlines some of the methods used to identify the key individuals to participate in the research. By asking as a final question in the interview for the names and contact details of others they thought the researcher should talk to, Duke found it possible to map the membership and shape of the policy networks but also to get a good indication of who was regarded as influential or inconsequential within the networks. Similar strategies are documented by Ostrander (1995) and Useem (1995). Another difficulty identified by Duke (2002) is the constraints placed on civil servants not to disclose any information gained as a result of their service. This can lead to what she describes as 'thin descriptions' of the policy process. The inclusion of civil servants who have recently retired may help to mitigate against these thin descriptions.

Selwyn (2012, p. 340) argues for the need to investigate "the meanings, discourses and ideologies that were attached initially to education change and have since continued into subsequent phases of education policy-making". As both an insider and outsider to the research, there is always the possibility that the role taken as interviewer may fall into several categories as outlined by Grek (2011) although undertaking the role of a 'harmless outsider' may be more difficult. Grek (2011) notes the importance of knowing the context and background to the policy development in order to appear 'knowledgeable' to the participant and so instil trust, however, she also acknowledges the "policy narrative as a story - as a construction of events and relationships that has a particular plot and that follows certain conventions in the roles taken by actors (detached intelligence, benign direction, etc.)" (Grek, 2011, p. 239). The researcher must be reflexively aware in order to avoid the co-construction of narrative that simply reinforces the official voice of policy development. This difficulty in interpreting interviews with elite participants is the danger that Useem calls 'going native' and "uncritically accepting a paradigm that one had arrived to appraise" (Useem, 1995, p. 27). Ostrander (1995) also warns against assuming that elites know more than they do and so over-estimating what they have to say just because it is said with conviction and a sense of authority. The reflexivity of the researcher and the

critical analysis of the discourse in the interviews will be central to the integrity of the research.

4.3 Using Critical Discourse Analysis: Background, theoretical grounding, Critical Discourse Historical Analysis (CDHA).

Fairclough (2005) makes the case for the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) when approaching research from a critical realist ontology. Fairclough argues for a "moderately socially constructivist perspective", one that "rejects the tendency for the study of organisation to be reduced to the study of discourse, locating the analysis of discourse instead within an analytically dualist epistemology which gives primacy to researching relations between agency… and structure" (Fairclough, 2005, p. 916). The critical realist ontology recognises the assumptions about the nature of social life, that social phenomena are socially constructed and that people's concepts of the world they live in contribute to its reproduction and transformation (Fairclough, 2005, p. 915-916). CDA, Fairclough argues, can contribute to analysis as it has "a doubly relational character: it analyses relations between discourse and other elements of the social, and it analyses relations between linguistic/semiotic elements of social events and linguistic/semiotic facets of social structures and social practices including 'discourses'" (Fairclough, 2005, p. 916). This analytical dualism allows for the analysis of the influences of processes and structures in the discourse but also recognises the individual agency of the actors in the discourse to change or transform the discourse. CDA can also trace the relations and tensions between the processes, structures and agency.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be considered a " problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda" (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 357). Tracing its origins in linguistic analysis, it is informed by the ideology of the Frankfurt school of critical theory and Gramsci's hegemonic structures, as well as by theories of discourse such as those expounded by Foucault (1971, 1979) and Bourdieu (1991). In his work Forchtner (2011) traces the theoretical grounding of CDA, and specifically the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), to the work of Habermas on language. Forchtner outlines how Habermas's theories on the role of culture in the reproduction of social order can underpin CDA's aims of revealing the powers structures embedded in language use. For Habermas, rationality is a

property of intersubjectivity where validity claims can be raised and refuted freely and so discourse can be seen as a reflective form of communicative action (Forchtner, 2011). CDA therefore approaches discourse as both socially constitutive and socially shaped and aims to make visible the ideological loading of particular ways of using language and reveal the power relations at work. Fairclough in his work (1989, 1992, 2005) has developed a dialectical theory of discourse and a transdisciplinary approach to social change. This acknowledges the socially constructed and constituted aspects of discourse, in recognising that discourse is constantly evolving and changing as it interacts with social structures and actors within those structures. Fairclough also makes a case for the shifting boundaries between orders of discourse as the interaction between social domains influences the discourses between them. This leads to the combination of concepts in discourse prevalent in capitalist society such as the 'knowledge economy' or 'information society' (Fairclough et al., 2011).

CDA can take many forms, and the Discourse Historical Approach was developed specifically to trace the emergence of an anti-Semitic stereotyped image as it emerged in public discourse in 1986 (Wodak, 2001). This approach not only analyses text but also context, and by including the historical dimension the ways in which certain genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change can be explored. Discourse is more than text, but texts can form part of the discourse. Wodak (2014, p.302) gives various examples of what can constitute 'discourse': "anything from a historical monument, a *lieu de mémoire*, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, or topic-related conversations to language per se." According to Reisigl and Wodak (2009), they consider 'discourse' to be:

- A cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action
- Socially constituted and socially constitutive
- Related to a macro-topic
- Linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view. (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89)

This description of discourse as a social practice implies a dialectic relationship between a discursive event and the situation, institution, and social structure which frame it (Wodak, 2014). There can be various interpretations of the word 'critical' in CDA but primarily it

functions to make the implicit explicit and "more specifically, it means making explicit the implicit relationship between discourse, power and ideology, challenging surface meanings , and not taking anything for granted" (Wodak, 2014, p. 304).

In their description of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), Reisigl and Wodak (2009) outline some of the key considerations of this approach to CDA. In particular, DHA considers intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between texts in order to explore how texts and discourses change in relation to socio-political change. This approach complemented the critical realist ontology outlined for this research as it acknowledges the temporal relationships between concepts and understandings and how these are influenced by structures, processes and agency. One of the difficulties with applying this approach is identifying a macro-topic and delimiting the borders of a discourse as " a discourse is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89).

While there are varied theoretical groundings for CDA (Van Dijk, 2011), there are common convictions held by CDA researchers: "hidden power structures should be revealed, unjustified discrimination and inequality have to be fought and the analyst has to reflect on her/his own position and make her/his standpoint transparent" (Forchtner, 2011, p. 1). This reflexivity is central to the work of any researcher using CDA as a methodological tool. As iterated by Wodak (2014, p. 305) "CDA researchers have to be aware that their own work is driven by social, economic and political motives like any other academic work and that they are not in any superior position". Van Leeuwen (2006) expands on this premise by adding that critical analysts, by making their position explicit and outlining their critical stance add to the tradition of democratic debate and therefore has great social responsibilities attached. The positionality of the researcher becomes important to recognise and acknowledge.

Fairclough (1992) describes an interlocking framework for use in textual analysis that has the text at the centre, discursive practice (production, distribution, consumption) surrounding that field and an outer area where social practice can be identified (see Figure 9). Any text analysed using this framework with involve a close analysis of the text itself, an examination of the reasons why this text was produced and for whom, and an

examination of the social practice that has an influence on or is influenced by the text. These processes are not necessarily linear and can happen concurrently (Janks, 1997).

Figure 9 Fairclough framework for CDA (Fairclough, 1992)

For the purposes of this research the texts under close examination are the interview transcripts. While CDA is more frequently used to analyse written texts, Fairclough (2013, p.180) explains "texts are understood in an inclusive sense, not only written texts but also conversation and interviews". As these texts are not published or distributed, the second dimension of Fairclough's framework, discursive practice, is less relevant in this analysis. The links between the text as presented in the transcript and social practice are the focus of the analysis. As outlined by Anderson and Mungal (2015, p. 809) "language is increasingly used not simply to communicate, but also forms part of a larger arena in which power struggles over meaning take place. For instance, the language of business and economics creeps into education talk and texts without anyone noticing." This use of the language of business in education discourse can be seen in the shift in language around partnership to view parents and management bodies not now as 'partners' but increasingly as 'stakeholders'.

The use of discourse analysis as a methodological tool has multiple benefits. Firstly as a means of exploring the power structures and influences at play through an analysis of the accepted norms of discourse around events or issues and secondly as pointed out by Anderson and Mungal (2015, p. 812) "doing a discourse analysis of interview transcripts provides a form of triangulation that complements traditional coding procedures". This triangulation and challenging critique of the norms of educational discourse will be important to provide rigor given the positionality of the researcher.

4.4 Positionality, reflexivity and rigor

As stated by Chiseri-Strater (1996, p. 115), "All researchers are positioned". The features that define that positionality, the influence it will have on the research study and how that positionality is revealed in the report on the study, can vary. Positionality can include attributes that can be seen as fixed or culturally ascribed such as race, nationality and gender and also more subjective-contextual factors such as personal life history and experiences (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 116). Some aspects of positionality such as age, power or status can change over the course of the study, or, vary in relation to the participants of the study. But the importance of positionality was outlined by Bourke (2014, p. 2) "the nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process." In the same way that a researcher would scrutinise a data collection instrument such as a survey for evidence of bias, leading questions or assumptions, so too in engaging with the qualitative process researchers must engage in reflexivity to determine their own biases, underlying assumptions and background in order to try to maintain some degree of validity to the research. However, consistently focusing on the reflexive can result in a sense of futility in trying to achieve an objective stance (May & Perry, 2015). Bourke (2014, p.3) states that striving to achieve pure objectivism "is a naïve stance" and instead positionality represents a space where objectivism and subjectivism can meet. This can be complicated by the recognition within positionality theory that people have multiple overlapping personalities and make meaning from various aspects of their personalities (Kezar, 2002; Longino, 1993). These multiple identities, and facets influencing identity, can complicate the relationships, and power dynamics, embedded in the interview context (Merriam et al., 2001). Researchers in the qualitative domain have to be aware of their own positionality, and that of their interviewees, in order to ameliorate unintended bias in their research. This is particularly important in the relatively homogeneous Irish education system. "The more one is like the participants in terms of culture, gender, race, socio-economic class and so on, the more it is assumed that access will be granted, meanings shared and validity of

findings assured" (Merriam et al., 2001). In the course of this research, some of the participants shared many traits with the researcher and so assumptions about shared meanings and understandings needed to be continually questioned and explored to try to ensure the validity of the findings.

The difficulty of ensuring academic rigor in qualitative research has been extensively examined by many researchers including Lincoln and Guba (1985), Lincoln and Denzin (2005) and Sandelowski (1986, 1993). Sandelowski (1986) takes the traditional criteria applied to quantitative research to test for rigor such as truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality, and outlines a framework for similar application to qualitative research. Sandelowski (1986) builds on the earlier work by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and suggests that there is sufficient diversity in the typologies of qualitative research to make a single set of criteria inadequate and warns against the rigid application of a set of criteria. Instead, she outlines an alternative way of searching for rigor in qualitative studies that recognises the richness and depth of experience revealed in this type of research that may lead to its definition as more artistic than scientific. This is similar to the argument offered by Eisner (1981, p. 6), "There is no test of statistical significance, no measure of construct validity in artistically rendered research. What one seeks is illumination and penetration. The proof of the pudding is the way in which it shapes our conception of the world or some aspect of it." For Sandelowski then, rather than the concept of internal validity, for qualitative research the concept of credibility is a far more important measure of truth value.

> The truth value of a qualitative investigation generally resides in the discovery of human phenomena or experiences as they are lived and perceived by subjects rather than in the verification of a priori conceptions of those experiences…truth is subject-oriented rather than researcher-defined. (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 30)

One of the threats to this 'truth value' is the threat of a researcher 'going native' or the emergence of 'elite bias'. Sandelowski recommends that the threat of 'going native' can be offset by deliberately focusing on how the researcher influenced and was influenced by a subject. The methodological use of reflexivity in this regard has been promoted since the 1980s but there are many aspects of its use that must be considered in undertaking qualitative research. Reflexivity is different to reflection. Reflexivity requires not just a post-event distillation of the process but also an othering that requires the researcher to

develop an awareness of the process of self-scrutiny. This has its roots in anthropology and the 'politics of the gaze' in qualitative research, raising questions as to whose voice is represented, by whom and for whose benefit. Reflexivity has epistemological foundations as how knowledge is gained, evaluated and reproduced is constantly questioned; "to be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). However, how successful this reflexivity can be in helping to position the researcher and so aid the validity of the research is questionable. Pillow (2003) claims that this type of self-reflexivity is limited and limiting as it depends on a knowable subject and often collapses into linear tellings that render the researcher and the research subject as familiar. She warns:

> self-reflexivity can perform a modernist seduction – promising release from your tension, voyeurism, ethnocentrism – a release from your discomfort with representation through a transcendent clarity (Pillow, 2003, p. 188).

Instead, she argues for an "uncomfortable reflexivity" where data are problematised and while reflexivity seeks to know, recognises that knowing as "tenuous". The very act of interviewing can be seen as an invitation to be reflective and reflexive (Simbürger, 2014). The reflexivity of the participant, is explored by Enosh and Ben-Ari (2016). If one accepts their definition of reflexivity as "the constant movement between being in the phenomenon and stepping outside of it" (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016, p. 578), then the reflexivity of the participants can also be of interest to the researcher. If in the process of the interview, the participants, through their recollection of events and narrative editorialising, step in and out of the phenomenon then they are engaging in a reflexive process themselves. In this way:

> reflexivity is also a process of co-construction and creation which takes place in liminal spaces, emanating from contemplative processes of researchers, participants and/or within the encounters. The liminal spaces of reflexivity thus serve as arenas in which direct experience is transformed into constructed new knowledge. (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016, p. 586)

This new knowledge is also tenuous, as the subject editorialises in that moment, but that recollection may be different or contrary to a previously expressed narrative by the same

subject. In this was the researcher must tread carefully to gain an understanding of the 'truth value' of the findings.

In order to ensure a transparency in decision-making one of the strategies recommended by Sandelowski is 'auditability'. This can be defined as having a clear decision trail for each stage and step of the research. She lists 12 stages when decisions are made where the researcher should describe, explain and justify decisions made including the sourcing of evidence, the selection of subjects, the nature of the data collection and analysis. She also recommends strategies to achieve credibility and fittingness such as checking the representativeness of the data, triangulating across data sources, checking for typical and atypical elements in the data and the independent analysis of the data by another researcher. However, in her later work she offers the following warning:

> We also remain in danger of succumbing to the 'illusion of technique', of making a fetish of it at the expense of perfecting a craft and making rigor an unyielding end in itself…rigor is less about adherence to the letter of the rules and procedures than it is about fidelity to the spirit of the qualitative work. (Sandelowski, 1993, pp. 1-2)

This concern with the rigid application of criteria is echoed by Barbour (2001). In the spirit of this qualitative work, the researcher questioned the validity of findings, maintained a clear audit trail of each step of the decision-making process and maintained a reflexive journal to aid clarity on the experience of the study and mitigate against the possibility of 'going native'.

4.5 Insider research: privileged access, bias and assumptions, ensuring validity.

As an education officer with the NCCA, the organisation that undertook the review of senior cycle, some aspects of this research will be necessarily classed as 'insider' research. This has many advantages and disadvantages that must be acknowledged ahead of undertaking the study and must be accounted for in the research plan. The concept of 'insider research' was initially coined in the 1920s in relation to white anthropologists studying native tribes where the 'otherness' of the researcher from those being researched had to be defined but from the 1950s anthropologists and sociologists studying the familiar, shared many of the traits of the study participants, such as race, gender, culture, ethnicity, and in sharing those traits were viewed as having privileged access to knowledge (Mercer, 2007). Merton (1972) succinctly outlines the claims for authenticity from both

positions: only an insider can truly understand the realities of the group, but only an outsider can achieve relative objectivity and raise the questions that need to be raised. The advantages and disadvantages of each position are well documented (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Labaree, 2002; Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972). As an insider the researcher has privileged access to participants, may gain greater rapport with participants and can understand practices without the need to decode meaning. The insider researcher has a knowledge and understanding of the jargon used but also knows the legitimate and taboo phenomena under discussion. The researcher also has a prior knowledge of the formal and informal hierarchies at work across organisations and know where to recruit participants. The ability to draw on prior personal experiences may allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions that may obtain richer data. However, the insider may also fail to raise the questions that should be asked. Similar to the *Idol of the Cave* outlined by Francis Bacon drawing on Plato's allegory of the cave (Walton, 1999), the insider may not be sufficiently able to step outside their own perspective to see a reality that is different to their accepted view of the world. The accepted understanding of realities may also prevent the researcher from recognising phenomena that may be obvious to an outsider researcher.

This dichotomous view of the insider/outsider assumes that it is a mutually exclusive frame as Merton (1972) outlines. Other researchers have a more nuanced view of the positionality of the researcher. Christensen and Dahl (1997) see this as more of a continuum of insiderness / outsiderness rather than a dichotomy. In Griffith (2008) she outlines how the multiplicity of positionalities held by the researcher may have an impact on how their 'insiderness' is viewed or perceived by the participants. This can be influenced by the researcher's biographical profile, political activities, research agenda and the relationship with the community under study. How the researcher is perceived can also vary from participant to participant, "complex and multi-dimensional variables such as gender and the degree of insiderness and outsiderness in relation to the respondent, present challenges that must be carefully negotiated" (Labaree, 2002, p. 113). McNess, Arthur, and Crossley (2015) further expand this concept of insider and outsider as researchers need "to recognise that neither the researcher nor the subjects of analysis are fixed, stable and coherent but are constantly shifting, incomplete, fragmented and contradictory in relation to both collective and personal existence" (McNess et al., 2015, p.

298). This implies that in my research as an insider of the NCCA, I am also on a continuum of outsiderness in relation to the participants of the research and also that this continuum will also be continually evolving and changing.

As an insider researcher, I had to be even more aware of my own biases, perspectives and assumptions. I had to be continually critical of my assumptions and endeavour to see events from other perspectives before applying a level of interpretation and analysis. Mercer (2007) outlines some of the challenges of insider research and the particular ethical dilemmas posed by such research. She identifies 'informant bias' as a challenge to the insider researcher where participants' willingness to talk and what they say is directly influenced by who they think you are. This may result in a certain level of pragmatism where, knowing that professional relationships must continue outside the research, openness and candour may be replaced by ambivalence and vagueness in an effort not to offend, upset or undermine the researcher. The second main issue identified by Mercer relates to validity. The accepted method of ensuring external validity is to allow participants to review their contribution to the research and fact check their submission. Mercer argues that this doesn't ensure validity as the accounts are context bound and therefore cannot be verified by generating data from multiple sources (Mercer, 2007, p.12). This echoes the advice of Silverman (2000, p 125), that the responses of participants are not factual statements but rather they are descriptions of their experienced reality, contextually-embedded narratives, and as such not suitable for external verification. Labaree (2002) identifies additional ethical dilemmas in insider research such as maintaining the necessary distancing when entering and exiting the field of study, the hidden dilemmas of shared and significant relationships and the problems in positioning the author within the final text. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) in their defensive of the validity of insider research acknowledge the many challenges faced including the role duality faced by the researcher as both insider and researcher as "insider researchers are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims and identification dilemmas" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 70). The key to managing these according to Brannick and Coghlan is managing organisational politics in recognising that undertaking a research project within one's own organisation "is political and might even be considered subversive" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p.71).

Each of these issues was foregrounded in the approach to the study. Many of the participants were known to me through professional relationships and the need to mitigate against informant bias was considered in the development of the research protocol. Participants were assured that the accounts that they gave would not have repercussions outside of the interview space. The participants were also reassured that my role in the study is as researcher rather than education officer, that nothing said would be taken as a personal or organisational slight in order to encourage candour. But as Mercer (2007) remarks in her study, whether anyone can totally remove themselves from their context in order to participate in a study is doubtful.

The second issue, around ensuring validity, is more problematic. In order to obtain uncontaminated data (Silverman, 2000), it would be wise to avoid informing participants too specifically of the research questions to be studied and the possibility of participants changing their perspective over time is a very real possibility in a study that is concerned with events that are happening in real time and subject to fluctuations in public opinion. It may not be of any benefit to the research to engage the participants in a review of their data beyond an objective fact-checking exercise.

According to Hockey being an insider "may potentially influence the whole research process – site selection, method of sampling, documentary analysis, observation techniques and the way meaning is constructed from the field data" (Hockey as cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 14). This was undoubtably true in the course of this study. The site selection, the vertical case study of participants involved in the review of senior cycle, was made easier to access as I had been directly involved in the review and could easily access the participants. The sampling was purposive to gain a greater understanding of the experience of a wide range of participants in the review, but due to my involvement I was already aware of the various areas to direct my gaze, unlike an external researcher who would have to survey the entire cohort first to ensure a diverse spread of experience.

The need to continually check and challenge my own assumptions, perspectives and biases with a critical self-evaluation of my positionality may more accurately be called reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). In her work developing reflexive practice in her research, Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) suggests the use of social perspective taking as a means of checking the

authenticity of her insider research. She outlined the steps she undertook to compare her methods of analysis with those of an outsider researcher researching the same topic in the same school in order to consider the world from another perspective. By utilising these steps, she challenged her assumptions and strove to attain a greater level of objectivity in her findings. This utilisation of an outsider perspective of similar research may be a useful device to challenge inherent assumptions and biases in the study. One assertion made by Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017, p.6) that proved central to the planning for the research is "The place of proceduralism is important, as it may help prevent weakness of will, namely, actions born of the researcher's sympathy that would not be justifiable to other researchers". The development of the interview procedures and protocols was therefore central to any planning prior to the interviews taking place.

The ethical dilemmas that I faced in this research in the dual role of insider/researcher became apparent as the research progressed. The 'tug of loyalties' outlined by Brannick and Coghlan (2007) needed me to be reflective and reflexive in relation to my own position within the research. As stated by McNess et al. (2015, p. 312) "All researchers need to come to terms with their own position within the research process and engage with a diversity of expectations and perspectives, many of which may be fragmented, imaginary or even contradictory and divisive."

4.6 Research plan

Based on the needs of the outlined research questions, to investigate the policy development process in the review of senior cycle in Ireland, a qualitative methodology was chosen. The case study was viewed as the most authentic way of gathering rich, thick description of the processes and events from the participants in the process. A vertical case study, where the influence of national and international forces is recognised, is seen as the most suitable type of case study for this research question.

4.6.1 Selection of participants

In order to select participants who could provide relevant description, selective purposive sampling was the method used to identify the participants. In order to give a

contextualising context to the review, participants from an international perspective who were involved at various stages of the review of senior cycle were invited to participate as were international academics with experience in curriculum development. This included members of the OECD team who visited schools and international academics who had advised on the early stages of the review. Participants from various levels of the review such as members of the Board for Senior Cycle, within the NCCA, representatives from other organisations involved in the review, and past members of the DES involved in early iterations of the review were invited to participate. At the micro level, participants from the school-based section of the review including principals and teachers were also included. As some of these participants came from positions of seniority in education nationally and internationally, the challenges of interviewing elites informed the practicalities of the interview processes.

4.6.2 Research protocol

In line with principles and arguments advanced, keeping a research protocol informed the interview process rather than a scripted set of standardised questions. This was more suitable for this research study, as the experience of the participants varied according to the level at which they engaged with the process. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to aid analysis.

In keeping with critical realist ontology, recognising the influence of not just the empirical, but also the actual and real levels of reality, Critical Discourse Analysis was utilised to bring the underlying powerful influences, to the fore. The application of CDA to all of the data influenced the first and second coding of the data in order to develop key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016).

Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a research journal and used this to aid her reflexivity in the process of gathering the data and in the analysis and reporting of the data. The positionality of the researcher is explicitly acknowledged in the research and the multiple identities as teacher, examiner, policy maker, and researcher, among others, was reflected upon to try to maintain an objective stance.

4.7 Data Collection: selecting levels of participants

The initial phase of the data collection was to select the interview participants and approach them to participate in the research. The different levels under analysis required different approaches. There has been extensive research on curriculum development that describes the activity across different levels or domains (Goodlad, 1979; Van den Akker, 2012; Van den Akker & Thijs, 2009). More recent work by Priestley, Alvunger, Philippou, & Soini (2021) argues that the metaphor of levels encourages thinking about curriculum in linear lines rather than the creation of curriculum emerging within and between different layers or sites of activity (p. 3). Priestley et al. (2021) refer to sites of activity

> …that operate in education systems as curriculum is made and remade in different settings; as sites of social activity with changing social actors, who are moving between sites, are being present in more than one, or actually becoming a site themselves depending on the social activity they are engaging in (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 12-13).

The sites of activity described by Priestley et al. (2021) (Figure 10) provide a useful heuristic for describing the participants in the review while also acknowledging the fact that individuals often interact on different levels or multiple levels at the same time. The responses of a school leader may not just be confined to that level of experience but also incorporate experience gained from involvement in a national organisation, as well as the experience of being a parent. But the descriptions of sites of activity, while they may work in an international level, are problematic when applied to the Irish model of curriculum development.

Sites of curriculum making		
Site of activity	Examples of activity	Examples of actors
Supra	Transnational curricular discourse generation, policy borrowing and lending; policy learning	OECD; World Bank; UNESCO; EU
Macro	Development of curriculum policy frameworks; legislation to establish agencies and infrastructure	National governments; curriculum agencies

Meso	Production of guidance; leadership of and support for curriculum making; production of resources	National governments; curriculum agencies; district authorities; textbook publishers; curriculum brokers; subject-area counsellors
Micro	School-level curriculum making; programme design; lesson-planning	Principals; senior leaders; middle leaders; teachers
Nano	Curriculum making in classrooms and other learning spaces; pedagogic interactions; curriculum events	Teachers; students

Figure 10 Sites of curriculum making (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 13)

It was relatively easy to identify individuals from the supra level of international organisations to participate in this study as the OECD had been involved in an ongoing assessment of the strategies used in the school-based phase of the review and so prior personal contact had already been made. Identifying participants at the macro and meso levels was more difficult to define. While a curriculum organisation such as the NCCA exists as an organisation at the macro level of policy development, its Council is representative in nature and so a member of Council may also be a union representative or a school principal and so will have agency on the macro, meso and micro levels of the Priestley heuristic. For the purposes of this study, individuals who were primarily involved in the national level (leaders of organisations, former governmental employees and policy brokers such as management bodies or unions) were defined as macro level participants. At the meso level, school leaders involved in the review were identified, while also cognisant of the fact that these leaders were also involved in the macro level by virtue of their membership of sub-structures of the NCCA and so these lines are blurred. At the micro level, three sub-levels were identified: teachers, parents and students. In early plans for the research a gap was recognised as those external to the review but with extensive knowledge and experience of the process of curriculum development were not included in this description of levels. As a result, a further level was added, that of external curriculum expert. In identifying participants for this level there was purposive sampling of academics and curriculum scholars in Ireland and internationally.

4.7.1 Identifying participants: Macro level

The macro level participants were identified as leading members of organisations directly involved in the review from an organisational standpoint. Purposive sampling was used as the most suitable method to identify participants that would be beneficial to the study in providing unique and valuable perspectives on the process of the review (Tansey, 2007). In order to check the validity of the selection process, the snowball or chain referral method was also used where at the end of interviews candidates were asked if there was anyone else the researcher should speak to who would have insights at this level (Conti & O'Neil, 2007). In each case the participants named people who had already been contacted for the purposes of this research. The people who agreed to participate included participants from research organisations, former members of the Department of Education or education agencies, the various teacher unions and management bodies. Many of these people were involved in the review at multiple levels. While some were members of the Board for Senior Cycle and so had an oversight role in the development and rollout of the review, they also represented their organisations and had roles within their organisations as education officers or representatives in a number of sites of activity. As outlined by Walford (2012) the researcher used current contacts and connections to the individuals in order to gain access. As extensively outlined in the research, access is often the most common obstacle to including the policy elites in this type of study (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Grek, 2011; Marshall, 1984; Ostrander, 1995; Useem, 1995).

However, by using contacts and existing professional relationships I was able to initiate contact with the majority of those I wished to interview. I also found that access to recently retired members of organisations was easier as outlined by Duke (2002) as these people often no longer had institutional ties that would prevent their participation in this type of research. This led to one of the limitations of the research while a former Secretary General of the Department of Education was willing to participate and give insight into the workings and processes of the department, current department officials politely declined the invitation on the basis that they were not free to comment on work and policies that are live in the system. This is in contrast to the findings of Aberbach and Rockman (2002) where they found a relatively high response rate among bureaucratic elites. In total there were seven participants at this level, and they included two union representatives, an

educational researcher, one former head of an education agency, one former deputy head of an education agency, one international researcher from the OECD, and one former Secretary General of the DES.

As the researcher had personal relationships with each of the participants, access was gained by emailing an introductory letter to their email accounts. The introductory letter, from a university address, outlined the research and the part they might play. It also gave assurances about the ethical approval process, the time commitment and the methods of data collection and storage that would be employed. The email also had an attachment with further details on the process on UCD headed paper with the name of my supervisor and contact details for further information. Both the attachment and the email had assurances that participation was not expected and that a rejection of the approach would not have any implications on my existing working relationship with participants. The email and information letter attachment are included in Appendix A. The full breakdown of the participants at this level are outlined in the table below (Figure 11):

Participant	**Organisation**
1	Union representative (M)
2	International Researcher OECD (M)
3	Former Deputy CEO Education Agency (F)
4	Union representative (F)
5	Researcher ESRI (F)
6	Former CEO Education Agency (M)
7	Former Secretary General DES (F)

Figure 11 Participants at macro level

4.7.2 Meso Level

Many of the participants at the meso level were also heads of organisations and were also on the Board for Senior Cycle or had recently been on the Board. The basis for their designation at meso level was based on the fact that they retained direct links to schools and classrooms. In some cases, they were school leaders, or recent school leaders, or leaders of organisations that dealt directly with school management and so were closer to work 'on the ground' in schools. In this way the designation as meso level reflects some of the thinking outlined in Priestley et al. (2021) where rather than the actors being

representative of certain levels, the sites of activity are the reference points for levels of engagement. Identifying and sampling participants here was also purposive (Tansey, 2007). Previous links and associations were utilised to access a broad range of participants and the same email and attachments as outlined for the macro level group were sent. Nearly all responses at this level were positive underlining the importance of personal links and associations for gaining access. There were five participants at this level. They included two school principals, two heads of school management bodies, and the head of a representative body for school leadership. Other people approached include a member of a parent representative body and another school principal. Due to other pressures and contextual issues neither of these two people were able to participate. A full breakdown of participants can be found in the table below (Figure 12).

Participant	**Organisation**
8	Member of Board for Senior Cycle, School Leader (F)
9	Member of Board for Senior Cycle, School Leader (F)
10	Member of Council, Management Body Representative (M)
11	Member of Council, Management Body Representative (F)
12	Former member of Council, School Leader Representative (M)

Figure 12 Participants at Meso level

4.7.3 Micro Level

The identification of participants at this level involved three sublevels: parents, students and teachers involved in the review. The participants here were more difficult to access as I did not have direct links to either the parents or students who had been involved and so I had to depend on the referral of the teachers contacted. This made the process of accessing these levels more protracted than the other levels. The teachers identified at this level were purposively sampled but it was also important to have a broad sample that in some represented the range of school types involved in the review and so represented a form of quota sampling (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 156). As a result, I approached teachers in three types of schools involved: a rural, single sex, voluntary secondary school; a suburban co-educational voluntary secondary school and an urban co-educational community school in a DEIS area. Initially the teachers contacted agreed to participate but the changing contextual situation where schools closed and returned to online teaching meant that

some participants were no longer able to participate. Additional teachers were contacted and three were able to contribute to the research. Once the initial contact had been made and the interview carried out, I asked those involved for their suggestions for parents who had been involved in the review or students who had left school who had been involved that they still had access to using a snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008). The initial contact with the teachers was made using the same email and information letter as was used at the other levels. In contacting the parents and students a further plain English document was provided (Appendix B). Students and parents were also given the option of answering the questions in written format and returning answers to the researcher via email if they did not feel comfortable with carrying out an interview. None of those approached submitted a written version and preferred to conduct the oral interview. This resulted in the following participants at this level (Figure 13):

Participant	**Grouping**	**School**
13	Teacher	Suburban, Community School, Mixed (M)
14	Teacher	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)
15	Teacher	Urban, Community School, DEIS, Mixed (F)
16	Parent	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
17	Parent	Suburban, Community School, Mixed (F)
18	Parent	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)
19	Student	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
20	Student	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
21	Student	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (M)
22	Student	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)

Figure 13 Participants at Micro level

As can be seen from the table above there were certain limitations in terms of who was able to participate in the research, but as previously outlined, each experience is rich in its own context and therefore each of the participants brought their own richness to the descriptions they gave (Geertz, 1973; Sandelowski, 1986). One of the limitations is the gendered representation of the parents represented in the sample. However, as was commented on by one of the parents during the interview, in her experience it was always 'the mammies' who came to the parents' association meetings, always the mammies who

volunteered to participate in the 'on the ground' events but more likely to be the (often the only) male participant who got the recognition for attending. In this instance the representation of a single gender may in fact be more representative than if there had been a male parent included in this sample. The lack of gender balance in the representation of parent voice could be the subject of a further piece of research.

There is also a limitation in the student voice represented. There are no students represented from the urban setting and this was due to the non-response of students after an initial contact was made. The difficulty of accessing former students was also exacerbated by the Covid restrictions as the teachers interviewed were working from home and often did not have access to the database of school contacts as this was located in school.

The richness of the student contribution however cannot be underestimated. Each of the students brought their own unique perspectives and particular contexts to the discussions. In one case a student has since travelled to The Netherlands to attend university and so was able to bring a comparative stance to her views on her experience of senior cycle and of the review. Another student was from an Eastern European background and had experienced schooling in three different countries. This enabled her to again draw comparisons that would not have been considered in the initial outline of the research.

The varied teacher experience also generated its own richness. One teacher was a guidance counsellor and was able to give insight into the review and its impact on the student body in far greater detail than had been anticipated. The experience of the teachers at the various events in the review also shed light on aspects of the review that the researcher would not have anticipated at the outset.

4.7.4 External Curriculum expert

In the initial planning stages of the research, only the three levels above were considered but it became very evident that external views would be necessary to validate the findings and so the researcher set about identifying key figures in areas that would be tangential to the review that would shed interesting light on the experience of the policy process. Some of those identified were previously known to the researcher through previous academic links or previous work but others were 'cold called'. Once an email address had been

sourced a short informal email was sent briefly outlining the research and asking if they would be interested in getting involved. The short email, as suggested by Marshall (1984) elicited positive responses in most cases.

After the first initial interviews and initial analysis, another gap in perspective emerged, that of the political representatives who had the decisive role in implementing policy or not. In identifying the politicians most relevant for the research two who had been significantly involved in educational change were identified and contact initiated. There was one non-response from a political representative. I then followed up with the formal email with information letter as an attachment. For those who were in the political realm and whom I did not know personally, I also included a disclaimer that I was not the TD who shares my name.

The people who agreed to participate from this level are outlined in the table below (Figure 14):

Participant	**Organisation**
23	International curriculum academic (M)
24	International Curriculum academic (M)
25	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum (F)
26	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum and former policy experience (F)
27	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum (M)
28	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum and experience abroad (M)
29	Former Politician with experience of curriculum policy (F)

Figure 14 Participants at External level

4.7.5 Devising the interview structure

The interview headings were open ended as this structure was most likely to reveal the attitudes, beliefs and perspectives of the participants in this research (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Berry, 2002). The early iteration of the questions was focused on the broad research questions that are central to this thesis. Further iterations included brief preamble statements to allow the participants to frame their answers or deviate from the frame of reference. As noted by Marshall (1984), elite interviewees are likely to resist the

provided frame of reference in order to assert their own meaning making on a situation. The first question was broadly framed to allow the participants to talk about themselves and their own experience of curriculum development. This served the purpose of enabling the interviewees to ease into the interview, enabled the development of rapport and gave the researcher points of reference from which to direct further questions during the discussion (Hunt et al., 1964). This framing worked particularly well on the external and macro level participants but had a more limited success at the micro level, where parents and students had very little experience of curriculum development. It did however serve a purpose in revealing the gap between the policy makers and those who implement or have the curriculum 'done to them' which echoes the research in this area (Cuban, 2013).

The final question was always 'Is there anything else you would like to add?'. The inclusion of this question enabled the participants to review what they had said and return to points they had previously mentioned only briefly or to expand on something that they had not touched on to that point. Woliver (2002) and Leech (2002) refer to this technique and recommend its use, particularly from a grounded perspective, in avoiding the assumption that the researcher knows all and giving a democratic voice to the interviewee in this process. Depending on the level of involvement with the review, the questions for each level, while adhering to the same overall structure, placed different emphasis on different levels of experience. A full list of the questions/interview outlines for each level can be found in the appendices (Appendix C). Some of the questions also had supplementary prompts to explore the discussion area if the participants had not fully developed their answers. Other techniques used during the interviews included allowing silences to develop to encourage a response to be expanded upon, using phrases such as 'really…' to encourage further elicitation and non-verbal cues such as nodding encouragingly (Marshall, 1984). The participants were sent the questions in the days preceding the interview once a final date and time had been agreed and this allowed them to prepare the areas they wished to speak about. Despite this preparation, the interviews were carried out on an informal basis and sometimes the sequence of the questions was altered in order to follow the train of the conversation and logically expand on particular points. The interview protocol and shared outline of the questions enabled me to return to questions or steer the conversation if it had veered off track.

After the initial interviews and analysis, one of the concepts evident was the partnership model of policy development. A question on attitudes to and opinions on the partnership model was added to the later interviews. The relevance of this question was primarily found in the interviews at meso and macro level.

4.7.6 Carrying out the interviews

Due to Covid 19 restrictions all interviews were carried out in an online environment. This had several advantages as well as disadvantages. One of the key advantages of using an online platform to schedule the interviews was that time, a very precious commodity while interviewing elites, could usually be found within a working day to carry out the interview. It also enabled me to interview international participants without the related cost of travel to meet them. Quite often busy academics, leaders or teachers could find an hour to set aside for an online interview when they may not have the luxury of setting aside time for a face-to-face meeting. It also enabled meetings to be easily rescheduled if something unexpected cropped up or other meetings overran. One of the disadvantages of the online platform is that as people were often working from home, there were distractions and disruptions from dogs, post arriving, emails and phone calls that may not have been present if the interviews had taken place in a traditional office environment. The use of the online platform for the student participants was particularly beneficial. All of the students were currently experiencing education via an online platform and so were very familiar with the format. This also removed a status differential that may have been experienced if the meetings had been face to face.

The most obvious drawback of using an online platform for interviewing is the inability to physically meet the respondents and develop a rapport. In the literature on interviewing, developing a rapport is regarded as one of the key factors in successful qualitative interviews (Hunt et al., 1964; Leech, 2002; Walford, 2012). This lack of proximity was less evident in interviews where I had previously met the participants and had some prior relationship with them. In interviews where I had no prior connection to the participants it was more difficult to develop rapport and judging silences, interruptions and facial features was more problematic. In one such interview poor broadband connectivity meant that the participant's camera was not on. This made those micro-judgements within the interview

process even more difficult, and it was probably the most challenging of the interviews to carry out. Thankfully, poor broadband connectivity caused very few problems in the course of the interviews and minor problems such as cameras not turning on or technical glitches were quickly resolved. As a result of the increase in working from home due to the pandemic and the increasing familiarity with the technology, all participants accepted these minor challenges as par for the course when conducting online conversations.

4.8 Contextual considerations: external events, ongoing Covid restrictions and exam disruption

The interviews were carried out between November 2020 and February 2021. The changing contextual situation had an impact on the execution of the research plan. The impact of the Covid pandemic meant that all schools in Ireland were closed from March 12, 2020, and this had an impact on the state examinations due to be held in June of that year. Originally it was planned to postpone the written examinations until July of 2020 but as a result of the worsening national and international situation, a system of calculated grades was introduced on May 8th, 2020, and students received these grades in September and started college slightly later in October 2020. Schools reopened in September 2020 and when the initial interviews were carried out, schools had just returned from a midterm break and schools were optimistic in being able to continue as planned despite a rise in Covid numbers and a return to level 4 restrictions. After the Christmas break, the significant rise in Covid numbers and the arrival of a Covid variant resulted in the closure of schools in January 2021 with the threat of a further impact on the examination schedule for 2021. During this time there were ongoing discussions between the DES, unions, student representatives and management bodies looking at alternatives for the scheduled examinations. As some of the participants were involved in these discussions and others would be directly impacted by the result of these discussions or had been impacted by the previous predicted grades system, these high-level discussions were keenly analysed by participants and commented on during the course of the interviews. The changing situation, sometimes on a day-to-day basis, had an impact on the reflections of the participants when discussing senior cycle and thoughts for the future of senior cycle.

Another contextual consideration that had an impact on the interviews was the changing political structures. After the general election on February 8th, 2020, there was a protracted

series of negotiations that resulted in a programme for government being agreed by Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and the Green Party on June 26th, 2020. In the intervening period without a stable government in place and with the effects of the Covid pandemic wreaking havoc on the education system the Minister for Education was Joe McHugh of Fine Gael. In the early stages of the pandemic when schools were closed, Minister McHugh issued a declaration that the examinations would be held "by hook or by crook" (RTE news, 2020). This unfortunate turn of phrase was repeatedly used by the media and many interview participants to illustrate the detrimental dominance of the Leaving Certificate examinations on the national psyche that a generation of Leaving Certificate students were being prepared for sacrifice despite a global pandemic (Coffey, 2020; Donegan, 2020; O'Brien, 2020b; O Caollain, 2020). The cabinet reshuffle and establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) resulted in the appointment of two ministers with a remit for education: Minister Norma Foley (FF) with responsibility for the newly named Department of Education (DE) and Minister Simon Harris (FG) for the new DFHERIS. This splitting of the responsibility for primary and secondary education from the further and higher education sectors was unprecedented and caused many in the interviewees in this study to question the transition arrangements or innovations now possible when the role was split over two departments. The rapid changes made by Minister Harris to the apprenticeship model and to the CAO system also pre-empted many of the suggestions that arose from the review. The changing roles of the departments is reflected in the changing referencing of the Department of Education from the DES to DE in this thesis.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Before the interviews were conducted this research proposal was submitted to the UCD Ethics Committee. As the respondents are all adults and the 'students' who participated are no longer students but adults in their own right, ethical exemption was applied for and received (Ethics reference number: HS-E-20-87-OReilly-Galvin). However, there were still some ethical issues that were considered in conducting this research. One issue was the possibility of anonymity for the elite respondents in this study. Walford (2005, 2018) casts doubt on the ability of any study to confer confidentiality and anonymity to its participants. Walford references the BERA and AERA guidelines that state: "The confidential and

anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research" (British Educational Research Association, 2018) and questions the ability of the researcher to completely anonymise the data of any participant. This is particularly true where in elite interviews the small field of experts means that most would be able to recognise the other respondents even from the limited biographical data given. Walford (2012) even proposes that the use of pseudonyms does more to protect the researcher from possible libel than it protects the confidentiality of the participants. Bearing these limitations in mind, the introductory email and the information letter outlined the limited form of anonymisation that the researcher could ensure. Namely, that "There will be no identifying information in relation to participants included in any such research paper and all data will be de-identified prior to analysis. Due to the small number of people involved in curriculum development in Ireland however, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed".

4.10 Limitations of the Study

As with any study, the existence of parameters for the research will result in limitations of the research. While the number of participants cannot be said to be generalisable for the population at large, the experiences of the participants are relevant in that they provide rich description from which to draw conclusions about their experience of the review and the policy making process.

The limitations of the gender imbalance in the parental representation has already been noted, but unlike previous studies (Marshall, 1984) where elite interviews form the basis of the research, this research did not find that the majority of policy actors were male. In fact, it was an encouraging sign that times have changed as the people interviewed who held the most senior positions (Minister and Secretary General) were both female.

One of the limitations of any qualitative study is the reliance on participants to tell the objective truth. As outlined by Walford (2012, pp. 115-116) one of the epistemic difficulties with interpreting data from interviews is that "Interviewees including powerful people do not have full knowledgeability, and this is for four reasons: unconscious beliefs, unacknowledged conditions of action, tacit knowledge and unintended consequences". The inability of anyone to objectively view their world and comment on it without the

trappings of their beliefs, former knowledge and value system means that all interpretations are limited in their objectivity.

The major limitation of the research is the passage of time. As the review took place between 2017 and 2019/20 and the final advisory report had not yet been published at the time of the interviews, some of the reflections of the participants are coloured by the absence of the feedback loop. The reflections of the student participants in particular are hazy due to the passage of time but also due to the fact that most participated in the review in their final year in school. The review was just one, and a relatively minor one, of the many events that they experienced that year and as such its importance was slight. Their experience of life after Leaving Certificate in many cases has coloured their opinions of senior cycle and of the review itself.

For those who are involved directly in the world of policy development, the passage of time has other implications. Many have been involved in the policy development world for quite some time and have seen how previous reviews and reforms have been implemented or rejected. Their prior experience of the policy landscape informs their reflections and the objective views they present may be the result of events other than the current review.

The impact of the ongoing Covid pandemic also cannot be under-estimated. For students, parents, teachers, school leaders and policy developers, the usual world of education has been shaken to its core and changes that would have been unimaginable have come to pass in a relatively short space of time. The impact of these changes and the constantly changing landscape in which this study took place create additional limitations for the findings of this study. The generalisability of any findings is undermined by the exceptional circumstances in which this study took place. The stilted interaction of online interviews cannot replicate the informal conversation that may have happened face to face and so may have implications for how the interviewees participated and what they said. This study is very much of its time and as such presents a snapshot of a moment in time; a moment that was exceptional but a learnable moment, nonetheless.

4.11 Analysis of research data

4.11.1 Transcription

The data collected from the recorded interviews were transcribed before analysis. Each interview was carried out using an online meeting platform. The platform enables online recording of the interviews, including audio and video capture. For the purposes of this research the audio files only were used for transcription. The audio recordings were uploaded to an online transcription application to run an initial transcription on the data. Each interview was then rechecked by the researcher by running the application and then stopping where any errors of transcription occurred to ensure all data were accurately transcribed. The online application enables key words, names and acronyms to be included in a customised vocabulary which helped to ensure that subject specific and site-specific words were more easily recognised by the application. As each additional transcription was rechecked the added vocabulary enabled further accuracy in the process.

The transcription procedure is an interpretative one (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Poland, 1995, 2001). As "people often talk in run-on sentences…transcribers must make judgement calls during the course of their work about where to begin and end sentences" (Poland, 2001, p. 4). The act of trying to capture the interactive, dialogic, contextualised event that takes place during an interview into words typed on a page requires multiple decisions on the part of the transcriber. As observed by Poland (2001), the transcription process is more accurate when completed by the researcher directly familiar with the context and focus of the research and so this researcher personally undertook the transcription process. Hammersley (2010, pp. 556-557) lists some of the decisions faced by transcribers which include decisions on how much to transcribe; how to represent tonality, pitch, amplitude; whether to include non-word elements such as linguistic fillers (em, eh), laughter or sighs; where to indicate sentences or paragraphs and how to notate silences or pauses. There are multiple conventions used in Conversation Analysis to aid accurate transcription but Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) have the following warning for qualitative researchers: "Standardized transcription conventions aid the handling, comparison and sharing of language data. However, language meanings and processes which are situated in time and space and always negotiated or emergent evade such neat description" (Lapadat &

Lindsay, 1999, p. 70). In keeping with the critical realist ontology of this research, and in an effort to explore the rich description evident in the interviews, the transcription of the recorded interviews aims not only to capture "the words we can hear in written form" but also the "descriptive resources for interpreting them in a much more deliberate fashion for the purposes of social science" (Hammersley, 2010, p. 564).

In order to capture this rich description, while maintaining rigor in the transcription process, the transcriptions include descriptions of the tone, pitch or amplitude of utterances where they are considered pertinent to the analysis; marked pauses in the interview were described as such and linguistic fillers were transcribed in order to obtain as accurate a reflection of the interview as possible. However, as noted by Poland (2001, p. 6), verbatim quotes filled with vocal interruptions and pauses make for difficult reading in any final report and so editing may be necessary, but any editing to aid understanding will only occur after analysis has been completed. One of the challenges to the transcription process was the difficulties faced by the Artificial Intelligence (AI) programme to master dialects and accurately capture the tonal variance or linguistic fillers repeatedly used by some participants. This meant that some transcriptions took significantly more time than others. Another difficulty encountered was the tendency of some participants to speak in sentence fragments. This became particularly apparent when in the transcription process, whereas in the course of the interview it was less obvious that sentences were fragmented as the tonality and pitch of the speech implied where sentences were heading before they veered off on related tangents. This made the coding process more difficult as some elements that were implied by the speaker were cut off by tangential thought and not explicitly uttered.

Once the data were transcribed, they were analysed using Saldana (2016) to guide the process of analysis. As outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2015, p.65) analysis can be described as both an art and a science. The art is in knowing what to pursue and develop and what to let go to maintain a balance between description and conceptualisation; the science is in applying scrutiny to the data to validate interpretations and conceptions. While the six phase thematic analysis model described by Braun and Clarke (2006), has much to offer this research, the methods outlined by Saldana (2016) provide a structure for the rigorous

interrogation of the data which, given the positionality of the researcher, will contribute to the overall rigor of the research.

The transcribed speeches of the participants were divided according to breaks in theme or flow of speech. However, the formatting choices made in dividing sections into paragraphs may be considered part of the initial analysis in that the selection process is a creative one and the researcher decides where one point ends and other begins (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Similar to Braun and Clarke's (2006) first phase of familiarisation with the data, in Saldana the pre-code phase involves an initial and thorough reading of the data. This included circling, highlighting, bolding or underlining along with memos and jottings in the margins which may become the emergent codes for later in the analysis. A full list of emergent codes was kept in a separate codebook. Given the number of interviews and the range of topics covered in the interviews it was considered prudent to use Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) and the NVivo programme was used to organise and track the coding process. The transcripts were uploaded to the CAQDAS programme and grouped according to level of involvement (external, macro, meso, micro).

4.11.2 First coding

As outlined in 3.1.9, Grounded Theory methodological techniques were applied to allow for the development of themes and identification of causal mechanisms relevant to the Critical Realist ontology (Charmaz, 2001, 2017; Fletcher, 2017; Hoddy, 2019). Following Saldana (2013, 2016), in the first stage of coding, the data were coded following an inductive analytical process. Here the data were coded without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame. As coding is the first step from description toward conceptualisation (Charmaz, 2001), the codes used were a combination of In Vivo Coding, Process coding and Holistic coding. The use of In Vivo coding enabled the analysis to stay close to the participants' words in the initial stage and the Process Coding or use of gerunds helped "the researcher to remain specific and not take leaps of fancy" (Charmaz, 2001, p. 11). In the iterative process of coding, the data were given initial codes that described the broad areas of content or used the specific words of the participant. As the coding progressed some codes were less relevant or became more refined as the data were processed (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 560).

After the initial coding, there were 145 separate codes. Some of the codes reflected the focus of the themes in the questions such as 'consensus', 'aims of the curriculum', 'process of development' and 'experience of the review'. Whereas others encompassed a large area of the discussions. These were given holistic codes. The initial holistic codes included broad areas such as 'student voice', 'assessment' and 'impact of 2020'. These holistic codes when then re-examined and subcodes assigned that captured the range of opinions and perspectives in the data (Saldana, 2016, p. 92). As a result, a code such as 'Assessment' which had 148 references from 28 different files was sub-coded and revealed a broad range of 28 subcodes including 'additional points of assessment', 'assessment literacy and capacity', 'continuous assessment', 'exam validity and integrity', 'modes of assessment', 'dominance of final exams', 'lack of change in assessment practices', 'rote learning' and 'school-based assessment'. For the initial code 'Impact of 2020', the resultant subcodes revealed the wide range of impacts felt as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. These 29 subcodes included: 'building new capacities', 'challenges for schools', 'crisis management', 'never waste a good crisis', 'resetting priorities', 'revealing flaws in the system' and 'remote learning'.

In the initial coding some codes developed as 'versus codes' where two concepts were presented as being in opposition to each other (Saldana, 2016, p.137). Some of these codes included: 'fear vs confidence', 'learning outcomes vs examinations', 'local vs national', 'logistical vs educational reasons', 'policy vs. practice', 'representation vs reflection role', 'rhetoric vs. implementation'.

In some areas, disparate discussions began to coalesce under general headings. One such heading was 'Agency'. Under this heading, codes such as 'autonomy for schools', 'autonomy for teachers', 'efficacy of students', 'empowering', 'independent learning' and 'capacity building', were gathered as representative of the concept of agency.

One of the striking aspects of coding the initial data was the prominence of emotive language in relation to the Leaving Certificate. This was coded using emotion coding (Saldana, 2016, p. 125). The codes here were grouped under two main codes: 'LC as trauma' (17 files with 29 references) and 'LC as icon' (21 files with 51 references). Some of these concepts will be examined further in the discussion chapter.

Throughout this phase, the writing of analytic memos was vital in shaping the analysis of the data. These analytic memos were written after each analysis session and contained observations, emerging queries, thoughts on key moments. These memos helped to link the initial analysis stage with the latter categorisation and writing stages of the research (Charmaz 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Concept mapping, mind maps and graphical representations also helped to shape the developing analysis.

Fletcher (2017) describes looking for 'demi-regularities' in the data as in keeping with a Critical Realist approach to analysis. These demi-regularities can be seen as rough trends or broken patterns in the data. Hoddy (2019) describes how axial coding and open coding techniques allowed for the identification of CR demi-regularities in his research. This trend of describing the Leaving Certificate as either traumatic or as iconic beyond criticism can be described as a demi-regularity in the data. This demi-regularity revealed a common cultural belief or value that was present in the data and influential as a causal mechanism.

4.11.3 Values and value coding

But before a description of the values coding can be outlined, clarity on what is meant by the loaded term 'values' would be useful. According to Schwartz (1992) there are eight (and later eleven) motivational types of values. These values are concepts or beliefs that pertain to desirable end states or behaviour, transcend specific situations and guide selection or evaluation of behaviour or events. For Schwartz, motivational factors could be broadly grouped according to values such as self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, spirituality, benevolence and universalism (Schwartz, 1992, p.29). For each of these headings there were further subcategories that included values such as social order, social justice and equality. These factors were mapped by Schwartz using surveys of participants and a broad understanding of motivating impetus was outlined. While understanding the psychological motivating factors for human behaviour is useful, it doesn't reveal the influence of values or beliefs that are held by groups of individuals, engaging as representative members of structures in the process of curriculum development.

Galpin et al. (2022) take the process of participatory values led design to co-create curriculum innovation for undergraduate psychology curriculum with staff and students. This experiment in curriculum co-creation found that values that could be appropriate in one situation could be problematic in the next and that central to the process was a joint sense-making or collective reflection in action to come to a negotiated space. Sejer Iversen et al. (2010) in examining the role of values in participatory design (PD) found that underpinning values were emergent, not necessarily explicit and changed according to context. While focused on the world of product design, these concepts for the use or exploration of values as a key component of the design process with participants has parallels for the development of curriculum policy with education partners. The importance of stakeholder involvement in the co-creation spaces was emphasised in this study but stakeholder involvement alone was not seen as sufficient. In order to be truly participatory, values have to be negotiated and realised through that participation (Sejer Iversen et al., 2010, p. 91).

In the emergent spaces of curriculum policy development, and in light of the review of senior cycle explored in this study, the values explicitly and implicitly expressed by the participants at each of the levels underpin the relational interactions between the stakeholders. Without an explicit naming of the values and negotiation of the spaces where these values intersect, further development of policy or implementation is limited.

In this study there were a number of values that emerged in the conversations with participants. Some values were revealed through the analysis of the discourse around certain topics, the selection or repetition of words or phrases that captured emotive thought or action that revealed an underlying assumption or belief (Krzyzanowski, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

After the initial coding, the use of Values Coding was very useful in trying to reflect the values, attitudes and beliefs of the participants and their perception of the roles they play in the formulation of policy (Saldana, 2016). The entire data set was recoded trying to identify the values (prefaced with a V), attitudes (prefaced with an A) and beliefs (prefaced with a B) as expressed by the participants. This coding resulted in 143 separate codes. These included attitudes such as ‘student centred’, ‘impatience’, ‘happy with predicted

grades', 'deference to higher authority'; beliefs such as 'college is not for everyone' 'LC as a means to an end', 'smart equals points', 'trust in the current system' and 'teacher identity linked to the current system'; and values such as 'time for consultation', 'clarity on roles and responsibilities', ' stability', 'validity' and 'value of education'. A full list of the values coding can be found in Appendix D.

In the values coding carried out on the data, one of the striking themes identified was the strong values and principles espoused by all participants in the research; values and principles that were sometimes shared with other participants, but in some cases, values that clashed with the implicit values of other participants. These clashing values often underpinned the areas where conflict was evident in the policy development space such as assessment and aims of education. These values and principles often underpin the expressed views around the three themes heretofore examined: the purpose and aims of senior cycle, the previous experience of policy and structures and agency.

4.11.4 Second phase of coding

After the first phase of coding, the codes were organised and assembled using code mapping to categorise the initial codes and to serve as an auditing process to query the original codes or subcodes and test the categorisation process (Saldana, 2016, pp. 218-223). The second stage of coding incorporated Pattern Coding and Focused Coding in order to identify developing themes, configuration or explanation (Saldana, 2016). In this stage the most frequent or significant codes were used to develop the most significant categories (Charmaz, 2001) and to explore how the categories and subcategories relate to each other. The focused codes are "more abstract, general and simultaneously analytically incisive than many of the initial codes they subsume" (Charmaz, 2001, p. 12). While the stages are outlined in a linear fashion, the testing of codes and categories for validity and reliability resulted in a more iterative and cyclical process than described above. Similar to Braun and Clarke's (2006) fourth phase: Reviewing Themes, this second stage of coding enabled categories across the entire data set to be reviewed and tested.

This stage of the coding process revealed three themes: the purpose and aims of senior cycle, the influence of previous experience and, structure and agency. Under the first theme, the purpose and aims of senior cycle there were subcategories such as 'assessment', 'beliefs about the current senior cycle', 'what is it all for' and 'improving senior cycle'. Each of these had further subheadings. The category assessment has 28 subheadings including: 'assessment literacy and capacity', 'dominance of final examinations', 'rote learning' and 'moderation'. The breakdown of the categories that formed the themes can be found in Figure 15 below. The full codebook can be found in Appendix E.

Purpose and aims of senior cycle	Assessment
	Beliefs about senior cycle
	Improving senior cycle
	Perceptions of the Leaving Cert
	What is it all for?
Influence of previous experience	Attitudes to curriculum development
	Consensus
	Consultation
	Previous experience
Structure and agency	Agency
	Improving partnership
	Student voice
	Underpinning values and principles
	Whose role is it anyway?

Figure 15 Themes and sub-categories

In the post coding stage when categories had been identified, the underpinning importance of values and principles became more apparent. In applying a critical realist perspective to the codes, the values held by the participants were moulded by their previous experience or social norms and either engendered agency or caused frustration with the system. A critical discourse analysis of some of the key phrases used by multiple participants revealed

some of the underlying influences and power structures that exist in the curriculum development processes in Ireland. This will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

The final stage of this research will be the dissemination of the findings. The better understanding of the process of curriculum development and the forces that influence it would be of importance to policy theorists, policy makers and those who implement the curriculum at school level. In addition to the articulated findings in the published thesis, it would also be relevant to submit papers on the emerging themes for publication in relevant academic journals and to present the findings at conferences.

4.11.5 Examining the Discourse: revealing the influences and impacts

As part of the analysis process, analytical memos were kept taking note of recurring words or phrases that had been used in the course of the interviews. Using CAQDAS queries were run on the frequency of such words across the data set. The use of specific words or phrases revealed an acceptance of key terminology among the participants, such as the use of economic discourse around education (Anderson & Mungal, 2015).

The use of the term 'stakeholder' (157 references) was much more prevalent than the term 'partner' (30 references) across all of the data set. The use of 'stakeholder' was much more common in those participants at the external and macro level of engagement with the policy process. These groups also frequently used words such as 'investment' and 'resources' in their interviews. The documentation around senior cycle has moved from the discourse of 'partnership' to the economic model of 'stakeholders' in education. This is evident in the evolution of language use from the Education Act in 1998 to current documentation as outlined in Figure 16 below.

Year	**Document** **(Publishing body)**	**References to partner/ship**	**References to stakeholders**
1998	Education Act (Government of Ireland)	2	0

2005	Proposals for Senior Cycle (NCCA)	3	1
2009	Senior Cycle Developments (NCCA)	34	1
2011	Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES)	9	1
2015	Framework for Junior Cycle (NCCA/DES)	2	1
2022	Senior Cycle Advisory Report (NCCA)	6	41

Figure 16 References to Stakeholder vs Partner in published documentation in Ireland

This shift in discourse to some extent matches the shift in supranational literature in the same timeframe as seen in Figure 17 below.

Year	**Document (Publishing Body)**	**References to Partner/ship**	**References to Stakeholder**
2001	Citizens as Partners (OECD)	182	69
2018	Eight Futures of Work (WEF)	8	4
2020	Education in Ireland (OECD)	6	171

Figure 17 References to Stakeholder vs Partnership in supranational documentation

While the participants in their discussions on the influences on the curriculum policy development space placed very little emphasis on the importance of global socio-economic forces, the prevalence of the language of economics used, particularly in the macro and external levels as seen in the increased use of the word 'stakeholder' to denote partners in education, reveals the pervasive influence of global discourses that view education as an economic commodity. In this discourse, education is 'resourced' and 'invested' in, the partners in education, including the students, are seen as 'stakeholders' and the result of the education they obtain can be valued in measurable outcomes. The difficulty with this discourse is that it clashes with the explicit values expressed by the participants.

Values such as 'fairness', 'equity' and 'trust' have very little place in a market-led economy. The clash between these values and the experiences in senior cycle are felt physically. The language used to describe senior cycle and the process of policy development was viscerally graphic. Words such as 'scarred', 'bruised', 'pain', 'anxiety', 'stress', 'abuse', occurred across the data set. References to stress and anxiety were more dominantly expressed in the micro level by students and parents. But there was also a surprising number of references to the physical impact of the clashes felt in the policy development arena with some referring to feeling 'scarred' and 'bruised' as a result of the disputes over junior cycle reform. This was an interesting reminder that the actors in this field are physical beings. The stratified ontology underpinning this work recognises the layers of human experience in the real, actual and empirical realm. But the impact on the physical plane of existence experienced by all of those involved cannot be underestimated.

The importance of language as socially constructed was understood by many of the participants in this study. Some referenced the importance of a shared understanding of a word or concept, particularly in the area of assessment. The most problematic, and most often referenced phrase, was 'continuous assessment'. Perceptions of what that word means echoed the conversation on the word 'inconceivable' in the film *The Princess Bride* (Reiner, 1987), when Inigo Montoya stops Vissini who keeps saying the word to remark "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means". What people perceived as continuous assessment ranged from weekly spelling tests, to submitting items for summative assessment regularly over the course of the senior cycle programme. For some their conception of the phrase was based on their own experience in college or in the classroom, but for the teachers involved, they referenced their experience of the calculated grades in 2020 and what they expected to happen in 2021. In contrast to the rhetoric around opposition to school-based assessment on the grounds of advocacy for students prevalent in the union discourse, the teachers here expressed greater satisfaction with the process than the traditional examination structure and had a greater sense of what a form of continuous assessment could look like than they had while participating in the review. The impact of this changing socially constructed meaning on the wider teaching body would be interesting to study as there is evidence here of a widening gap between shared understandings of the union representatives and those teaching in classrooms.

Despite the rhetoric that teachers don't want to be involved in assessing their students for summative means, the fact is that over the past two years, they have. For some it was a stressful and frustrating experience, but for others, it revealed a different way of recognising the broad learning of their students, and regardless of rhetoric, that learning cannot be undone.

4.12 Conclusion

The outlined research design takes a qualitative approach to the research question by utilising a vertical case study to explore the process of curriculum development in this context. The participants at the four different levels of participation, external, macro, meso and micro, have different considerations due to the level of participation and the influence of other external roles. The analysis of the data gathered was to ascertain the factors that influence the development process and to better understand the processes at work. The themes and the relevant findings are discussed in the next chapters.

5. Findings and Initial Discussion: External Group of Participants

5.1 Introduction

The four groupings of participants in this study refer broadly to their level of involvement with the Senior Cycle Review. Those who were not directly involved in the review and who were added after the initial research planning to add a triangulation of voices heard, are referred to as the "External level". The other groupings of participants were involved at the higher policy level (Macro), at the sub-structure policy level and school leadership level (Meso level) and in the schools as teachers, parents and students (Micro level). Accepting that no words are devoid of value judgements, the word 'level' as used in this context does not imply a higher status of participant but tries to give an indication of the spectrum of experience from exclusively policy level to exclusively school level. As outlined in Chapter 4, the nature of the multiple roles held by the participants also means that some participants had roles that crossed the boundaries of these groupings but are so grouped to aid the analysis. The levels assigned form part of the vertical case study design as outlined by Bartlett and Vavrus (2009).

In structuring the interviews for the various groupings of participants in this study, the initial questions were designed to elicit broad responses that enabled the participants to relax and place themselves within the policy development context by telling their story and the answers that emerged shaped the structure of the interviews. In the analysis of the interviews one of the key concerns was the wide-ranging nature of the conversations that took place in the study. While the policy level experience of the participants influenced the contextualising narrative, many of the participants began with the history of their involvement in education including their own initial experiences of the Leaving Certificate and the experiences of their immediate family. These personal anecdotes often revealed deeply held beliefs and attitudes about the purpose and aims of senior cycle education. In the values coding carried out on the transcripts, one of the recurring themes that emerged was a conflict between these beliefs and values, and other influencing factors on the policy development process such as political will, pragmatism and societal expectations. From a Critical Realist perspective this revealed the influence of the past, the life histories and professional histories of the iterational domain described by (Biesta et al., 2015), on the

creation of the cultural forms (ideas, beliefs, values and discourse) and structural forms (social structures, relationships, roles, power and trust) of the practical-evaluative domain where agency (or lack of agency) was experienced. As outlined in Chapter 3, the use of analytical dualism (Archer, 1998; Priestley & Miller, 2012) enables the analysis of aspects of the real domain through the disentanglement of aspects of social reality from the social situation being examined in order to determine the relative causal weight of the those aspects. In this instance, an examination of the real domain reveals the influence of cultural structures and cultural forms such as beliefs, ideas and values on the actions, interactions and relationships of the actors involved in the policy sphere.

Often the macro level concerns drown out the concerns expressed by participants at the other levels (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009). While a thematic structuring of the findings was possible, in order to ensure that this macro dominance does not happen and that the integrity of all voices in the discussions is maintained, the different levels of involvement (external, macro, meso and micro) will be used to delineate the findings under each theme. The rich descriptions offered by the participants were such that every theme identified in the data could not be meaningfully analysed and discussed in this report and so, the most dominant themes have been focused on in detail.

5.1.1 Themes and a Critical Realist perspective

The first theme that will be outlined below is the purpose of senior cycle education. It may seem an obvious starting point, and one that may not offer much by way of analysis, but the disparity and conflicting philosophies that emerged in analysing this theme made it of central importance when looking at the underpinning values and principles revealed by the participants. The critical realist ontology underpinning this research looks at how structures and agency are revealed by examining their interplay over time (Archer, 1985) and the application of analytical dualism outlined in Chapter 3, allows for the examination of the role played by aspects of social reality such as beliefs, values and ideas in complex social situations. In analysing the stated purpose of this stage of education, it became obvious that it is not universally agreed, but also can cause fundamental difficulties in the development space if differing values and principles are not acknowledged and owned by the participants and stakeholders involved.

The second theme is the influence of past experience of policy development. This was called the 'archaeology of policy development' by one of the interview participants. The analysis of this theme would suggest that the previous experiences of individuals, groups and representatives on decision-making bodies has a cumulative impact on the process of policy development. Therefore, I propose that any efforts to understand how the policy development process works must be cognisant of the past experiences of those involved. The influence of past histories and professional histories (the iterational space) has an influence on the visions for the future (the projective space) and so on the agentic response of the actor.

The third theme to be outlined can be best described by the terms 'structure' and 'agency'. The ability and capacity of individuals to act can be defined as agency, and structure can be defined as those forces that can help of hinder such actions. In terms of the policy development process, the importance of the roles played by individuals and organisations in the development of policy and the clarity, or lack of clarity, around those roles and responsibilities was one of the emerging themes in the research. From a Critical Realist perspective, structure and agency directly relate to Archer's conception of morphogenesis and morphostasis (Archer, 1995). An examination of this theme revealed some of the causal mechanisms that engenders change (morphogenesis), or resists change (morphostasis) in this policy development space.

Each of these three major themes was explored under the levels of involvement headings: external, macro, meso and micro level participants. The number of participants in this study and the grounded theory methodology used means that a statistical representation of the level of agreement with the themes explored would be counter intuitive and undermine the integrity of the research. Instead, the voices of the participants are used to give detailed rich description and depth to the analysis. The implications of the analysis and discussion of these themes using the lens of a critical realist ontology will be explored in Chapter 7. Given the volume of findings discussed, this chapter will deal exclusively with the external group of participants and Chapter 6 will discuss the findings of the other three groups.

The participants grouped under the heading 'External level' were not directly involved in the review of senior cycle 2017-2019. They were all experts in the area of curriculum development through their involvement in academia both in Ireland and internationally, or their involvement in politics. Some participants had also been involved in education agencies earlier in their careers and so had some additional insight into the processes discussed. The level of familiarity with the senior cycle and the Leaving Certificate varied and so many of the insights in this grouping were, by necessity, on a more philosophical level than some of the participants in other groups. As detailed in Chapter 4, there were seven participants at this level and the full description of participants can be found in Appendix F.

5.2 Theme 1: The purpose and aims of senior cycle

Many of the respondents at this level used the initial questions to give lengthy expositions of what they felt was important at this level of education. As expected, the international academics acknowledged that they were not overly familiar with the specifics of Ireland's senior cycle but recognised that there are universal difficulties at this level of education as it is the threshold between school and the next stage of education, whether that is further education, vocational training or the world of work. As pointed out by one international academic:

> …curriculum change is messy everywhere, but in upper secondary, perhaps the most, because it's at the friction, the thresholds of two different domains, it's a major break to the rest of your life, you might say, and there's so many people have an interest in it. And most importantly, the schools, the students and parents, of course, the schools, the higher education institutes but also the world of work, especially for the vocational education. (Participant 23, international academic).

5.2.1 Broad curricular aims

What is expected at that threshold between "two different domains" appears to differ. In this group of participants, personal development, a good grounding in a broad education, an ability to take on life-long learning, and, equipping students with the skills to succeed after school were referenced as the key purposes of this stage of education. This thinking was well summed up by participant 24.

> …the aims of the curriculum, which is, you know, let's face it, is empowered agentic young people who can engage critically with the world we live in and actually be a force for change in that world for the better, ultimately. And that means having the knowledge and understanding of that world, not just a superficial knowledge so that there, they become prey to the latest populist politician, the Donald Trumps of this world. (Participant 24, international academic)

However, for one of the participants there were wider concerns and issues that influenced decision-making beyond a concern with education interests:

> …there's not only the influences of the education interests, but you have the economic pressures as well, I mean you're just as likely to have Microsoft sitting in your office, as you are having the INTO or the ASTI you know, you're just likely to have an invitation from the Chamber of Commerce, asking you to speak about preparing young people for future jobs that don't exist yet. (Participant 29, Politician).

5.2.2 Progression to third level

For those with specific knowledge of the Irish system, one of the criticisms of the system is that it "has been entirely colonised over the last 40 years, by the selection mechanism, points, entry to college and so on. All other educational considerations have been sort of swept aside by that" (Participant 27, Irish academic). Participant 27 was very clear on the historical reasons why this is the case. Political decisions on education, particularly the introduction of free secondary education, had a generational impact and ensured that education was seen as the route out of poverty.

> …I think that there has historically been huge, high regard for education in the Irish population,… it has traditionally been seen as the route to freedom to liberation, out of poverty,… you can map it physically on the Irish population, you know, how through education and through educational achievement…people have, families have grown from poverty into maybe not affluence, but a certain level of standard of living. So, education has always been seen as that ladder out of poverty. And free education, when introduced in the 1960s has been rightly identified as being you know, a landmark change, not just in education, but in Irish life. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

Senior cycle in general, and the Leaving Certificate in particular, arguably can be seen as the victim of its own success. The universal route through education, has become a universal route into third level without much questioning as to why, or if that route is the

best route for all. Some participants at this level referenced the early work of the NCCA and the Department of Education and how the vocational sector was explicitly omitted from their remit:

> …our brief wasn't to include vocational or technical education. But back in the day and then in the 80s, that was seen to be to be outside our remit. And we were we were developing a policy that …would have had a much more inclusive program, not just an academic Leaving cert. But trying to get vocational or technical education involved...was seen to be ... ANCO as it then was FAS as it became, that was their role, and it was funded separately. And we were told "hands off it" by the Department of Education, ironically enough, so you're starting from that base where the accepted wisdom was that the Leaving Cert was and should remain an academic, nobody used the term elitist, but that's essentially what it was it was… for those of an academic elitist orientation. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

This explicit decision to omit the vocational sector from an integrated senior cycle was seen by this participant as significant. The segregation between vocational education as the remit of bodies external to the Department of Education, and the Leaving Certificate and an academic pathway as the sole preserve of the Department and related agencies perpetuated a divided system and stratified status of the qualifications as a result. This was seen by one participant as having implications for today's students:

> I think that that [absence of vocational education] is definitely a problem. And I think we're all responsible for driving people into higher education. You know, we're always constantly talking about upping the numbers and increasing the numbers and all of that so then, we are guilty, actually, of undermining it. Now. It wasn't helped by the recession. In fact, vocational training wasn't as needed, then, but it certainly is now. So, it has lost status. Now, but we need to bring back the status. (Participant 29, Politician)

This perspective on the problematic absence of a vocational pathway through senior cycle was shared by participants in the other groupings and revealed a common view of the limited pathways available for students in senior cycle.

5.2.3 Assessment

If the aims and purpose of senior cycle are seen as inextricably linked to progression to third level, then the route and access to that progression are exclusively seen through the assessments offered in the Leaving Certificate examinations. The volume of references to assessment and assessment practices by all participants was testament to the dominant

role they play not only in this stage of education but also in Irish society (148 references across all 29 interviews). For those familiar with the Irish senior cycle, the impact of assessment was seen as problematic.

> …This enormous weight dominance of the final examinations, and the extent to which it dominates. Basically, the exam programme becomes the curriculum itself (Participant 23, international academic).

> …assessment wag dog.... You know, there are issues, there are issues around assessment. (Participant 26, Irish academic)

For the participants in this external grouping, one of the queries that emerged was questioning the validity of the examination system. For international academics, there were several references to international competency frameworks and the difficulties associated with designing valid assessments to capture the skills and competencies of students:

> The problem is that oftentimes, also because you want to do it centrally, and large scale and sort of objectively whatever the tendency is that what you what's actually examined, is not such a valid representation, which people actually mind as long as it if it's within subjects and, and that was a bit more emphasis on reproduction. Then you can do you do your multiple-choice tests or even your essay questions, and then but that's already lots of work then. But there are also other, sometimes more higher order skills, or things that you cannot specifically catch within a single subject, more interdisciplinary stuff, or goes over across different subjects. That is very difficult to examine then in a central way. (Participant 23, international academic)

The context of the interviews, in the midst of a global pandemic when large scale assessment of students had been cancelled for 2020 and plans for 2021 were in the process of finalisation, meant that these considerations were often referenced by the participants when commenting on the assessment system. In particular the ability of an assessment system to adapt when under pressure was referenced as an example of what could be possible for assessment.

> …we could have the English... all the essays for all languages, they could all be written in the classroom under teacher supervision, and to send it off to the SEC. There's a whole range of things that could be done, that won't dramatic... even this year, they could be done, they won't dramatically... they will fit with the expectations by and large of students. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

The discussions on assessment frequently returned to a perceived dichotomy between externally assessed examinations and teacher-based assessments. For some participants, a combination of both was seen as a way forward in achieving validity across a variety of assessment modes. As would be expected of this group of participants, many with careers in academia, there was some theoretical reasoning on the assessment processes and the validity and reliability of those processes.

> …but there's some evidence to show that actually the exam isn't a particularly valid indicator of future success, but measures a particular thing. Now, I'm not saying we should get rid of exams, but what I'm saying is that we should develop assessments. And teachers are often in a good position to do that in their own schools, because they know their students well, they know their work, which are more predictive not only of whether they'll do well on a set day in the exam hall, but actually wherever they're... they're, they actually understand the stuff, whether they have developed educationally as a result of the programme they've been exposed to. (Participant 24, international academic)

But the positive view of 'teacher assessment' expressed above was not universally held. For one participant, the idea of 'teacher assessment' was abhorrent.

> …I mean, I hate the idea of teacher assessments. Absolutely. Hate it, you know, and, and what will happen is the, exactly the system, Leaving Cert central, will lose credibility. Because the country's just too small. (Participant 29, Politician)

One of the recurring themes that emerged in the course of the interviews was the importance of language, in particular, a shared language and understanding of what we mean by key terms. From a Critical Realist perspective, this focus on language as a shared understanding and part of a cultural form was recognised as part of the social reality of the participants. Assessment in its many forms: external assessment, teacher-based assessment, continuous assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, is one of the areas most discussed by participants, but the language and shared understandings of the terms used was most problematic. It was obvious that for certain groups of people these terms had slightly different meanings and connotations and so the cultural forms were not always shared by all. For the group of participants in this external category, mainly working in the academic environment, there was a shared understanding of what was meant by school-based or teacher-based assessment but differing views as to what its place should be in senior cycle in Ireland. The shifting context, as plans for a second year

of accredited grades based on teacher judgements were finalised, may have influenced some of the discussions on these areas. These issues of shared understandings of language use also emerged with the participants at other levels and this discourse will be further examined in the discussion section.

It is not the aim of this research to come to a conclusion on the best methods of assessment for senior cycle, nevertheless, it can be noted that some of the underpinning beliefs around assessment seem to have an influence on the progress and implementation of any policy changes at senior cycle and so must form some part of the discussion. For the participants in this external grouping there was some agreement that in order to recognise and value, and ultimately accredit, the broad range of learning of students as they leave upper secondary education and transition to the next stage of their learning journey, more than a singular assessment event was optimal. How the assessment events should be organised, what learning should be assessed, how that learning should be assessed and by whom were often the subject of speculation. At this level of participant more than any other, the speculation was seen as hypothetical. For other groups of participants, somewhat closer to the coalface of the Leaving Certificate, the theorising was less prevalent as more concrete concerns took to the fore.

For some in this external grouping, having additional assessment components was seen as being enough as long as they remained externally assessed.

> …I mean, the idea of having a larger number of components of an exam, Right? like the oral… like the project in history, like the project in geography, like the practical, whatever. That you know, all of those I think are essential elements. But it's to make sure that they're given proper recognition and that they are objectively assessed and independently assessed? (Participant 29, Politician)

In Ireland, as the Leaving Certificate Established (excluding LCA or LCVP) has always been externally assessed, there is an implicit understanding that it must remain so and is the best and most appropriate way of assessing student learning.

> …but the big question now is: no minister has said there won't be an externally assessed Leaving cert, nobody has said that. So, we have to take it and the... The Irish people certainly want an externally assessed Leaving certificate examination of some kind of ...well

> assessment using that word, an externally assessed one, not a school based assessed one. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

The key reason for this belief stated by participants was its implied objectivity or fairness. Many commented on the fair and objective approach to assessment evident in the Leaving Certificate, while others questioned this assumption.

> I'm a very big fan to this day of the anonymity, objectivity of the Leaving cert right. And the way in which I often said it at the time, it didn't matter whether you're in a vocational school in Donegal or single sex schools in Kerry or a co-ed school in Dublin, it was the same exam. And the same criteria have been set for everybody. And for a country as small as Ireland, that is hugely important, right? (Participant 29, Politician)

> …I understand it like this tendency, you know, to say, Well, whatever about the Leaving cert. It's fair. And it's objective. Yeah, I don't know is it either. I mean, because if you don't have defined standards, not sure how the hell you can call it objective. (Participant 28, Irish academic)

For others external to the Irish education system, this belief in external assessment as the only valid means of assessment was not evident and other options are seen as possible. But, even where teacher-based assessment is the norm, there are caveats:

> …teacher assessment is problematic, it has to be brought in with suitable safeguards, it's not something you can just hand over to teachers and say, "Get on with it, folks", there are reliable reliability issues, issues of bias conscious or otherwise, or unconscious bias. There are issues of workload, particularly if moderation systems are over bureaucratic, which they often tend to be. But then that needs to be set against the, the sort of narrow and quite baleful influence, I think of exams in the way that they frame teaching and learning so that it becomes a very much a test-driven approach. (Participant 24, international academic)

One of the interesting facets of the discussion is the obvious difference that exists in vocational education. In vocational education, competency-based assessment tends to be the accepted norm. In this type of assessment teacher judgement forms the basis for ascertaining that evidence of competency has been met.

> …and I'd been used to competency-based assessments through vocational education in England. And it was very much based around portfolios and finding evidence to show you meet the standard. (Participant 24, international academic)

Ireland has no specific vocational pathway through upper secondary and the LCA programme is described as a 'pre-vocational programme'(Department of Education, 1995). However, in the development of the LCA, teacher assessment was an intrinsic aspect of the programme, in direct contrast to the rest of the Leaving Certificate programmes. Two of the participants in this study were involved in the development of the LCA programme and, when discussing how the programme managed to have teacher-based assessment when none is seen as possible in the rest of senior cycle, the response gives an insight into the 'status quo' and values implicit in the assessment structures in place in Ireland.

> Why did it slip it under the radar? Well, the main reason is this. I think maybe this is cynical, again, that nobody cared too much. These children aren't particularly important (Participant 28, Irish academic)

These key areas of broad curricular aims, the progression of students and the key role of assessment in that progression, formed the basis of the purpose and aims of senior cycle in the discussions with participants in this external grouping. The opinions expressed, despite the differences in backgrounds of the participants, revealed a common perspective on the aims of senior cycle being broader than just an academic pathway into university. This common belief revealed a shared cultural value in this group that was echoed in the other groups of participants. The limitations of assessment practices and absence of a vocational pathway were agreed by most of these participants, but the discussions lacked agreement on how these limitations should be overcome.

5.3 Theme 2: Previous experience of reform

At this external level of participant, experience in the processes of reform varied. For some participants understanding reform processes has been a continuing academic endeavour, for others, professional academic career has followed direct involvement in the processes of curriculum development. For some others the experience of reform has been political, either directly involved or reporting on processes of curricular policymaking by governments or international agencies. As such, the reflections of the group on this theme must be considered in this light and rather different than the reflections of those who are currently in the throes of the process.

5.3.1 Complexity and lack of change

Most of the participants at this level commented on the complexity of curriculum and policy developments. The wealth of experience over a significant period of time meant that most of these participants had been involved and commented on curricular developments over several political administrations, and many, over several jurisdictions. The common consensus that emerged was that this area is contextual and complex.

> It's a quite interesting one actually...it teaches me a lot again, all day. At the same time, also sometimes confusing it because sometimes you think, oh, yeah, I get it, I understand what's happening there. And you get more and more information and there comes a moment you don't understand at all anymore …what's happening. And perhaps that's a bit illustrative sometimes for the curriculum domain. It's such a complicated field, that there are so many factors and actors and tensions and ambiguities in it, it's always messy. (Participant 23, international academic)

Despite its complexity, one aspect of the curriculum development process that most agreed on was that it was highly political.

> …and the attitude of the citizens does make it political I mean; curriculum is a political issue. It's always a political issue, and always has been whether we like it or not. … If you go back to Plato, or Aristotle, you know, it is the decision of government, what should be taught, I mean, that is simply reality, especially what is to be taught in publicly funded education (Participant 25, Irish academic)

But even though the process of curricular development was admittedly complex and political, one of the issues that emerged when discussing the Irish context was despite many changes in government and policy, very little has actually seemed to change.

> …That is exactly it, is there's a cycle going over and over and nothing ever changes. But at least we never did anything dramatically wrong. I suppose. That's all you can say (Participant 25, Irish academic).

This stasis in the system, resulting in very little by way of curricular change since the introduction of the Leaving Certificate in 1924, in light of the discussions with these participants, may be as a result of the methods used for the processes of development.

5.3.2 Consultation and consensus

One of the features of the Irish system of curricular development over the past 30 years has been the focus on consultation and the development of consensus. Attitudes towards consultation in this group of participants varied from positive to cynical, but the recurring commentary was on the difficulties that emerge from consulting widely. Quite often, the result of wide-ranging consultation was seen by the participants as resulting in a mix of ideas that are not coherent for policy development. For instance, as outlined by one participant:

> There is, of course, also sort of limitation, because all those deliberations consultations, they, first of all, they do not always… it remains difficult to get what's a workable compromise. And basically, it's a lot of talking, but a lot of talking doesn't create a curriculum. So actually, … you need also people to do the design work. And all this partnerships, about what should we do with course, it does not automatically result in the sound design (Participant 23, international academic).

Participants frequently commented that in trying to achieve consensus on curricular matters, quite often compromise was achieved at the expense of innovation. Participants mentioned aspects of reform devised for educationally sound reasons being sacrificed in order to achieve implementation. This in turn raised questions as to the purpose and efficacy of the consultation process.

> …to me that the real danger in the, in the very ground up empirical and consensus type model is that, you know, you have to be careful about lowest common denominator answers coming out of it. And so, it's about to me is, it's an issue of balance. (Participant 28, Irish academic)

This layered view of consultation and distrust of consensus was echoed across the other levels of participants where consultation was seen as a cynical exercise and consensus was viewed as contributing to the stasis in the system.

5.3.3 Influence of previous events

Due to the high profile and elite positions held by some of the participants in the research, one of the striking features was the fact that those who had been involved in policy development prior to the current review, were still influenced by the impact of prior

events. Many talked about previous experiences of trying to implement change in curricular policy and the impact the experience had on their views of what is possible for curricular reform in Ireland.

> …so, when we went back to the Minister, we put it to him, we said to him, this is a proposal that is, you know, it exists in other countries, Holland at the time the Netherlands had that approach… but it...we don't think it will get buy in in Ireland. And we didn't, therefore, recommend it, so we didn't put a recommendation to him. That was not going to run politically. Now, you could argue we maybe we should have done, but we didn't, because we felt there's no point, we knew it would be turned down. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

> …whereas, you know, the Minister kind of started dissing the Senior Cycle stuff she was she did an interview from China, I think. Eh she was out on a visit was it to.... So, she was somewhere foreign. And she was being interviewed by the Irish Times about these proposals, and she dissed them from a distance. And that was we never, we never recovered from that. And wasn't her fault. It's our job to bring the politicians with us. Now that… that's the learning from then. (Participant 26, Irish academic).

For many participants at this and other levels, the emotive language used to describe how they 'never recovered' from the experiences before, is striking. The impact of these experiences goes deeper than reflections on professional decision-making. These hurts are significantly felt and echo through the decision making today. This reflection on the humanity of the participants as individual actors in social situations speaks to the relational aspects of social forms that have an influence on the social world of partnership.

5.4 Theme 3: Structure and Agency

In looking at the system and processes of curricular development in Ireland and abroad, many of the participants at this external level referenced concepts that relate to agency and structure. To be an agentic being, one must be able to carry out an action independently. Many of the discussions about the processes in place around policy development referenced the structures in place to facilitate those processes. Quite often there was a perceived conflict between the agency required and the structures in place or lack of clarity about the structures in place.

5.4.1 Agency

In the processes of curriculum development many participants spoke of the autonomy of schools and teachers or lack thereof. For the international academics, school autonomy to develop curricular materials was seen as an essential, if not an unproblematic aspect of their systems.

> In the Netherlands, we come from tradition, where there is a lot of autonomy for schools, and I even tend to say there well: Because the...how you structure the curriculum, with comes also close to the methods of pedagogy, of course, and definitely in pedagogy in the Netherlands, the inclination is... Well, let's not decide on that too much on the central level, because we will never have any kind of agreement on that, and perhaps is good, there is some variety in schools, and that they can have their own preferences and variants. (Participant 23, international academic)

For those more familiar with the Irish context, there were examples of agentic schools who worked with autonomy to develop responsive programmes for their students, but these tended to be on the periphery of mainstream.

> …we were looking at programmes of study in Senior Cycle where we took some of the innovations around where schools were able to develop their own Senior Cycle experience and integrated vocational qualifications and did and really looked at Senior Cycle in a different way. And I've heard principals of some of those schools talk about how ground-breaking that was for them to be able to break the rules, and offer kind of college experiences within the Senior Cycle. And I'm disappointed that it didn't really gain the traction it might have. (Participant 26, Irish academic)

Many of those involved in the area of curriculum development referenced their own experiences in schools and working with students on the periphery of society. The reasons for innovations in these areas was summed up by one participant:

> …I often think when I look at various curriculum development initiatives, such as the humanities in the Dublin and the various other Shannon initiatives, as well as the sort of any port in a storm syndrome, where when clearly the traditional approaches and syllabuses and whatever are not working. And you want to keep children in school, you know? (Participant 28, Irish academic)

Involvement in these disparate projects was seen as building capacity for curriculum development among the teachers involved. In the more centralised system in place today, the absence of a middle ground or a meso structure to develop curriculum programmes

directly with schools and teachers was seen by the participants as a missing step for the system in Ireland. Some participants identified the developing structure in ETBI as something that could offer some scope in capacity building.

> There should be support given at local level through ETBs would be the natural agency, but there would be... not necessarily those... the capacity to foster local initiatives where groups of schools and teachers could come together and, and develop programmes within a national framework, but not shaped and defined by the National framework. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

For participants at this external level then, agency was seen as linked to autonomy but for those familiar with the Irish context they felt that the system was lacking meso level structures to facilitate and develop that agency. Some hope was shown for the emerging structures in the ETB sector, but very little commentary was offered on schools outside that sector.

5.4.2 Structures

While developing capacity in schools for local curriculum development was identified by participants as one issue, another was the structures in place for the development of curriculum policy on a national scale. The evolution of the structures in place to develop curriculum policy have been outlined in Chapter 2, but the implications of these structures were commented on by all of the participants at this external level familiar with the Irish context. Who was involved, who should be involved, the roles and responsibilities of those involved and the lack of clarity of those roles, were all raised as discussion points.

5.4.3 Who is involved? Who should be?

The evolution of policy development from the dark, inner workings of the Department of Education to the partnership approach of committees and councils favoured today was outlined in Chapter 2. For those at the external level, most were in favour of the more transparent partnership approach at work today but who exactly are considered the 'partners' is a more problematic issue.

> I think partnership is important. I've always been a supporter of partnership…I came in on curriculum development, when it was moving away from being solely determined by the

> department inspectors, when the first curriculum examinations board, as you know, that's what was happening. It was being taken out of the hands of the inspectorate… But the debate at that time was, should it be only stakeholders and should only be recognised stakeholders, if you like, the department at that stage had, and still has, a list of whom they regard as stakeholders? Or... Should there also be an expert voice? And that has been... that was a big debate back in the 1970s and 80s? Who exactly are stakeholders? I mean, the fact that you're interviewing me today, now is great, because I think of myself as an expert, but I'm no longer a stakeholder. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

The use of the term 'stakeholders' to denote the 'partners' is an interesting shift in discourse outlined in Chapter 4 and will be further discussed in Chapter 7. The 'stakeholders' on that original list was seen by some of the participants as problematic, as they are not necessarily seen as the most appropriate representatives for particular sectors.

> …Higher Education is represented on the NCCA by a union, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, like that's insane, you know, and, and, and not even the biggest union in the third level space, a tiny little one. And which is kind of the oddest thing, you know, when you look, look, it's such a throwback to, to old days of social partnerships. (Participant 26, Irish academic)

The advantage of partnership or stakeholder engagement stated by participants is 'buy in' for any changes made but the difficulty with a list of recognised stakeholders, established with the Education Act (1998) is that it does not tend to lend itself to alternative voices being heard, but does lend a stabilising influence.

> …the strengths are stakeholder buy in, you know, you hear you get a range of voices around the table, although I'd argue that you don't, …participating as a stakeholder is very much a, you don't get alternative voices, but it but.... But you do get stakeholder buy in, it does stop the system going into hyperactivity, you know, because it can act … as a stabilising force (Participant 26, Irish academic).

One of the 'alternative voices' referenced above, not present in the formal structures of the NCCA Boards and Council is that of the students. Again, given the context of the interviews, the issue of student involvement in the negotiations on the Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021 was raised as an example of student involvement in policy and its absence in formal structures was noted. However, while most welcomed the involvement of students, many offered caveats to that involvement. This was mainly around the level

of involvement of students and the limitations on what they could offer to national policy making.

> So when you're talking about student voice, it's ...the student voice is most effective, and really only valid in the ultimate sense...and it is constant are and present through the engagement all the time, which can only happen at school level or at local level where kids are talking about what they're doing now, what they'll be doing next week, having that sort of input into the programmes that they're teaching and learning, not just an input into a group sitting around the table drawing up the program for Leaving Cert biology, Junior Cert art, whatever (Participant 27, Irish academic)

> …children can only tell you what they know, from their experience at the end of it and young people and again, you know, that shouldn't usurp expertise, but expertise should be guided by knowledge of how young people experience the curriculum I think. (Participant 24, international academic)

For participants at this external level, the consensus was that student participation was right and just but that it should not come at the expense of expertise, and, that it was probably more effective and useful at a local level where it can be sustained.

5.4.4 Roles and responsibilities

In a system that has evolved from a very centralised policy-making system to a more transparent partnership approach, one of the difficulties identified by participants was knowing who held what role, how that was to be communicated, and where specific responsibilities lay. The evolution from "where things were prior to the establishment of the CEB and the NCCA, when, you know, this was a black box, essentially, and Marlborough Street, you know, decided everything." (Participant 28, Irish academic), to where things now stand was not an easy transition. In the early days of evolution out of the shadows of the department, there were 'turf wars' as to who or what department or agency was involved in specific decision making.

> Back in our, in our time, we had a very uneasy relationship with the Department of Education in the early days, you know, it was it was turf wars all the time. And one clear, one clear and absolute line that was drawn back in those days was we had, we were not to be involved in development with schools. The inspectorate of the Department of Education, that was the official state point of engagement. And then there were curriculum development agencies in Dublin, and in Shannon and a few other places who could involve

> themselves with schools, but we couldn't, our only involvement was with teacher reps and school principals, and so on and so on at that formal level. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

In the evolving education landscape in Ireland, the emergence of the NCCA in the role of offering advice to the Minister on curriculum and assessment was muddied somewhat by the establishment of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in 2003. While NCCA is still responsible for assessment, the SEC oversee examinations. The division between those two roles does not seem to be absolutely clear.

> …I looked up the original legislation setting up the NCCA. And I have it here. And it's unambiguous. It is the responsibility because people have said to me, is it not the responsibility of the state examinations commission to advise on assessment? It's not. Under the legislation is the NCCA, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, it is the NCCA's responsibility to advise the minister on curriculum and assessment. And I, my concern is that that's fallen somewhere, somebody has forgotten that, and that the assessment is getting lost. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

The separation of the examination and assessment was not the original intention in the setting up of the NCCA in 1987 and later as outlined in the Education Act (1998). Even at the time this separation was viewed negatively:

> …I felt, as did most observers at the time, that removing the examination function from the NCCA, as it had become, and having the NCCA as a purely advisory body, which it was then, it wasn't statutory, was a major blow and a defeat for us. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

However, in retrospect, this same participant now feels that this separation was probably for the best:

> …but it's logistically and technically it was, it was such a big operation that we were simply in no position to do it. So ironically, I think if we had succeeded in attaining that responsibility, I think it would have stymied certainly would have held back much of the curriculum, processed through the 90s I don't think we would have been able to do it. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

Nevertheless, the relationship between the three bodies (the NCCA, the SEC and the parent body of the Department of Education) has been viewed as troublesome by the participants, “that vexed question of the relationship between a statutory but advisory curriculum body and a statutory powerful state exams commission” (Participant 28, Irish academic). Even

those within the inner workings of the department have difficulty defining the separation of powers.

> …the NCCA was set up and the HEA [Higher Education Authority] was set up. And certainly, my view and the view of the department, that both of them operated as independent entities... So, it's not so much personal relations, as in the relationship between an outside body, which is a little bit at arm's length, and the actual department itself? (Participant 29, Politician)

When asked later on about how relationships between the three bodies worked, the same participant said:

> …I would say not well, because there were all too separate, okay, really, you know, the exams were such an independent body. And nobody minded that that one being independent, right? Because it has to be, particularly, it has to be independent of a political process. But the fact that they were all independent of the department, they were also independent of each other. (Participant 29, Politician)

The description of the NCCA as an organisation "which is a little bit at arm's length" from the department, and yet fully funded by the department appeared to be the cause of some concern for one participant.

> …and even though they were fully funded by the Department, and everything they did was supported by the department would have to be implemented by the department the whole lot. They had their own ...I think both of them [the NCCA and HEA] had their own logos, their own backdrops their own everything and sorry it wasn't! This was the government of Ireland; this was the Department of Education! (Participant 29, Politician)

Participants at other levels in the research echoed the comments on the differing definitions of roles held by the Department, the SEC, the NCCA and other stakeholders, in particular, the difficulty of being a representative structure but under the aegis of the Department of Education. The dominant role of the Department in the curriculum processes was outlined by one participant:

> …but the NCCA you know... doesn't, they're not separate. They're not separate. They're at arm's length, just to for, really management purposes and that, but really at the end of the day, it's up to the government and the minister to actually implement. (Participant 29, Politician)

The description of the NCCA as only separate "for management purposes" outlined above, and its comparison to the HEA, seems to ignore the very different representative structure of the NCCA. The National Council as a representative structure contains the voices of disparate stakeholders including unions, management bodies, the Department of Education and SEC officials, third level, parents and employers' groups (a full list of the organisations represented is outlined in Appendix G). The SEC is a commission with five ministerially nominated commissioners and the HEA has statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system governed by a Board of 15 members appointed by the Minister, only one of whom represents a union, in this case the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

Of all of the stakeholder representatives on the Council, the role of union representatives on the NCCA was widely discussed by the participants at multiple levels of the research. At this external level, the participants spoke of the evolution of the role of union representatives on the Council and other structures. The channels used for teacher representation was discussed by international academics:

> …I think also, you know, having the right channels for teacher voices is important here. Now, if those are channelled entirely through resistance channels, like the unions that can be quite unhelpful, whereas if there are other channels for teachers to constructively engage with policy, so for example, through the JCT and so on, that, that that that can be really influential on the way the policy shapes. (Participant 24, international academic)

The power of the teacher unions in the policy space was commented on by many of the participants at the external level:

> Now, I think the unions in education are so strong, that you have to have them on board. (Participant 29, Politician)

> …I mean, it has to do power, the extraordinary power of the teacher unions in Ireland, in Ireland, by comparison with most other jurisdictions is certainly part of, of this picture. (Participant 28, Irish academic)

The impact of the powerful role held by the unions was linked to a lack of innovation or impetus for change by two of the participants:

> …I'd have real experience of this in my own time back in NCCA, the structure of NCCA and have committees and all of that was such that there was always an effective veto on things largely held by teacher unions and largely held by one teacher union indeed. But it meant then that some things were simply not discussed, because we knew that there was going to be War, if we went down that line with the result is that it simply was not on the agenda. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

But one participant noted that it was not always like this:

> …it's something that the literature you will get some discussion on the role of the teacher unions on the one hand as professional bodies, and on the other hand as negotiating trade unions. And so, they have two roles…And in the earlier days, if I go back to the NCCA... to the Curriculum Examinations Board, ..., the ASTI, regarded itself then, and if you read history of the ASTI… how they saw their role. They did see themselves as a professional body for many, many years. And it's really only in more recent years that the trade union aspect of their role has countered… has overbalanced if you like, their professional role. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

The evolution of this role and the impact of recent recessions on the trade union terms and conditions role has been heightened by the role played by social media in recent years. One participant commented:

> …for social partnership to work, there has to be a steady, and controlled line of communication between the stakeholders and their members. You know, we always… said that in NCCA, 'they're not briefing back to the membership.' But that's gone now. They have no control over that. It's why government leaks, because they're now trying to get over the stakeholders to the population. And I think so very interesting times, for partnership, not just in Ireland, but in systems across the world, because you no longer control the lines of communication. (Participant 26, Irish academic)

Of all of the disparate voices represented on the NCCA Council, some of the participants felt that the representative voice of the parent body deserved further discussion. While the representative nature of that voice was questioned by some of the participants, the importance of having that voice included was reiterated.

> …the voice of parents is one of those nebulous things in curriculum reform. Parents have been at the table at the national level for a long time. But I feel that it's not really the best use of the voice of parents, just putting at national level, of course, they have to be there, and it should, it should be. But the really important input that parents make, obviously is at local level, at school level, in the local area, that's where it counts. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

The representative nature of the structures was seen as problematic by some participants when they are viewed as replicating the same voices in the sub-structures. In the words of one of the participants, this can result in an echo chamber effect, with only ideas that will be viewed as acceptable being put forward to the detriment of innovation and change.

> …partnership is one thing, but representative structures are not necessarily the same thing. By that, I mean that if you look at NCCA, the Council itself is a representative organisation. In other words, bodies, management bodies, and so on, there's a range of bodies that have the right to nominate members on to the Council of NCCA. So, they're around the table, then you, the policymaking body, you have the key players, the key actors are there. And that's, that's a really good system, what becomes a little bit more problematic is that all the sub structures beneath that Council have tended to be equally representative. So that there is a sort of an echo chamber there, where all the sub structures have the same composition effectively, this isn't literally true, but effectively, so, so that the same range of voices are around the table all the time, at the different levels of the organisation. (Participant 27, Irish academic)

Outside of the stakeholders officially listed as representatives on the structures of the NCCA, the other influential and often unnamed stakeholder is the Minister of Education. The politicisation of the role and the decisions taken (or not taken) by Ministers were often referenced by the participants at every level of the research. It seems, that despite the 'partnership' model of policy development, the Minister in charge will still hold sway over the eventual decisions made.

> …I was always aware that a minister will have a view. And so, it's a very, very tricky balance between listening to the stakeholders, and recognising whether the Minister and the then government will accept the recommendations. (Participant 25, Irish academic)

Each of the questions raised in relation to the roles of various representative organisations in the policy development space, were echoed by the participants at other levels but often from differing perspectives. From a Critical Realist perspective, the lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities would seem to have a negative influence on the agency of individuals within those structures. The lack of agency and hierarchical power structures seem to be in conflict with the language of partnership. The resistance of the cultural forms to change is also evident in the discussions of the participants who have been involved in policy development for a number of years. Also evident in the discussion is the importance of key

relationships in the interactions within the policy space. Further elaboration on the implications of these observations can be found in the discussion chapter.

5.5 Conclusion

The themes that emerged as part of the analysis of the interviews with the external participants revealed issues that were also discussed by those more directly involved in the process of the senior cycle review at the other levels of the research. What these external participants brought to the analysis was a distance from the review and a reflective stance on the developments in curricular policy in Ireland and internationally. As many of the participants at this level had been involved in policy developments in the past, the inclusion of their thoughts and viewpoints also gave a sense of the temporal evolution of the policy development process.

The importance of broad curricular aims for education at senior cycle was revealed by the participants as underpinning thoughts on the success of curricular developments. For those who saw this stage of education as requiring a holistic development of students, they felt a dissatisfaction with the dominant academic focus of the Leaving Certificate and the influence of the terminal examination arrangements. The opinions of the participants at this external level were influenced by their previous experiences of reform, both as actors and agents of change in the system. Participants identified the complexity of the process of curricular reform and in the Irish context they questioned the role and impact of consultation and consensus on the coherence of policy making. The evolution of the structures for policy development in Ireland, the lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the actors and the absence of key voices were all identified by participants at this external level as key factors in the apparent stasis in the policy development space. Each of these themes will be further explored in the discussion in Chapter 7.

Throughout the themes that were developed in the analysis of the data, there were some values that seem to underpin everything that was discussed: a value placed on trust, fairness, objectivity and respect. This was apparent if the participants were discussing the Leaving Certificate, or the roles they played in the arena of policy development and what

they expected of that process. As each level of participant is examined, the contradictions between those values and beliefs and the actions and inactions of the policy arena becomes more apparent. For these participants there were additional values placed on expertise and international standing which is unsurprising given their positioning in the realm of academia and politics. A discussion of the significance of these beliefs and values will form part of Chapter 7.

The themes as they developed in the analysis may seem to offer little by way of understanding of the research questions posed at the outset of this research relating to the characteristics and determinants of partnership activities. However, the focus given by all of the participants to their own experiences of education at this level and their views on the broad aims of education reveal the cultural and societal structures at work beneath the surface level of reality for these participants. The stated beliefs in the importance of holistic development are often at odds with the support for the cultural cachet of academic examination success. For those participants in this external group, the insight they can give into the characteristics and determinants of the partnership activities that underscored the Senior Cycle Review process is limited. Their role 'outside the tent' of the review is to give it an external perspective. Nevertheless, a critical realist analysis of their discussions reveals some important causal mechanisms for and against change at this level. The importance of tradition and continuity and the value assigned to international standing emerged as a demi-regularity in the coding with this group of participants. While views expressing dissatisfaction with the overly dominant role of the examinations were common, and beliefs in a more holistic purpose and aim for education were expressed, those who held the positions of most power and influence, the politician for example, was more likely to express concern for tradition and continuity than innovation and change.

The previous experiences of reform described by this group, particularly those who spoke about the Irish context, reflected a hierarchical view of partnership where some partners held more power and influence than others. The reflections on where the power lay in the partnership activities was evidenced in language around "turf wars" and how a body such as the NCCA is "at arm's length" from the Department but not regarded as separate. More significant is the discussion around the silencing of voices or issues; the things that "simply

weren't discussed" (Participant 27) due to effective veto on difficult discussions. This is significant if the apparent aim of partnership is to have a democratic space where difficult issues are discussed and negotiated to a point where all stakeholders can live with the outcome (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), yet this is undermined by vetoing of subjects by powerful groups.

The lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities expressed by this group and echoed in the later groups, reflects one of the levels outlined by Biesta et al. (2015) in building on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) on agency. In the practical-evaluative domain, Biesta et al. list the aspects of structure that have an impact on agency: relationships, roles, power and trust. If, as was expressed by the participants in this study, roles are uncertain or unclear and relationships are fraught as a result, then there is an imbalance of power and trust in the process is affected. Trust became one of the central underpinning values that was expressed by this group and was echoed across the other groups. The cultural aspects listed by Biesta et al. included ideas, beliefs, values, discourse and language. In this group, and in the other groups in this study, each of these cultural aspects had a role in how the participants experienced agency in the process of curricular development.

A Critical Realist analysis of these discussions reveal the powerful influence of the underpinning values and beliefs of the participants. Regardless of the organisational structures, the participants in this study and in the partnerships described by the curriculum development processes, are individuals and their actions and interactions are founded on relational concerns and alignment with their beliefs and principles. A full discussion of the importance of these concerns and what it means for the development processes and partnership activities can be found in Chapter 7.

6. Findings and Initial Discussions: Groups of participants at the Macro, Meso, Micro levels of involvement in the Review.

6.0 Introduction

The findings from the three groups of participants directly involved in the senior cycle review at the macro, meso and micro levels, are examined in this chapter. As outlined in the introduction to Chapter 5, while the word 'level' is often used to describe these groupings, and accepting that all words are value-laden, the implication intended is not that a more elite status be attributed to the group of participants designated 'macro' or 'meso' level, rather the designation is to indicate the involvement of the participants in the policy-making arena. In order to preserve the 'voices' of all of the participants, and to try to prevent macro level concerns drowning out the concerns of participants at other levels (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009), the discussions at each of these designated levels (macro, meso, micro) are reported on separately in this chapter.

In following a grounded methodological approach to the interviews, the discussions were wide-ranging but, similar to the responses of the group of participants described in Chapter 5, the external group, three themes developed as central to the discussions. These themes can be described as: the aims and purpose of senior cycle, previous experience of reform and, structure and agency. As outlined in section 5.1.1, these themes developed as a result of the Critical Realist analysis of the data. The analysis of the themes reveals the cultural and social forms that make up the social reality of the participants and through the application of analytical dualism, this study attempts to disentangle and theorise on the causal weight of those aspects on the structures, powers and mechanisms at work in the real domain.

Section 6.1 will outline the findings from the discussions with the macro level group of participants, 6.2 will outline the discussions with the meso level and, 6.3 will outline the responses from the micro level of participants. Each of the sections below begins with a brief overview of the participants in each group of interviews and a full description of the selection process can be found in Chapter 4. Some of the themes described below have subheadings that echo across the dataset, but quite often the perspectives offered are very

different. A full discussion of the implications of these differing perspectives will be explored in Chapter 7. Despite the different perspectives offered, the values expressed by the three groups discussed in this chapter, such as the importance of fairness and trust, are the same as those expressed in the external group described in Chapter 5. From a Critical Realist perspective, the universality of these underpinning values, despite the differences in the surrounding discourse, is significant and will form part of the discussion in Chapter 7.

6.1 Macro level interviews

The interviewees at the macro level represented key figures involved in the review of senior cycle as it was carried out between 2017 and 2019. There were seven interviewees in the macro grouping and as discussed in Chapter 4, one of the difficulties here is to define the realm of the participant as at only one level as many are involved in activities on multiple levels within the policy and educational arena and cross the boundaries between policy and practice (Priestley et al., 2021). For the macro level, the definition used to aid this distinction is the premise that the participants at this level are not directly involved at school level, but work exclusively in the policy realm. The interviewees who participated in the research were: a researcher involved in the review but external to the policy field, two union representatives, the former CEO of an education agency, a former secretary general of the Department of Education, a former deputy CEO of an education agency and a member of an international organisation involved in the review. A full anonymised description of the interviewees can be found in Appendix F.

Some limitations of the sample need to be acknowledged. The absence of any current macro level Department employees is regrettable, but understandable. Attempts were made to engage current employees in the study, but the 'live' nature of the developments meant that their involvement was not feasible, and they sent regrets. But as noted by Lancaster (2017), the inclusion of recently retired employees enable them to discuss aspects of their work that they would have been reticent to discuss and indeed forbidden to discuss, had they been still in employment in the Department.

6.1.1 Theme 1: The purpose and aims of senior cycle

The subheadings identified within this theme such as the broad curricular aims of this stage of upper secondary education, the dominance of assessment and progression into third level were also expressed by the grouping of participants described in Chapter 5. The interviewees at the macro level expanded on the role played by Leaving Certificate in society and commented on specific programmes included in senior cycle. Each of these subheadings is described below. The discussions on this theme reveal the importance of the cultural and societal beliefs about the Leaving Certificate but also reveal the challenges faced by the participants when they clash with their underpinning belief system.

6.1.1.1 Broad curricular aims

While the external participants described in Chapter 5 spoke extensively about the broad curricular aims of this stage of education, it is no surprise given their involvement in the policy arena that the participants at the macro level were concerned with the specific aims and purpose of senior cycle in Ireland. One of the opinions expressed was that there has not been enough discussion about what the aims of this stage of education actually are, summarised by one of the responses below:

> …I don't think adequate attention in the past has been given to really thinking through the aims and purposes of Senior Cycle education, and, and also actually to connecting Senior Cycle education to other areas of education. (Participant 6, Education agency)

Despite an apparent lack of engagement on what the purposes of senior cycle education should be, there was a consensus among the participants on the narrowed focus that currently exists in senior cycle. Participants saw the narrowing of purpose to be a result of the examination focus experienced by students and teachers over the two years of senior cycle, outlined by one interviewee here:

> … even students who previously emphasised a much … valuing a much more interactive approach to teaching and learning become quite instrumental in terms of wanting to focus on exam preparation, that so it drives a lot of things, drives a less authentic approach to learning I feel, it results in high levels of stress, especially among girls. And it squeezes out other sorts of skills and capacities that could be recognised, particularly around kind of social emotional wellbeing. (Participant 5, researcher)

While the participants discussed what the broad curricular aims of senior cycle should be, they conformed with the notion of a broad, rounded education incorporating skills and competencies described by the external participants in Chapter 5. This was captured in the comments of the respondents below:

> You needed to have some kind of view of what a rounded person or an educated person was, and what were the core elements of that… that went wider than how you went into college, the kind of good citizen kinds of debates and I think a lot of that, and about the kind of co-curricular side if I can call it that in education and the value of that and how you built that in (Participant 7, civil servant)

> I think the structure of the curriculum needs to change, I think how students learn needs to change, they need to be able to build up the competencies that are required for, for current living. (Participant 3, Education agency)

6.1.1.2 Role in society

The dominant role played by the Leaving Certificate in Irish society was widely discussed by the macro group of participants. Even the international researcher involved in the review spoke of how dominant the Leaving Certificate was in Irish society in comparison to his experience of researching upper secondary level education in a number of other countries.

> …what I would say is that the Leaving Certificate is it goes beyond education in Ireland. In Ireland is not just something for upper secondary education, you know, this is the Leaving Certificate belongs to the Irish society. (Participant 2, international researcher)

Why the Leaving Certificate was seen as important for the functioning of society was expanded on by some of the participants. Some saw the role as societal reproduction, whereas others saw the beliefs in a meritocratic approach as problematic:

> …the body of theory that talks about schools mirroring society, and it rings very true in terms of something like the Irish Senior Cycle. And because, you know, our schools do a job for Irish society, in stratification, and then selection for third level, through the Senior Cycle (Participant 6, Education agency)

> I think that the Leaving cert is a problem… is a profoundly flawed educational model. But I think it's a very, very sophisticated social model, because it's about the meritocracy… about

> the reproduction of social relationships. And it does this as if it's ostensibly fair, and …what has merit?... effort plus IQ equals reward. So, it's a very, very sophisticated social reproduction mechanism (Participant 4, union representative).

While the importance of the Leaving Certificate to society was not questioned, what society saw as the importance or purpose of the upper secondary level of education was left in some doubt, as one of the respondents commented:

> Irish society has tremendous faith in Senior Cycle in Ireland, and tremendous faith in the education system as a whole and an extraordinary level of public interest and media interest in it. So that's brilliant. But I'm not entirely sure Irish society really knows what it wants the Leaving Cert to do (Participant 1, union representative).

6.1.1.3 Progression to third level

As with the external group of participants, at the macro grouping progression to third level was seen as a key purpose of this stage of education. There were some varying views on whether this was a good thing or not. Participants expressed cynicism towards the third level institutions for allowing the selection mechanism for entry to third level to dominate the educational experience of students at this level, captured in the comment below:

> I think also kind of… third level institutions, it suits them to have a selection mechanism that is carried out by someone else, but that that they're pretty happy with. (Participant 5, researcher)

The difficulty with this singular focus on third level progression was summarised by one participant:

> The education system is to some extent, and the senior cycle in particular is seen as a feeder for higher education, and very specifically higher education. …And I think it works very well for the 55% who will go on to higher level. I think, to some extent, it works for the 11% or so who will go on to further ed. I'm not sure at all, how well it caters for the third of students who will go into the workplace or will go on to alternative routes. (Participant 1, union representative)

As with the external participant group, the overemphasis on the academic aspects of the Leaving Certificate and absence of a vocational pathway was seen as a particular concern for many of the participants, for instance:

> …it's a very academic upper second level. Now, I think, that had huge strengths at a time when we had a tradition of having a kind of vocational and academic education at second level that were very split by social class, and which had a huge impact on education opportunity… clearly there's a lot of research that shows that currently doesn't suit all students and, and offer enough opportunity to all students. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The need for more diversity in the range and type of subjects offered was seen as one of the areas that senior cycle could improve by one respondent:

> I would like to see more diversity of kind of a broader variety of subject areas so that young people could take kind of vocational type subjects or things like even drama, … in a broader way than they can now. (Participant 5, researcher)

Issues around equity and equality were raised by most of the participants in this macro group. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on education was commented on as revealing the inequalities that are present in the system and making them more apparent to all involved. Many discussed the need to address the concerns raised as a result of these obvious inequities. This is captured in the following comment:

> …one of the dominant effects of the pandemic, is that it's really exposed the fact that our normality is not acceptable. You know, you can't have a situation where when something goes wrong with an education system, automatically, it's the least well off who do worst out of it. (Participant 6, Education agency)

6.1.1.4 Assessment

Issues around assessment seemed to drive much of the discussions around the purpose and aims of this stage of education. The two themes of progression and assessment were seen as intertwined and often difficult to separate on this occasion.

> Senior Cycle experience with the exception of Transition Year …is very strongly driven by the mode of assessment so that opportunities and the approach to teaching and learning become very focused on preparation for the exam. (Participant 5, researcher)

Many spoke of the negative impact the assessment procedures at Leaving Certificate had on students' wellbeing as well as the negative impact on the teaching and learning experienced, summed up in the following comment:

> …it drives a lot of things, drives a less authentic approach to learning I feel, it results in high levels of stress, especially among girls. And it squeezes out other sorts of skills and

> capacities that could be recognized, particularly around kind of social emotional wellbeing. (Participant 5, researcher)

As with the participants described in Chapter 5, many of this group discussed the possibilities and challenges thrown up by the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. Participants suggested alternative or additional methods of assessment that could ameliorate the negative impact of a single assessment moment for students, such as the comment below:

> I think it may build up the case for saying: haven't we a mad system where it's all dependent on the terminal exam? And it may help build up the case for trying to do more about other assessments, and maybe saying maybe a certain amount of it should be under your desk in fifth year, maybe you should have some capacity to say, well, statistics is a certain skill, you can go off and do it at a bank of things like the driving licence. (Participant 7, civil servant).

Another respondent felt that additional assessments or components were not necessarily the answer.

> I'm not terribly clear whether assessing more is necessarily assessing better…I think there's a perception perhaps among students, that you reduce stress by having more assessments. Personally, I'm far from clear whether there's actually a genuine connection there. (Participant 1, union representative)

Some were more pragmatic in their approach to these perceived solutions and saw the difficulties with assessment as lying beyond the remit of curriculum or policy reform as captured below:

> …people talking about Senior Cycle on the basis that diversification will solve the problem, or broadening assessment or a different kind of assessment or having exams at different times of the year will solve the problem. I think that it's been proved to be something of an illusion, because all that happens in a very competitive educational environment…is that the goalposts change and that those people who, who can exercise the greatest social and economic capital, they'll...they'll adjust their approach to take advantage of whatever, you know, measures are introduced. (Participant 6, Education agency)

The public perception of the Leaving Certificate as a 'fair' examination was discussed and as with the other groups, the participants at the macro level questioned the concept of 'fairness' associated with the examinations. The repeated trope that arose was that of 'having the same chances as everyone else' when faced with the examination, as seen below:

> … by and large, most people think, to an unreal extent, actually, when you consider how exams are actually run, but they actually see the Leaving cert… is fair. When their kids do their exam, they have the same crack as everybody else, you know that it doesn't matter who you are, you're not going to be bribing the examiner or anything. Now it's fairness, in a very narrow sense. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The discussions in this macro group focused specifically on the requirements of examinations and the impact on teaching and learning. While additional assessment components or timing of assessments were mentioned, as was the impact of the calculated grades, there was no real discussion of 'continuous assessment' as there was with participants in the other groupings. There was, however, some discussion on the lack of shared meaning around the term 'continuous assessment'. As one respondent commented:

> A lot of stakeholders will refer to continuous assessment, which is anathema to the teacher unions…when I was a teacher, continuous assessment to me was a spelling test every Friday. I'm not sure that's necessarily what people meant by continuous assessment, I think they generally mix up continuous assessment with second component. Now, this is important because language here matters. (Participant 1, union representative)

6.1.1.5 Specific Programmes

The participants in this macro grouping also considered the aims and purpose of the individual programmes within senior cycle: the Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as well as the Leaving Certificate Established. The Transition Year was seen as embodying some of the most positive aspects of senior cycle and of fulfilling some of the broader aims of education at upper secondary, as outlined below:

> …if you can see Senior Cycle as encompassing Transition Year, I think that has been really, really positive. I think it's given young people an exposure to a variety of learning opportunities. When it's done well, it can really be impactful. (Participant 5, researcher)

One participant when discussing the other two programmes at senior cycle, the LCA and the LCVP, reflected that these programmes were less successful in achieving their aims.

> …there's also a question at the moment in terms of LCA to some extent, certainly apprenticeships, the FET system, generally, to some extent, LCVP... have they achieved what they were originally set out to do? Are they joined up in any meaningful way? Are

> they basically a Cinderella of the system, and from a resourcing point of view and a public perception point of view, I think to a large extent they are. (Participant 1, union representative)

One participant discussed the absence of a follow-on programme for students currently following the Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LPs/L2LPs) at junior cycle. This participant was one of only two participants in the entire dataset to mention these students. Their absence from the discourse is not surprising and much has been written about the absence of students with additional needs in the formation of curriculum policy (Flood & Banks, 2021; Shevlin et al., 2013). This absence from the discourse was highlighted below:

> I think the current system doesn't really cater to any great extent for kids with SEN, or AEN... But one of the positives of junior cycle is …the L1LPs and the L2LPs... but yet we've, we've students coming out of those this year, am I correct in saying last year as well? And we have no follow on whatsoever. And I think there's a problem around that (Participant 1, union representative).

For the Leaving Certificate Established, one of the interesting themes that was discussed was what should and should not form part of that programme. Irish and mathematics were the subject disciplines most discussed across all participants with many holding very strong views on the issue of compulsion. For the participants in the macro grouping many of the discussions were rhetorical rather than specific and yet, these two subjects were often used as examples when describing previous experience in the policy arena. For instance:

> …back in the 2004 one, where, you know, a lot of the students had been telling us …they weren't in favour of Gaeilge being, you know, de facto compulsory. And because, you know, some of them would have said that, you know, people who had languages, you know, as their area had an advantage over people who were more mathematical, and scientific, and so on. So, we looked into addressing that and seeing about, you know, was there a way of it not being compulsory, and there was a huge movement of students from the west of Ireland, and teachers, who, you know, went completely against that idea. (Participant 3, Education agency)

The views expressed by these participants on the aims of senior cycle education with the dominance of assessment and preoccupation with third level progression are significant for any study on policy formation at this level. From a Critical Realist perspective, the views reveal the cultural beliefs that dominate and the social structures that are beyond question

and become the accepted norm. The implications of these views and the different perspectives offered will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

6.1.2 Theme 2: Previous experience of reform

The participants at the macro level have vast experience of curriculum policy development in Ireland over the course of their careers and in the planning, direction and implementation of reform. As a result, the impact of that previous policy-making experience was extensively referred to throughout the interviews. This discussion of personal and professional histories becomes important from a Critical Realist viewpoint in revealing their reflexive views on the policy process, and so gives insight into their values, beliefs and ideational systems that underpin their perspectives of the social world of partnership. For other groups, the 'experience' of reform was at the receiving end of reform decisions and so in latter sections the word 'experience' has a different connotation to that expressed here. The commentary on the experiences of this group can be broken down under the same three themes as identified in the discussions with the external group of participants in Chapter 5: Complexity and change, consultation and consensus, and, the impact of previous events.

6.1.2.1 Complexity and change

The complexity of curriculum policy development was acknowledged in these discussions, but with greater emphasis on what makes the issues complex than the external group of participants offered. One of the factors identified was the lack of consensus on what it is the curriculum is supposed to do. Without these guiding principles, any decisions will be challenged by some group and will result in an overcrowded curriculum, as captured below:

> I think there is a real danger that no matter what we design, somebody will say afterwards, ah that wasn't really what I was thinking of. And there's also the problem … everyone knows what they want to put into the system, and nobody can agree on what to take out. And the problem is, you can't have one without the other. If we do that, we end up with curriculum overload and that's often what happens. (Participant 1, union representative)

The second issue that adds to the complexity is that even if agreement can be reached on a policy level, the implementation plans often cause further difficulties. These often involve lengthy timescales that can be viewed as problematic in the system, for instance:

> I think you need to have a good understanding of change and how it transacts and how it can be introduced and what the elements involved in the implementation of it are, and what scale is possible within timeframes. (Participant 6, Education agency)

Within the change process, one issue identified by the participants that can cause further complications is the use of a shared language and shared understanding of key terminology. Where an incorrect term is used it can cause considerable damage to the negotiation process. This is illustrated in the comments below:

> …and then there was a lot of...not confusion, but a lot of variety in terminology. (Participant 5, researcher)

> …in terms of diplomacy … an unintended word or an unintended meaning of a word can take up legs. (Participant 1, union representative)

6.1.2.2 Consultation and consensus

In their reflections on developing education policy, one area that received considerable attention by the participants at this macro level, was the use of consultation and the wish to try to achieve consensus. How valuable these processes are was viewed differently by different participants, but the importance of having stakeholder engagement and the language of agreement rather than diktat was regarded as important by these participants. How well the review and previous policy developments achieved this consensus and engagement was disputed.

Firstly, how consensus can be achieved was questioned. One participant queried the coherence of resultant policy if all stakeholders have their views taken into consideration:

> …they basically have a shopping list in which everyone is just adding things to different things. And this is extremely problematic from the perspective of first, policy design and eventually, implementation, because it's not realistic. (Participant 2, international researcher)

Secondly, if a broad consensus is reached on aims and goals, that does not mean that how to achieve these aims and goals will be unproblematic, summed up by one participant:

> …there was consensus, in the sense that everybody thinks that it's important to have a reform of Senior Cycle. And it was, but there was no consensus about which direction to take and how to, you know, organise that, that reform effort. (Participant 2, international researcher)

It was generally accepted by these participants that if you wanted to succeed in developing curriculum policy that the involvement and sustained engagement of stakeholders in the process was vital. Some were very definitive in expressing these opinions.

> …anybody who thinks that you can proceed with anything, and with any aspect of education change without stakeholder engagement is an idiot! (Participant 6, Education agency)

While having stakeholder engagement was acknowledged as a strength of the process, it was not seen being totally without its drawbacks. One drawback was identified as the impact it has on the pace of change, a second was the impact it has on innovation and the tendency to go with the lowest common denominator in order to get the changes agreed. This can lead to slow incremental changes rather than any major change in the system. This is captured by the following comment:

> …given that combination of circumstances and factors, your chances of success are probably a little bit better. But it will be a certain kind of success. And it's a success, that probably means that change most of the time is relatively incremental, and that a lot can be compromised in the deliberations, the discussions, and that take place. So, you might start out with a quite a radical idea. And by the time you're finished, you might think there's not much it's not recognisable. (Participant 6, Education agency)

For the most recent review, the involvement of the 41 schools in the initial consultation phase was viewed positively by the participants at this macro level, but with some caveats. For political purposes the involvement of the schools was seen as a good thing by one participant:

> I think having 41 schools was a great idea, I would have loved to see more…From a political point of view, that was very helpful. And, and I think there was a good balance. (Participant 1, union representative)

The involvement of stakeholders was seen as an essential element of getting 'buy-in' for any reform or planned changes to the system, but there were difficulties in trying to engage schools as one of the key stakeholders in this process. The limitations of having just 41 out of the 730 post primary schools in the country was acknowledged, particularly when previous experience had taught one participant that the involvement of these schools did not necessarily mean the messages carried to any other schools.

> …but extraordinarily the message, you know, that's, that comes out from those 41 schools or that generates around the staff in those 41 schools doesn't really get any further than the 41 schools. (Participant 3, Education agency)

The second difficulty acknowledged was the pressure on resources caused by this type of involvement. For instance:

> Given how resource intensive it is to do, and how complicated the matter, you can only afford to do that level of engagement with the small number of schools. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Overall, the participants at this macro level were more positive about the value of consultation and consensus than the previous group. It was seen as necessary to get buy in and agreement for change. But, like the external group, the slow pace of change emerging from a consultative process was acknowledged.

6.1.2.3 Impact of previous events

The impact of previous policy decisions cannot be under-estimated. One of the participants described it as follows:

> This is what I call archaeology of public policy, one of your initial questions was about the resistance for change. And I will say this is probably number one, excuse in the resistance for changes, because we don't believe in the system. (Participant 2, international researcher)

Two previous incidents were consistently referenced by the participants in this macro grouping: the reaction of Minister Hanafin to the senior cycle reform proposals in 2004/5, and the industrial dispute and negotiated implementation of junior cycle from 2012-2015. Each of these moments was seen to have an impact, to differing degrees, on those still involved in the policy development process. Many of the participants were directly

involved in previous developments at an executive level. They were key figures in previous negotiations, or resolutions, or suffered as a result of decisions made, but each had subtly differing perspectives on the events at the time and differing perspectives on the impact they had.

Firstly, the comments made by Minister Hanafin referring to the 2004 proposals for senior cycle as the 'Rolls Royce model' were seen by some as signalling the death knell for reform of senior cycle and causing difficulties for the partnership model of policy development, as described by one participant below:

> I think matters in relation to Minister Hanafin. I'm making reference very specifically to the comment she made in relation to senior cycle… where she referred to the proposals that the NCCA put forward. And in relation to the 'Rolls Royce model'. And it really was very unfortunate and possibly even nasty way of dealing with it. It took the legs from underneath the NCCA. And it… made every stakeholder around the NCCA table, I imagine very nervous. (Participant 1, union representative)

For others, the comments signified a reluctance to implement large scale change in the system.

> …what happened, essentially… with the original proposals on Senior Cycle, you know, their characterisation as a Rolls Royce model? And could we not settle for taking that bit and that bit, and that bit, and implementing those? And would that not be enough for the moment? (Participant 6, Education agency)

But for one, seeing the events from a different perspective from within the Department, there were no decisions made, the proposals were just not seen as a priority.

> I don't recall us making any decision not to do it, you know what I mean, but it sort of... there was some kind of presentation, there was a general concern about Transition Year. And then it seemed to fade from view. (Participant 7, civil servant)

These differing perspectives on the last round of proposals for senior cycle illustrate some of the difficulties in trying to understand what is happening in the processes of development. What can be seen as a significant moment from one perspective, has no significance from another. From a Critical Realist viewpoint this disparity in the perspectives on the same event provides an interesting insight into the values and beliefs, roles and priorities evident at different levels in the system.

The second key moment, and more visceral in the minds of the participants, was the industrial relations issues that arose as a result of the Junior Cycle Framework introduced in 2012 and revised as a result of a mediated agreement in 2015 (Travers, 2015) outlined in Chapter 2. Almost all participants in this macro grouping spoke of lessons to be learned from the junior cycle implementation. Many referred to the events using very physical language, as illustrated below:

> …we are all... what is the word I'm looking for... scarred by the junior cycle experience. (Participant 1, union representative)

> …people at senior level in NCCA would also have been thinking, what are the lessons from the junior cycle reform, which was pretty bruising, you know. (Participant 7, civil servant)

There were many opinions given on what happened to allow the proposals to become "completely enmeshed in industrial relations stuff" (Participant 7, civil servant) despite being developed though the committee system of the NCCA. The difficulty with negotiating a curriculum through the industrial relations mechanisms was outlined by one participant:

> …industrial relations are great… if money will sort it, d'you know, if the row is about, we want to roll out new science curriculum, but we won't do it until you give us brand new labs, or you won't do it... until you give us x or something. That's grand, but if you're actually trying to negotiate curriculum through an industrial relations process, it doesn't really work. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The resultant compromises on some of the key features of the original junior cycle framework are seen by some as going too far, as captured below:

> I think the back and forth ended up sort of? Well, I think it sort of eviscerated a lot of what could have been done at Junior cycle, I think there were, now maybe those compromises had to be made. But I think there were possibly more compromises then around assessment than were necessary. (Participant 5, researcher)

> I did wonder at one point, when we looked like we'd losing all the... spending a fortune on junior cycle and losing all the elements that made it of benefit. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The long-term impact of those compromises on the outlook of those involved were described by many. This is best captured below:

> …so, I constantly have this duality between you know, what you can achieve, what you should achieve, what you should work towards trying to progress, but knowing that the reality is also there. (Participant 6, Education agency)

Whether these compromises are the best decisions to make educationally provoked interesting responses. This has implications for the partnership model that the NCCA is founded on. This is summed up by one participant:

> Now within the partnership thing, does the NCCA type model of having them inside the tent rather than outside the tent and you're negotiating with them? Does it mean you get into lowest common denominator proposals? I think that's a big risk. Do you know, do you aim ambitiously enough? So, I think it's a kind of tricky thing to know as to whether by negotiating inside and coming up with something as a proposal, does that mean you come up with the best proposal that you can come up with that's implementable, because teasing it out with the partners does give you a certain amount of implementability. Or does it mean just to get the proposal agreed that you'll lower, that you're going too much towards the lowest common denominator. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The other aspect of the mediated truce and agreement on junior cycle commented on by the participants is that it has led to a division between the ranks of stakeholders. The 'them' referred to in the previous quote referred to the union representatives on the committees and Council. How the actions of the unions were described by union representatives was striking:

> I think the political system got such a shock at the kind of almost Kamikaze tactics that the ASTI took in this Junior cycle. I mean, we went, we went all the way to the abyss. And we just about stopped ourselves. (Participant 4, union representative)

The impact of these actions was seen as having far-reaching consequences for the relationships within the partnership process.

> …however, since the debacle [junior cycle implementation], and the kind of very, very nuanced, but nonetheless, overtly political games that were played around the reform process. I think the NCCA has become weakened. (Participant 4, union representative)

The roles of the actors in this macro grouping would seem to have become entrenched as a result of the experience of junior cycle. The evolution of roles and responsibilities of each of the partners in this model of policy development were reflected on by the participants at this macro level and are described under theme 3.

6.1.3 Theme 3: Structure and Agency

The participants at this macro level were at the heart of the structures that developed and negotiated education policy over the past twenty years. Their reflections on the agency experienced in the system are as a result of their observations over their time engaging with these processes. This group had the most detailed commentary on the structures in place and the roles and responsibilities of the members of those structures. For this reason, the detail in this section outweighs that of other groups for this theme.

6.1.3.1 Agency

The concept of agency was often bound up with capacity for this group of participants. Some commented on the capacity or lack of capacity in the education system to take on innovations or develop curricula at a local level. Unlike the external participants who welcomed more localised curriculum making, participants at this macro level were more likely to comment on the absence of capacity in schools to develop curricula or innovative programmes, illustrated by the comment below:

> … [in relation to previous curriculum proposals] it ended up rather than being schools designing their own curriculum, I think it probably ended up being trying out new curriculum, because I think we overestimated the system, the capacity of schools to develop their own curriculum. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Two of the difficulties with developing agency in schools were identified by participants as resourcing, particularly in relation to additional posts for school management, and a culture of curriculum development as not being seen as the realm of teachers. This can be seen in the comments below:

> …there's actually a resourcing of the change. And actually, we've a system where, okay, the second deputy is making a big difference in schools, but I mean a school principal is spending as much time worrying about, you know, the boiler broken and the whatever? You know, so that capacity to drive? I think that's a factor that kind of inhibits change. (Participant 7, civil servant)

> …what teachers see is...is curriculum is done to them, curriculum change is done to them…It's difficult sometimes for teachers to see the rationale for change. And because they don't see the rationale, they can feel excluded…I don't believe in agency as a gift, that

> person has, agency is co-created. And the curriculum is the medium where teacher agency is co-created in the classroom with their students, who are... you see if the curriculum isn't tailored, the students can't learn. But therefore, you don't have much sense of an agency. (Participant 4, union representative)

In order to develop that capacity in schools and in teachers to enable autonomy, some spoke of the need for investment in capacity building. However, the discrepancy between the broader aims of the system in building capacity, and the conservative nature of the Department of Education, can cause difficulties in planning for that capacity building, summed up by one participant:

> …by their nature, government departments and bodies are not really risk takers, you know, they tend to be conservative, and therefore, they will tend to… not necessarily jump out there and do something that's kind of completely different... So, if you know that you're doing that, and you can say to teachers, yes, we're asking you to do assessment in a completely different way. But we have X number of hours for you to do this… we're going to have tools and you know, whatever available online by such a date, and that people know Okay, this is a little… It's scary. But I know I'm going to have the pieces that I need to be able to get me to the point where I can do it. (Participant 3, Education agency)

The lack of foresight and planning for capacity building was also commented on in a larger structural scale by one participant when discussing the review of senior cycle:

> …the NCCA is very small organisation in terms of capacity, and we've managed to build up capacity in terms of junior cycle, and indeed primary which was probably even less resourced, and if you kind of let it wind down again, and then have to crank it up whereas if you could kind of re-shift the posts as junior cycle was winding down if you could kind of shift the resources and keep the resources. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Each of these comments on building capacity and agency is directly related to the structures that are in place for policy development within the NCCA, and the relationships these structures have internally with their representatives and externally with the other educational agencies such as the SEC and most importantly the Department of Education itself. The importance of building capacity throughout the system for any change or implementation of policy is discussed further in Chapter 7.

6.1.3.2 Structures

The structures in place in the NCCA including the Council, Boards and development groups are outlined in Chapter 2. Due to their familiarity with these structures, there was rich discussion on the elements of these structures that worked well and those that did not function effectively. This element of the discussions was not replicated in this degree of depth with the other groups.

The purpose and aims of the unique and specific partnership structure at work in this policy sector were discussed by some participants and one in particular discussed what the options would be if there was no NCCA. In this case, the function of the NCCA was seen to be an arena where issues could be discussed before proposals were made in order to address the concerns of key groups, namely the unions.

> …so, say you didn't have an NCCA, say you had a professional kind of Council, you know, expert type Council, you probably end up either like the Australians with an advisory council of some sort …Or… you'd end up when you went to roll out curriculum change, …trying to negotiate it in an industrial relations or in a parallel framework to industrial relations. So, I think you're kind of stuck with, if I would take the union teacher unions to start with, you're probably stuck with having to deal with them in some format, or other. And so, you know, the partnership, one through NCCA, at least allows the opportunity of time, and having them in all the structures to look at the evidence and talk about the issues and try and address the concerns now. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Some of the concerns raised in the external group of participants about the replication of representation across the internal structures was also addressed by this participant.

> …but I think we've mitigated there a bit by having more co-opted people, certainly when I come into the NCCA first, around the time we reformed the committee structure, the unions had too much of a stranglehold on all the people who are making the policy and you weren't hearing enough diverse and younger voice, I think the co- option has helped that. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The co-option of external experts to the subject development groups has been used in recent years, particularly with the development of new subject areas such as Politics and Society or Computer Science, where the nominations from the representative stakeholders would not necessarily have the expertise in the subject area. Usually, these co-options

were preceded by an open competition to gather alternative voices from the education system and beyond.

6.1.3.3 Who is involved? Who should be?

In the discussions about who was represented on the structures, there was very little discussion in this group about who was represented already. Most of the discussion focused on the absence of certain groups, in particular the student voice. Like the external group, student voice and participation were broadly welcomed as a democratic right by this group. For instance:

> …but I suppose one of the partners that isn't really at the table are young people, and I guess that's for me the gap. (Participant 5, researcher)

What the student voice brings to the table was identified as their expertise on how the curriculum is enacted and experienced in the classroom. However, whether this expertise translates into something that is relevant to developing curriculum for future students was questioned, summed up by one participant below:

> …[students] they're heavily involved in what happens in curriculum today. Senior cycle improvement, senior cycle updating is what happens in five- or ten-years' time, and I'm not sure that necessarily ... they'd be able to, to foresee the implications of that beyond their own immediate environment. (Participant 1, union representative)

The assumptions around the existence of a singular 'student voice' – along with 'teacher voice' or 'parent voice' were questioned by participants in this group. In fact, what was identified as more important was the spectrum of opinions that can be found within these groups rather than trying to identify a singular viewpoint that is representative. This was captured by one participant:

> …there is no such thing as student voice, there is no such thing as parent voice. They're all different. Like, it makes me laugh when I hear people talking about 'teachers' voice', like put 10 teachers in the room and they'll all be saying different things about almost everything, you know, so it's the range of perspectives actually, that's much more important than the configuration of the particular voices. (Participant 6, Education agency)

Due to the context of when the interviews were taking place, there was also some commentary on the increased presence of the Irish Secondary Students' Union (ISSU) in

discussions at government level, an experience that had not been evident pre-Covid. Many of the participants questioned the representative nature of this, and other student organisations, and their ability to speak on issues beyond their remit. This is illustrated by the following comment:

> …what our colleagues in the ISSU say is often very, very good. But number one, I'm not sure if they're reflecting a second level viewpoint. And I do also worry that by their very nature our USI colleagues are going to be concerned with higher education issues, to some extent further education issues. (Participant 1, union representative)

This group of participants also commented on the absence of a wider field of voices within the structures and in the wider consultation activities. The absence of businesses or the third level representatives from the debates was seen by one participant as one of the limitations of the partnership model:

> I looked around the room and I said, we don't ...we haven't really got the wider groups, you know, the, the more economic groups and the you know, your chambers of commerce, your, you know, how do we get that... why, like, in fairness, it was a very wide group in terms of things, but I looked at the people that were even there from, you know, we didn't have the university presidents. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The 'partnership' model usually refers to inputs from stakeholders in education within the state, but the OECD has been recognised as having an influence on policy development in Ireland and elsewhere since the 1960s. In reflecting on the partnership model, the presence of this international group as an observer of the review was met with very different responses from the participants. For some, the presence of the OECD lent the review a degree of rigor:

> …that piece of them [the OECD] acting as a critical friend, which seemed like a great idea, I must say in terms of giving an international robustness to it. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The OECD report on the process was also quoted by some of the participants in favourable terms. However, as the external group commented, the opinions of a body like the OECD can be held up as a gold standard to be aspired to, but the real knowledge of the context

comes from within the context itself. One of the participants in this study was from the OECD and commented on the privileged position the OECD is in when it comes to giving advice:

> …the first thing is that we are very privileged, in the OECD because we say something…and people, they tend to listen to us, no matter how stupid is the advice we produce. And then other people, they need to live with the consequences. (Participant 2, international researcher)

Whatever the decisions about who should be represented on the structures and partnerships of policy development, one of the clear messages emerging from the research was the need for clarity on the roles and responsibilities of those representatives. This will be further explored in Chapter 7.

6.1.3.4 Roles and Responsibilities

While the external participants commented on the evolving roles and responsibilities of the NCCA, the DE and the SEC and how they changed over the early years after the establishment of the statutory bodies, the macro group were more focused on the impact the last few years have had on the roles and responsibilities held. In particular, the impact of the junior cycle framework and implementation difficulties that resulted in the Travers agreement were seen to have had a long-lasting impact on the authority and running of the partnership model.

The division of responsibilities between the Department and the NCCA and the separation of both was discussed. For some, the lines between the Department and the NCCA were blurred.

> …NCCA does really, really great work. And the people there know what they're talking about. It's based on evidence and so on. But to a certain extent, it's developed as advice, which is then passed to the department. Okay, now, there's more of an exchange around that. And, you know, there's a blurring of the lines between NCCA and the department. (Participant 3, Education agency)

But for others, the difficulties around the junior cycle reform made the division between the Department and the NCCA clearer than ever, captured in the comment below:

> …the department did not come out behind you [the NCCA] and make it clear that this was an advisory body, and we will make decisions, it hid behind you. And therefore, it allowed the strongest forces, in the Irish education space, the unions, to basically go on the attack… the department stepped out of the boxing arena and left its advisory body and the powerful teacher unions in there. And I think the NCCA got mauled, and the department itself when all of that, after that mauling of the NCCA… then we moved on to this ridiculous post-policy development process of "Oh, how are we going to implement it". (Participant 4, union representative)

The negotiations that resulted in the Travers agreement were unusual in that curriculum issues were being decided in an industrial relations forum. The absence of the curriculum advisory body from those negotiations was seen as problematic by one participant:

> I had serious issues with the fact that [the NCCA CEO] wasn't brought to the table for some of that. Now, you can argue we'd have been compromised. And… we were never at industrial relations implementation, but it was kind of an unusual one. In that it was it was about curriculum whereas normally the curriculum is adopted, and it's about the post or the price for it, you know, which isn't appropriate that we'd be there as NCCA. But I think there is that it that piece on the Travers... it… became very political. And like that, that deal was done without [the NCCA] being consulted. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The blurring of lines aside, the role of the NCCA as an independent advisory body to the Department of Education was seen as an important distinction to protect, however, maintaining relationships with the individuals in the Department was seen as key to progressing any curricular proposals. This is summed up in the comment:

> …there's always a balance because NCCA is independent and I'd have been very strong about NCCA's independence, there's always a bit of a tendency, there's some balance between having good relationships, because there's no point having an independent body off there producing something that no minister or department will live with. (Participant 7, civil servant)

That managing of relationships and progressing proposals was discussed widely in relation to the previous senior cycle proposals in 2004/2005. In that instance, while ministerial support appeared to be forthcoming, a change in minister revealed to one participant that the proposals had very little support within the department itself:

> …we had the minister very much on our side at the time, that was Minister Noel Dempsey and … he was very much into this. So, there was huge political commitment from his point

> of view. I don't know how much political commitment, there was in the department, you know, looking back on it, I can't say that there was or there wasn't political commitment in the department. And then, of course, you had a change of minister in the middle of that. So that changed the dynamic a little bit. (Participant 3, Education agency)

The impact a change of Minister could have on proposals, as was the perception in relation to the 2004/2005 proposals, can still have a long-term impact on the trust various partners in the system have in the process. Most of the participants in this macro grouping also mentioned the 'Rolls Royce model' as an example of what they hoped would not happen to the current review of senior cycle. One expressed their fears more explicitly:

> If we were to end up in a situation where the minister of the day whoever they happen to be, or whatever party happened to be in power, decided a few years after senior cycle had happened, or an updated senior cycle had happened decided ah that's not something I really buy into, that was a predecessor. That poses a real problem for us. (Participant 1, union representative)

But there were others who commented that regardless of the beliefs of a Minister, if the system believed something was necessary, then it would return to the agenda.

> I think certainly the perception in NCCA… was that Mary Hanafin had killed it …I think that's probably true in one sense. But there's lots of things ministers don't like that, if the system thinks is the right idea, get manoeuvred back on to an agenda. …So, I'd say there was a wider issue for NCCA than just not convincing the minister, they hadn't managed to convince the system. (Participant 7, civil servant)

This role of the NCCA as 'convincer of the system', advisor to the department as well as forum for negotiating with partners, exposes the diverse nature of the roles held by the NCCA. The Council itself is a representative forum. The Chair is a ministerial appointee. The executive, including the CEO and education officers, are former or seconded teachers. It appears in the course of discussions that the representative Council is often used as a negotiating forum and when referring to relationships with the Department or as a convincer of the system, it is the executive that is referred to. Within the representative Council, as with the external group of participants, there were questions asked of the value of this representation and of some participants in particular.

The representation on the Council was widely discussed, with some feeling that the Council had been quite lucky with the calibre of nominees as outlined below:

> One of the reasons the NCCA works or partnership... is that actually over the years by and large, the people whether it was NAPD, INTO, the unions, the various representative bodies, generally nominated, people who has a real interest and cared about curriculum and assessment to the NCCA. So, the kind of consensus way of working kind of worked, because people were actually prepared to go outside their own area. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Others were less optimistic about the representative status of the nominees and the power dynamics that were present.

> …and in some way, you know, stakeholder engagement should be very ambitious, and it should be it should kind of prioritise the listening to voices that deserve to be listened to, and the, we have a problem in that the power dynamics between different stakeholder entities is real, some people are listened to more than others, some people have more power than others as entities, we've also had the problems over the years, where the quality of representation within some of those entities may not be, it may not be properly reflective of the entities that are being represented, you know, and, and it can be very uneven the quality of representation. (Participant 6, Education agency)

The representative nature of the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPC-PP) did attract a number of comments. This group is a separate entity to National Parents Council Primary (NPC-P) and was seen as very different by participants. For instance:

> I think, second level parents are even a weaker voice in our system than primary level parents. Because the primary level parents, the organisation is a bit more structured and organised, second level isn't. (Participant 7, civil servant)

But, as with the external group, the representation of the unions and the roles of those representatives was the focus of some commentary by the macro group. But even for the union representatives themselves, they often see their roles in different ways as illustrated in the comments below:

> …so, my job is to walk the tightrope between what's educationally good and what is industrial relations possible. (Participant 1, union representative)

> …you are in a position to kind of provide a nuance on the context of policy documents and deliberative processes, which I think can provide people with access to the insights and

> thinking beyond... the conceptual thinking behind some potential proposals. (Participant 4, union representative)

For some representatives the role was seen as an advocacy role, where in the structures they advocate for what is industrial relations possible and when in the union role they explain the proposals and advocate for what they feel is right. Sometimes not without distress.

> I can find myself in a situation of having to explain to branch meetings; No, that's not what they meant. And now I'm the one out on a limb. Sometimes ...not enjoying the experience much. And getting battered from one end of a meeting to another… being seen to be in support of the NCCA. (Participant 1, union representative)

The fears expressed by the external group in the replication of representation across the boards and development groups would appear to be well founded. The role of the union nominees on development groups is tightly monitored and controlled by the union representatives on Council. One expressed how this monitoring was managed:

> So, in essence, every single meeting that's held, of a development group or a board, I meet with our reps beforehand, and often afterwards as well. So, although I wouldn't be a specialist, for example, in PE or in geography or in history, … and my job is politics and strategy. (Participant 1, union representative)

Despite this managing of politics and strategy, the language used implied a pulling together towards a greater goal. However, the impact of previous reform efforts has had a detrimental impact on the trust in the process.

> …we need to make sure that if, for want of a better term, we bring the troops to the top of the hill, that we're not marching them back down again. Yes, that will sour anything that happens in curriculum for union members for a very, very long time to come. (Participant 1, union representative)

But for others, “bringing the troops to the top of the hill”, is not how they see the role.

> …you have a very, very key role in the internal union structures to... I wouldn't use the word advocate, because that's not my job, but to make sure that there is a more critical appraisal of the proposals that are out there. (Participant 4, union representative)

The need for representatives to de-emphasise their sectoral representation in order to achieve collective governance was identified by one participant as a current weakness of the partnership model:

> …and I think in whatever way the NCCA Council can be held more accountable for its decision making, and more accountable to the people who put them there…And I don't think that that ethos is actually embedded in the NCCA. Because you go in there, you fly your flag for your sector, and you go home, and you whinge and just because we didn't get what our sector thinks it deserves. So, it's that notion of collective governance, collective decision making, I think, whatever way the NCCA can improve it, I think it will be important to do so. (Participant 4, union representative)

How the other participants at this macro level saw the union involvement was also very enlightening. One of the obvious points raised by most participants was the difference between the two unions at second level, the ASTI and the TUI. For most, dealing with the ASTI proved to be more problematic. For instance:

> …and one of the problems we have, I think that's a big barrier to change. It's not unions as such but unfortunately, ASTI for the last 20 years has been pretty dysfunctional…how representative the ASTI is, I don't know. But also, it's not capable, I think, or by and large, has not been capable of providing the kind of leadership of...this is a good direction to go. (Participant 7, civil servant)

Within the negotiating space this lack of leadership is seen as most problematic, as illustrated by the comment below:

> The problem is, how can you negotiate with somebody that you don't know will actually negotiate with you? ...But the problem with the ASTI is that if they came in and told you what their concerns were and you tried to deal with them, to deal with them, you wouldn't be sure they'd stick with it. (Participant 7, civil servant)

But even from the representative point of view, it appears this mistrust is well placed.

> …But I think what the department realized was that we [ASTI] acted in bad faith to use the existentialist meaning it, throughout. That we never really were going to deliver. You could sign up to something, sign up to Travers's statement of intention that went to the next round of talks, sign up to the… framework, go home, literally go home the following morning to your executive committee, and tell them to vote against it. (Participant 4, union representative)

Again, the impact of previous policy struggles on the workings of the Council were referenced by a number of participants, in particular, the difficulties caused by the ASTI rejection of the Junior Cycle implementation at Council after the framework had been passed. The comments made, revealed a highly stressful time for those on Council and a departure from the usual consensual methods of policy formation.

> …and then in a lot of the implementation of the subjects because the ASTI was against it, we had to have votes. So that really upset some of the long-standing people in the council because there'd never been vote and the thing requires consensus. (Participant 7, civil servant)

But the actions of the ASTI behind the scenes caused further stress for members of Council. In contrast to the previous comment on the need for collective governance while on Council, one participant referenced an incident during the difficulties with industrial relations disputes, when members of Council who were not ASTI representatives were coming under pressure to vote with ASTI either to support their stance as colleagues from another union, or in one instance where a representative for a school management body was receiving personal phone calls pressuring her to abstain from votes as she was an ASTI member, although not an ASTI representative on Council.

> …but they did try very hard, like the INTO people told, I mean, [INTO representative] told me that they had rung [INTO General Secretary] ... tried to get [her] to say [INTO Representative] was being unreasonable and not voting with union colleagues, in voting against union colleagues, and they put a lot of pressure on the lady from the Protestant ... Secretariate...the, Deputy Principal, and she ended up kind of abstaining, rather than…because she was an ASTI member, you know, so they did. (Participant 7, civil servant)

The wider implications of this trust, and lack of trust, in the representative structures will be explored further in the discussions chapter but the insights into the fractures caused during this period of industrial unrest casts doubt on the effectiveness of the partnership model of policy development. The references to trust also echoes the underpinning values described by the participants in Chapter 5. From a Critical Realist perspective, the influence of these underpinning values and beliefs as part of the social reality of the participants is central to understanding the real domain and the causal mechanisms for and against change at this level.

6.2 Meso level Interviews

The interviewees grouped as the 'meso level' does not imply a status or privileged position in relation to the other groups of interviewees. The word 'level', while not without value-laden connotations, is used here to delineate the involvement of the participants in policy-making using the terminology developed by Van den Akker and Thijs (2009) and later by Priestley et al. (2021). As previously stated, one of the difficulties in assigning a level to the participants in the interviews is the fact that many of those interviewed are involved in multiple levels across the policy spectrum. To delineate the participants at this meso level, the criteria used was that all of these participants were directly involved with schools, albeit that some were also involved on policy development structures. There were five participants in this meso grouping. Two of whom are/were principals of schools directly involved in the review and also represent management bodies on a number of agencies and bodies. The other three participants were/are involved in the management bodies and have direct contact with schools through the course of their everyday work. Greater concerns were expressed by this group around the aims and purpose of this stage of education than in other groups and there was more discussion of the minutiae of how the curriculum is enacted on the ground. Despite these differences, the same three themes emerged strongly in the discussions as has been discussed with the other groups: the aims and purpose of senior cycle, previous experience of reform and, structure and agency. These themes developed as a result of the Critical Realist analysis of the data that sought to find the influences and causal mechanisms in the real domain that have an impact on the actual and empirical domains.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Purpose and aims of senior cycle

In this meso level exploration of this theme, the five headings mentioned by the previous groups were again evident: broad curricular aims of senior cycle; the role of the Leaving Certificate in society; progression to third level; assessment; and specific programmes. As could be expected of a group that are closely aligned to work in schools, the detail here was focused on specific aspects of particular senior cycle programmes as well as general discussion of what the purpose of this stage of education should be. The impact of assessment and the demands of progression pathways were widely discussed. Unlike the

previous groups, the impact of the CAO system on teaching and learning was the focus of many interviews with policy makers operating at this meso level.

6.2.1.1 Broad Curricular Aims

The discussions at this meso level focused on the perceived current aims of senior cycle and what those aims should be. Chief among these was the absence of the development of critical thinking, personal development and preparation for life after school. One participant commented:

> I think the elements of the various programmes could certainly contribute far greater to the reflective piece for students, do you know their critical thinking. Their working with others, their whole social development, such that they're equipped for post school life (Participant 8, school leader)

Many participants spoke of the need for more focus on education than on examination results. This was similar to the values evident in the previous two groups where the intrinsic value of education was seen as underpinning many of the opinions and theories outlined, for instance:

> …we need to return to Senior Cycle as opposed to Leaving Cert. We need to return more to the experience than to the outcome. And we need to return to the narrative, or the notion of education is life. It's not a preparation for life. And I do like that definition of education, at its simplest, you know, as the creation of lovers of learning. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

This value of education was seen by one participant to be undermined by the extreme focus on the examination and assessment system in place, to the detriment of the teaching and learning experience of the students.

> I believe that the learning experience that our young people are getting currently is far too narrow. I believe that it is in need of change. Maybe to pre-empt your next question, I think there is an excessive exam focus in the current system, and an exam focus that is focused into two or three weeks of the year. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

The paradox of being successful in the system but not being well educated was pointed out by many of the participants. Success at senior cycle was most often described in terms of CAO points achieved, with students being described in terms of the points they gained, “he's a 550 pointer” (Participant 11, Management body representative), rather than a

broader understanding of education. However, most were also willing to point out that the functioning of the system was self-perpetuating as parents looked for the best for their children. The best was inevitably seen as getting the highest points possible, which in turn was seen to feed into the grinds culture. Even those critical of the system, still succumbed to its influence when faced with family decisions. This is well captured in the following:

> …we have to question why there's such a fine grinds culture in this country. It's there because… and it's flourishing, because it feeds into this into the education system that we've got. And I was absolutely, as a parent myself, quite ready to tap into that to make sure that my two navigate the system and got the best possible points they could get. Did they get the best education they could get? Absolutely not. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

The narrowing of educational experience to assessment for progression to third level was a theme that was echoed across the various participant groups. This would seem to suggest that this belief was challenging as it contradicted the expressed value of a broad education and so caused conflict within the participants and dissatisfaction with the processes at work.

> …that's really disappointing in terms of looking at the Leaving Certificate in an education system, because if it's all about the exams as a filter for Third level, where does education come into it? (Participant 12, school leader representative)

6.2.1.2 Role in Society

One of the most interesting aspects of the discussion on the aims and purpose of the senior cycle was when its role in society was discussed by policy makers at this meso level. Whereas the external and macro groups talked about the dominant influence of societal expectation and what the Leaving Certificate meant to Irish society, the meso group approached this from a very different perspective. This group talked repeatedly about the role of senior cycle *for* society. Of all the groups involved in the research, the meso group was the one most unfailingly in support of major change in the system of education at upper secondary. The thinking behind the reasons for change tended to centre on the needs of a changing, multi-national society that is not well served by the systems currently in place. One of the striking aspects of the commentary is the repeated use of ‘we’ to

denote who should be making the changes and who the changes should be for, illustrated in the comments below:

> So, if we can bring all and harness all of the groups together, to look at what would be best for Irish society, I think that's the best way forward. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

> …because again, it comes down to that service piece, that, who are we actually serving? We're serving society and we're serving the students that we're teaching. (Participant 8, school leader)

This vision of senior cycle as serving the needs of society was expanded on by some, and stark warnings given about the absence of this 'big picture' thinking. For instance:

> …we are in the multiple layered… contemporary and simultaneous horror shows that we're currently living in, from climate, to disease, to economy, to politics, and so the emergence of a critical citizenry, ... will protect us from so many of those political shifts, and really, really high-risk things that if again, due to fear, or lethargy, you let drift, you lose your country. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

6.2.1.3 Progression to third level

As with the other groups, the primary aim of senior cycle here was seen as facilitating progression to third level, regardless of the difficulties some of the participants had with that narrow aim. The impact of this aim was a very utilitarian view of senior cycle observed, but not necessarily held, by the participants. From this viewpoint subjects were chosen, not due to interest, ability or capacity, but based on the points achievable.

> …they're not maximising for students' interests, they're looking and saying, right, which is the quickest way through with the highest points and working backwards. (Participant 8, school leader)

This view of senior cycle, but particularly of the Leaving Certificate, as a means to an end was referenced by participants in the meso and micro groupings. Many blamed this view on the actions of third level or on the coupling of the Leaving Certificate with the CAO system and suggested a simple separation of these functions would result in major changes for senior cycle education.

> I would decouple the points system from Senior Cycle. And to an extent that would seem naively to look like the one big change you would make, if you remove that stranglehold of the points system, from Senior Cycle education, and that will be a liberating experience for it. And then we could move back into educationally rich experience and outcomes that weren't necessarily, you know, reducible to a three-digit number. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

The difficulty with this view of the Leaving Certificate as facilitating a direct pathway to third level was expanded on by some, namely, that this only suited a small portion of the student cohort. For these participants, they felt that the current system does not offer a relevant and coherent progression pathway for a significant proportion of the student population. But, it was pointed out by one participant, that as long as this arrangement maintains a 'status quo', there is no impetus for change:

> …so, everything becomes, no matter what, everything becomes centred on what worth it is, at the end of the day, for third level and for CAO points. And the crime of that is that that's only relevant a…part of the cohort of students and to fit in then with the, the status quo (Participant 9, school leader)

The 'status quo' was mentioned by a number of the participants in this group and the power exerted by maintaining the 'status quo' in stabilising the system. An example would be:

> …for some we want to maintain the status quo, because it is what we know not only have we benefitted from it, but we have brought students and young people through it. And so many of them have benefited from our way of managing it. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

As with the other groups, some suggested that a greater value being placed on other progression pathways, other than a singular academic pathway, was the solution to the over emphasis on progression to third level as the purpose of senior cycle education. It was felt that this 'greater value' only happens if somebody becomes very successful, and still their success is overshadowed by not progressing to third level.

> …if we could place a different value if we could get to a point in society where we value, practical manual work, in the same way. We only place a value on that when somebody is extremely successful. We talk about people, and we say, "Oh, my God, and wasn't he great, he never went to college." (Participant 11, Management body representative)

There was some criticism of the third level sector during the previous year when schools closed as a result of the pandemic. One respondent criticised the third level sector for not doing enough to respond flexibly to the pressures faced by second level when the means for selection (the Leaving Certificate examinations) were not held in 2020 and alternative arrangements had to be found:

> …the demands of this system all fell back on post-primary. The Higher Education Authority and the higher ed institutions, and indeed the Further Ed. Institutions did nothing. They sat back and they left post-primary carry all the pain, and all of the crashing through the electrified red lines that the unions have had around teachers assessing their own students, and all of the work around systems and algorithms and you name it that the Department of Education has had to take on. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

This criticism of the backwash effect of third level progression and the absence of valued alternative progression pathways was echoed in the group of participants at the micro level.

6.2.1.4 Assessment

The progression to third level and the selection mechanism for that progression is intimately bound up with the assessment procedures for the Leaving Certificate. As with other groups, one of the repeated issues was the perceived fairness of the system in place, although many pointed out the difference between fairness and equity. For instance:

> …everybody will say, there's no better alternative. And at least it's fair, at least every kid has a number, 'blah, blah, blah'. And we know that equity and equality are two quite different things. And that, in fact, we need as a maturing society, to begin to drill into the difference between blind equity and anonymity (Participant 10, Management body representative).
>
> We're obsessed with fair as opposed to equitable. (Participant 8, school leader).

The impact of the assessment system on the health and wellbeing of the students was a greater concern in the meso group than in previous groups. There were several participants who spoke of the examinations in very physical terms. It was referred to as "trauma" and a "mincing machine" (Participant 10, Management body representative) and the anxiety

levels experienced by students were identified as a key influence in looking for change in the system.

> …one of the key kind of forces for change over the last two years has been the focus on anxiety levels and the anxiety levels of young people.... And I know certainly as a, as a school principal, it has become really significant, the fact that we are linking our entire education system with anxiety levels. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

In addition to concerns over the impact of the assessment on the health of students, some were also concerned that the methods and processes of assessment did not actually achieve what they set out to achieve. This echoes some of the commentary at the external and macro level interviews on the alignment of curriculum and assessment and will form part of the discussions in Chapter 7. The commentary on the misalignment of the aims of the system and the assessment procedures in place was illustrated by the following:

> …the Leaving Cert sets out, and the various subjects, set out to test and what they encouraged in terms of the studying of the subject, and then what they ultimately assess, may not be necessarily aligned. (Participant 8, school leader)

The backwash of the emphasis on the final assessment was identified as the main limiting aspect of the current system.

> …the biggest impact is the assessment, the actual Leaving cert exam. And in many ways that just cripples so much of the potential of the Senior Cycle… so that is the most dominant feature every day is the exam that's so far ahead of everybody. (Participant 9, school leader)

It was unsurprising, given the changing context when the interviews were carried out, that the revised or possible revised assessment arrangements being explored for 2021 became the focus for some of the discussion. Among policy makers working at the meso level in this study, some felt that the change in arrangements offered opportunities for changes in assessment procedures that had not been thought possible before. Some commented on the increased professionalism of teachers and the possibilities offered by technological solutions to allow change to happen in the assessment system. Examples of such comments include:

> …you're looking at a situation now where on the basis that professional judgment of the teachers was encouraged and respected, that we might be able to see if we can move some of the lessons that we're getting in Junior Cycle into Senior Cycle. And there could be an element of professional judgment to recognise the work of the students in the classroom, so that not everything was dependent on the final exam. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

> …if it could be taken into Senior Cycle assessment, you know, if you can actually be off site and submitting, so on a work experience, for example, on a kind of a placement... I've been able to submit some work to school reporting on what you're doing, you know, technology will make that... will pave the way for that. (Participant 9, school leader)

In this aspect, the attitude towards the possibility of change in assessment procedures and practices presented by the meso level was very different to that reluctance to change presented by the previous two groups. This shift in attitudes and beliefs is interesting from a critical realist perspective as it can be seen as evidence of a causal mechanism for change that may have an impact on the actual and empirical domain in the future, but it also raises awareness of the power differential between the groups.

6.2.1.5 Specific Programmes

Given that this group of policy makers operated closely with schools, it is not surprising that they also discussed the different senior cycle programmes and to what extent they fulfil the stated aims and purposes of senior cycle. As with the macro group, the Transition Year was described as the one element of senior cycle that lived up to its aims of fulfilling the broader aims of education by encouraging independent learning and personal development without the demands of an external assessment.

> …and I felt that that whole piece where students were given time to develop and to grow and to I suppose engage in other activities outside of what I would call the mainstream Senior Cycle, was key and was very important. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

The LCVP was identified as a programme that had potential but that needed further development, but very often it was only seen in terms of the points that could be accrued and so was referred to as a “banker” (Participant 8, school leader). This referred to cases where students were limited in their subjects where one or more of the ‘non-negotiable’

subjects was not seen as a strength and the student relied on the LCVP to boost their points. This was seen as undermining the potential of the programme, captured in the following observation:

> …but LCVP is one of those that I'd really like to see ... expand it to be more meaningful. (Participant 9, school leader)

The LCA was discussed in very positive terms. As a programme, it is often excluded from discussions on senior cycle due to the different assessment and certification arrangements, but for this meso level of participant, the LCA was identified as having huge potential to encourage the development of cross curricular skills and capacities that were seen as missing from the Leaving Certificate Established. The status given to the programme, however, was seen as a continuing problem by one participant:

> They're in lots of ways, possibly the most equipped of our students to leave school, because they've had to research their projects, they've had to defend their projects, they've had to have adult conversations with those who come to school, to interview them. … And certainly, in terms of the personal development, you can see huge personal development in respect of the students. And now it's the credibility piece [that is problematic] when they're entering the programme. (Participant 8, school leader)

The description of this status problem as a "credibility piece", that the LCA certification was not believed, was not seen as a credible qualification speaks to the underpinning values of trust, fairness and equity.

This in-depth discussion of the benefits of each programme was almost exclusively seen at the meso level. At the micro level, the parents, students and to some extent, the teachers were aware of their own experiences, but not necessarily able to give an oversight into how the interconnected elements of the system worked. At the macro and external levels, there was some discussion of programmes, but the discussions lacked the specificity of the meso group possibly due to the distance from the direct experience of day-to-day school life.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Previous involvement in curriculum reform

The career profiles of the meso group meant that unlike the more experienced individuals at the macro level where there was extensive involvement in the policy arena, here the experience of the participants varied. Some had experienced the difficulties around junior cycle reform from the vantage point of their schools rather than within the negotiation spaces. This gave a very different perspective on previous reforms, policy developments and what we mean by involvement in curriculum. The same themes emerged in the discussions however: the awareness of complexity and limitations of change; attitudes towards consultation and consensus; and, the negative impact of previous reform experience.

6.2.2.1 Complexity and change

For this group, any involvement in the policy process brought an awareness of the complexity of the system in place. Some who were recently members on NCCA Boards were surprised by the positioning of stakeholders on curriculum structures but gained insights into how these positions were reached, illustrated by the comments below:

> …but you could also see the positions that certain, you know, groups of stakeholders will take up. And then you're wondering, is this what the people are talking about? Or is this what the organisation holds dear, so that I found that very, very interesting. (Participant 8, school leader)

> …with getting insights into the thought processes, not just of the NCCA itself, but also of all the stakeholders as they sit around the table (Participant 10, Management body representative)

Some of the participants in this meso group expressed a belief that the underpinning rationale for any curriculum policy decisions should usually be concern for the students and their wellbeing. When this belief was apparently not shared by other stakeholders around the table, this caused one participant to reflect on the position-taking observed:

> …certainly, on the board, you can see how people take up positions by virtue of what they are, who they represent, as opposed to the focus on the students. And on society. You know, we're servants of the system. in whatever form, we engage, whether we're principals, or teachers, whatever, whatever, but not sure that that service piece comes out. (Participant 8, school leader)

One area that certainly emerged in the conversations with the policy makers involved at the meso level is how they view curriculum development as a much broader activity than those at the other levels. In particular, there were references to the role of teachers as curriculum developers in their own subject areas and schools as places for curriculum development. Both of these observations referenced the opportunities offered by the recent junior cycle framework and implementation process as a means of developing autonomy for schools and capacity for teachers in interrogating the 'why' of curriculum in order to design teaching for their classes and schools. These observations are illustrated by the following:

> Moving from Junior Cycle, to Junior Cycle framework really created a lot of discussion, a lot of involvement around curriculum building, I suppose and development. And then ...is it opening the door for short courses or for further options or, I suppose the whole idea of it being outcomes based took away the kind of crutch that we were used to, as being subject based. So now you're thinking, well, what really is the learning and where can it be placed. …then was another area of opening the boundaries a little bit and, giving the schools more autonomy. (Participant 9, school leader)

For most of these participants, the arena of curricular development they were most recently involved in was the Senior Cycle Review. In reflecting on the process of this review, they discussed the importance and impact of consultation and trying to reach consensus.

6.2.2.2 Consultation and consensus

Rather than a discussion of the abstract role of consultation in the development of curriculum policy, the participants at this meso level of policy involvement delved into the procedures and protocols of the consultation processes used in the Senior Cycle Review in trying to achieve consensus. One of the key benefits of consultation processes was identified by one participant as the insight gained into other perspectives on the purpose of senior cycle:

> When… teachers had the opportunity to reflect and talk about it and feedback. Likewise, students were really actively engaged in thinking about it, talking with their own peers, and then reporting back… the time that the group came to the school where there was inter -

> conversation between the students and the board…I think in terms of gaining insight of the other, that was hugely important. (Participant 8, school leader)

There was also a clear identification of the challenges associated with consultation, that some people feel unheard and that it can take so much time. For instance:

> …you will always have stakeholders who will feel that their voice wasn't heard enough. But I think that people were given the opportunity. I think it was very open. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

> …the only weakness is that you can get caught up on the consultation so much that you don't get beyond it.... I get trying to get a shared vision, but I'm also impatient for change. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

But the benefits of the slow pace of consultation were also identified by another participant:

> …we depend on consensus so much. And we have huge tradition of consultation and stakeholder engagement. And I think it's, it means that yes, it's when it's finally decided, it has high confidence, as you know, it enjoys high confidence. It's slow. And I think that's probably no harm at some level. (Participant 8, school leader)

One of the interesting comments that emerged in this part of the discussion was the hierarchical value placed on some participants by others. For the most part, there was an acknowledgement that diverse voices were heard and that there was a respect for all views. The presence of diverse voices, including student voice, was widely mentioned as a positive attribute of the review. But at one of the consultation events in the review, the presence of student voice was observed as not as valued as it was elsewhere.

> …one of the students spoke quite passionately about …the idea of politics and society and in Leaving Cert about her own involvement, her own civic kind of responsibilities and so on. And she was dismissed by another stakeholder at the table, but it was so significant, I think we all the rest of us around the table saw it. And we pooled in… (Participant 11, Management body representative)

This dismissal of a voice at a consultation is significant as it points to the importance of ‘status quo’ and dismissal of anything that could challenge that viewpoint. In the micro level interviews a similar experience was discussed, this time by a teacher who felt his views were dismissed by stakeholders around a table. The impact of these actions on the agency of those involved will be further explored in the discussion section.

The experience of the review for the participants at this meso level was broadly described in positive terms. While the limited resources were mentioned, the impact of the review on the sense of inclusion in the policy development process was commented on.

> …had the resources been there, I would have gone wider, you know, in terms of number of schools. Now, that said, 41 is still a significant number, because you were coming back to the school time and time again. So, it wasn't just a hit and run exercise. And that's where I really think the strongest experience that I heard back from our participating principals was that was that people got to know their NCCA people. And the other thing is that schools in provincial areas sometimes feel left out of the centralised policymaker engagement. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

The need for the inclusion of diverse voices in the discussions on policy development for senior cycle was commented on. Whether those diverse voices were captured however was questioned by one participant:

> …when we talk about the criticism of Senior Cycle, just suiting one homogenous [sic] group, if that's the only voice you're going to hear at the table, then you're going nowhere. Even in a small school, it's hard work to get the diverse voices…we've got 10% of our population, are Eastern European, and we had one girl's parents, both of the mother and father attended one [Senior Cycle Review Consultation] evening, and which was really two separate evenings. And it was just fantastic to see them there. And, but they didn't make up anything like 10% of the parents' voice that we heard. (Participant 9, school leader)

The need for diverse voices was echoed across the participants, and with that diversity comes the challenge to consensus. As one participant pointed out, the outliers rather than the consensual voices are the ones that need to be heard in a consultation:

> …there are always outliers. And we need to pay attention to those because sometimes consensus can be dangerous, and everybody thinking the same thing is a risk. And, and it's the 12th juror that actually has done the work and actually driven to the evidence and actually really, really thought about. So, it's the voice of that 12th juror that we need. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

The other difficulty for a consultation process like the review that was identified by this group was the need for a feedback loop to inform those involved of the progress made or lack of progress.

> The kind of idea of connecting and reaching out to people a little bit more and that engagement with parents...Then it goes to goes away, you know, and nobody now, really remembers, is there still a review happening or not? (Participant 9, school leader)

This need for a feedback loop is prevalent in the literature on stakeholder engagement (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Flynn & Hayes, 2021) and the absence of a feedback loop to those involved in the Senior Cycle Review was also mentioned by participants in the micro level grouping. While the feedback to schools was delayed due to the impact of the Covid pandemic on the education system, the absence of feedback to certain groups of stakeholders has implications for the functioning of consultation and will be further explored in Chapter 7.

6.2.2.3 Impact of previous events

The impact of the previous proposals for senior cycle reform made no impact on the perceptions of this group but as with the other groups, there were multiple references to the impact of the junior cycle reform on their perceptions of reform. Unlike the external and macro group, the participants at the meso level focused almost predominantly on the opportunities that have arisen as a result of the junior cycle implementation. Some of those opportunities revolved around professional development as exemplified in this comment:

> I think our younger teachers most definitely are gaining, in the confidence… to initiate and to take ownership of their own professional development. (Participant 8, school leader)

Others referenced a review that is being undertaken of the implementation of the junior cycle. This longitudinal research will look at the impact of the implementation of the framework on teaching and learning at junior cycle. For one participant, it was felt that this review will bring to the fore some of the positives experienced by teachers.

> I absolutely do believe that there will be a lot more positives out of the review [of junior cycle implementation] than some of our stakeholders are expecting and I think that they will positively influence what's happening at Senior Cycle. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

In particular, a disconnect was identified between the experience of teachers on the ground and the espoused beliefs and opinions of unions on what is happening in schools. This was summed up by the comment:

> But what I think the unions aren't recognising is that the profile of people coming into the profession now is different, and there's much more willingness of people to be involved and engaged in different learning methodologies. And that has been embedded by their experience of junior cycle so that in moving to calculated grades process last year, I think that was informed by the teachers experience and training with JCT and other things like that, and on CBAs [Classroom Based Assessments], on SLAR [Subject Learning and Assessment Review] meetings, and other things like that. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

The other disconnect that was identified was the gap between policy and practice. This implementation gap is also well referenced in the literature on educational change (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Looney, 2014; Priestley, 2011). One participant commented:

> …that disconnect, between policy and what happens on the ground, ...transferring the wonderful guiding principles of education into action, is just really important… It's notable when it's absent, and it's fantastic when it's present. (Participant 9, school leader)

The description of transferring not just the policy into practice but the guiding principles of education into action speaks to the underpinning values that the participants expressed in their interviews. If these values are not aligned within policy and enactment, then decisions can become stymied in inertia and the stasis that has been present in educational policy in Ireland will continue. Further exploration of these underpinning values will be in the discussion chapter.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Structure and Agency

For the participants at the meso level, many of the discussions focused on the agency or lack of agency felt by teachers and students at a school level, rather than a reflection on the agency represented by these groups at a national level. There were, however, questions that arose on the representation of groups at a national level and how these contributed to stasis in educational policy.

6.2.3.1 Agency

One of the phrases that was used by different participants was the notion that education or education policy was something that was "done to them" (Participant 11, Management body representative; Participant 10, Management body representative). This phrase was used to depict the lack of agency felt by students in the system and by teachers reacting to changes in educational policy. For those commenting on lack of student agency, they linked the lack of agency with the developments that have still to be made in the arena of student voice. Two examples of respondent comments help to illustrate this:

> …we talk about student voice. But that it has a long way to go. Student voices in the student council, you're actually asking the students, whether it's as active agents in the classroom, and how I teach, how I engage, how you're learning, you know, how this is going to unfold, and how you're going to improve, you know, that's a genuine conversation. (Participant 8, school leader)

> …unless we are recognising their role in the learning experience. Unless we are, and this was, this is to me, this is key to learning and motivation, their ability to reflect on what is happening to them, and the role they play and their efficacy in terms of what is happening to them. They will never be full partners in the system (Participant 11, Management body representative)

The capacity to engage students in the learning process and take ownership of their learning is not explicitly valued in the Irish education system. The difficulty of treating students as passive learners has been widely documented (Banks et al., 2010), but the students' lack of agency is echoed by the teaching cohort.

Some of the participants made links between the lack of agency and teacher identity and lack of collaborative practice encouraged in schools. Teacher identity was often linked to results achieved by students in final examinations. This was seen as problematic if the methods to achieve those results were not aligned with the values placed on a broad education, as illustrated by this comment:

> …we have certain beliefs about ourselves. So, if I have been very successful as a teacher, using a certain methodology, and driving students through in a certain way, and particularly a certain profile of students, then it's very difficult if somebody is coming and asking me to

> interrogate that and maybe to do things differently. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

Teachers who identified as a 'good teacher' because they got good results for their students, may feel threatened if there is any challenge to that vision of success in a high stakes environment. If, as was expressed by all groups of participants, success in senior cycle was generally quantified in terms of CAO points achieved, then enabling your students to get those results and points meant that you were a good teacher, without any deeper questioning of the educative value of those results. One reason proffered for the resistance to change in the system was this view of teacher identity being linked to the system being re-evaluated.

At this meso level when reflecting on the policy development processes, some of the participants drew on their previous experiences teaching in other jurisdictions. For these participants their experience in other systems caused them to question issues such as teacher identity, professionalism and educative value of curriculum that may be taken to be self-evident for those working within a system. For one participant, one of the challenges faced when returning to teach in Ireland was the absence of collaborative practice they had experienced elsewhere:

> …when I worked in England, I was very much part of a team, the subject department was a recognised entity, and you are more a member of a subject department than you were an individual teacher. So, when I came back to Ireland, …they were all working as separate entities in the school and I remember thinking, "oh my god, come back here we can learn so much from working together and from sharing and from being in each other's classrooms and 'blah, blah, blah'". They thought I had seven heads, didn't make any difference… I think the teachers here have worked in a really isolated way for so long and have managed very, very well. That... trying to get people to see and to share and to collaborate, which I think any kind of sustainable and progressive curriculum will ask you to do [is difficult]. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

The perceived lack of collaborative practice and the lack of agency experienced by teachers may well be linked. Agency and collaborative practice can be related to a sense of professionalism (Biesta et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2019; Lasky, 2005). The role of teacher professionalism was widely discussed by participants at this meso level. Many wished to see a more assertive teacher professionalism at work, where teachers would acknowledge

and take ownership of their professional authority to make decisions on the basis of their expertise. For instance:

> I think that we as professionals need to stand up a little bit more and be accountable for being really bold and brave about what we do. And holding ourselves true to the principles of Senior Cycle education, which we don't know...never mind, stand true to. They're just not part of our, of our discourse. (Participant 9, school leader)

For some, that professional confidence needed to be linked to theory in order to be taken seriously, but the lack of trust in or familiarity with theory among the teaching population was seen as a stumbling block. According to one participant:

> But there is a… there is a self-affirmation needed around professional educators, or from professional educators, that will allow us to stand up and say, thank you for your opinion - but we're the experts. And here's why. Now, the "here's why" is problematic in that that demands a) evidence for here's why we say this, but also a connection into theory. And… my real worry about our professionalism and our capacity to stand up and say, all right, that's very interesting. Now, please leave us alone to do the job, we know how to do best, my biggest worry around that is the stripping out of theory from the life of the teacher after their graduation, as a teacher. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

Where the responsibility lies for the development of an agentic professional was touched on by participants at several levels. At the external level, one participant had suggested the subject associations as the obvious conduit for this professional development. For one participant at this meso level, this role should fall to the professional associations or unions.

> …there's a whole domain of learning there that can be done around professional associations and trade unions, that is lost on people. And they're reverting to an Arthur Scargill model of, of just saying no to everything, and because they feel under siege, but really, we can do so much better than that. And I think even the founding fathers of our professional associations had a much wider vision than the current executives and leadership have. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

This issue with what we mean by professional, how that links to professional development and the role this plays in teacher agency will be further explored in the discussion section.

6.2.3.2 Structures: who is involved? Who should be?

The nature of the involvement of the participants at this meso level meant that in the discussions about the structures in place, much of the discussion centred on who was absent from the structures. For those on the outside looking in, those absences were more obvious than for those intricately involved in the formation and workings of the structures.

One of the respondents commented on the absence of cross-sectoral discussion in the policy development process. The experience of the senior cycle review included an opportunity for students in a school to speak directly to the members of the Board for Senior Cycle. For one of the participants involved in this exchange, this presented an opportunity for board members to direct their questions to the people more centrally involved in the experience.

> …they were able to speak in an informal way, which necessarily wasn't reflected, or wasn't necessarily reflected at board level. But they were speaking about the insight they got from the students, because they were probably conversing in a professional way with students for the first time. (Participant 8, school leader)

The absence of these informal structures to get feedback from students directly involved could be identified as a gap in the process and will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

Many of the participants at this meso level commented on the involvement of parents in the senior cycle review. The difficulties with finding a diverse, representative parental voice were referenced, but some commented on the presence of a parental voice that had been absent from previous discussions. For instance:

> … [The review] was giving parents a voice. And unheard parents, in our case, probably for the first time, a voice, and … people that wouldn't have been previously confident to speak and wouldn't have been recognised as speakers, with something really valuable to say, particularly the people around the LCA, I found it really insightful. (Participant 8, school leader)

Finding a broadly representative parent voice has been made, ironically, more difficult with the increased use of technology to capture that voice. According to one respondent:

> One of the phenomena in schools now are 'WhatsApp' groups of parents who build up a level of anxiety around a particular topic and can actually skew parents' associations, which can skew some in-school decision making, which can skew an entire board of management and so on. So that we really needed to be sure that what was coming in was as representative as it could have been, particularly in settings where parents wouldn't all be digitally literate and happy to do questionnaires or whatever. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

The role of the parent representative body was discussed, and some participants felt that the internal structures and fractures within that body's post primary wing had had a detrimental effect on the impact that body could have at the policy table. For instance:

> …the parents' Council at post primary…but certainly it's more effective as it is now in the last year or so, than it had been in the previous five or six years, when in many instances, even though they were a partner in education and had roles on NCSE, on Teaching Council, on NCCA, and so on, their influence was minimal because of the shattering of the structures that they had and infighting within that organisation. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

This reflection on the role and efficacy of the parent representative group had been made by participants at the external and macro level also and deserves some commentary on the representative nature of groups in the discussion chapter.

The issue of student voice, its importance, relevance and weighting, was widely discussed by participants at the meso level. Similar to the responses at the macro level, the importance of including student voice was not questioned. For one respondent:

> …to hear young people talking about their own lived experiences… is probably one of the only ways to get… other stakeholders to realise just because we lived through it 100 years ago, doesn't mean that's the same experience that's happening today. So, I would say, absolutely, I think it enriches the whole process. I think it's, it's key to change. (Participant 11, Management body representative)

So, while the relevance and importance of capturing student perspectives was not questioned, as with the other groupings, how that contribution was captured and weighted was queried by one participant. This balance between capturing a representative voice and the weighting given to expertise is a recurring theme across the dataset and will form part of the discussion in Chapter 7.

> …there are two sides to the student voice story number one is, of course, you have to capture it and you have to do it using an appropriate methodology and d'you know it has to reflect an authentic voice. But the other thing is, and the kids are still kids, and they are, by definition, not fully matured… I think we need to be conscious of proportionality. And of, of not being drawn into a politically attractive overemphasis on one voice over another. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

The voices identified by participants as not being present in the policy development process were those of teachers and principals. As with the discussion on professionalism, many felt that the teacher professional voice was not being facilitated in the curriculum development sphere and it had been hijacked by other agendas. This is illustrated below:

> …teachers, of course, have a make or break role in, in curriculum development. But they really, really need to reclaim their own space, their own voice, their own authority in this story, and not to allow other perspectives to dominate them or skew them or lead them down pathways that are ultimately populist, may be transient, maybe political, maybe, and, or are following some other agenda. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

Who gets to have a voice or a seat at the table was discussed by the external participants, particularly around the original designation of representative bodies. For those at the meso level, these decisions have a long-term impact. Some spoke of the evolution of representation on the board and council and how groups such as the NAPD gained 'designated body' status through lobbying. Others felt that even with the inclusion of the NAPD, the group that is not represented at all in the discussions is principals.

> …there's so much to be gained by a transformation of the professional representation story and particularly for principals because, strictly speaking, there's none… I think at some point, there will be something of a coup where school leaders would realise that that they are being stripped of a powerful voice and powerful level of representation in the system. (Participant 10, Management body representative)

6.2.3.3 Roles and Responsibilities

The role of representatives on the structures of the NCCA was discussed widely by respondents operating at the external and macro levels but at the meso level, while most of the participants had experience of these structures, they also had a view on the impact decisions made in the structures would have on life in their schools. For them, the discussions were not rhetorical but grounded in the real lives of the students they dealt

with on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, there was evidence of frustration with the roles taken by some representatives around the table.

> …you could see entrenched positions…And so, you, certainly on the board, you can see how people take up positions by virtue of what they are, who they represent, as opposed to the focus on the students. (Participant 8, school leader)

The lack of focus on the students was one reason for dissatisfaction, but another reason identified was what was perceived as 'entrenched positions'. The lack of willingness to move lines drawn or discuss possibilities for some representatives on NCCA structures was commented on by more than one participant, and the group most associated with this entrenchment was the ASTI. This can be observed in the following comments:

> …the stakeholders as they sit around the table, you get insights into their values, and into their priorities and into their ways of working also into their electrified lines and you can be very, no they can be quite naked at times in in in terms of "don't go here, please". (Participant 10, Management body representative)

> …from an ASTI point of view…there was an obduracy and an unwillingness to look at things in a way. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

The phrase repeatedly used across all levels of participants to describe the reason for the perceived unwillingness to progress on curricular reform was "vested interests" (Participant 12; Participant 10). At the meso level when asked to expand on this concept of "vested interests", the unions and the Department of Education were identified as having "vested interest" in stasis. The reluctance of the Department of Education to engage in change may be unsurprising, and the research outlined in chapters 2 and 3, along with some of the commentary of participants at the external and macro levels, supports this conservative view of the Department. One participant in this meso grouping succinctly described this position:

> …our departments by virtue of the nature of them, … they're all very sectional and safe, and administratively safe, and that everything has to be for fear of litigation, we have to make sure everything is covered off. (Participant 8, school leader)

Regardless of the position of the Department, ultimately the position of the Minister of the day will also have an influence on any change in the system. Some of the participants at this meso level referenced the impact of Minister Ruairi Quinn on the progress of junior

cycle reform and commented on the need for political leadership in order to progress any change, for example:

> …there's an element of political leadership and actually a vision for what ultimately, we want to do. (Participant 12, school leader representative)

As with the previous groups, one of the issues that arose was the issue of responsibility and accountability for decisions made. The frustration of some of the participants here was palpable as they discussed representatives who agreed something at a Board or Council table and then argued against it outside of the structures.

> I think we have to be held accountable to things that we agree on, and then move on… we can't have both sides of the coin... And I think maybe being held accountable to what we've signed up to, at each stage so that we're not still allowing other factors come into play. How many buy ins do we need? …if we buy into that, then there's implications for having bought in to it. And that might mean compromise. And, it might mean having to…revise what you wanted from something. (Participant 9, school leader)

The comments expressed by this participant link to some of the underpinning values and principles held by some of the participants but not necessarily shared by all; values such as trust and accountability. The conflicting values of participants have an influence on how the processes of curriculum development works. The observations on responsibilities, roles and accountability give an insight into the workings of 'partnership' in the curriculum development structures. From a critical realist perspective, these discussions on roles and structures along with the insights gained on the underpinning values and beliefs reveal the social and cultural structures at work within this space. These insights, along with the related commentary from the other levels, will form one of the sections of the discussion chapter.

6.3 Micro level interviews

As previous outlined, the designation of 'micro level' does not intend to imply a status differential between the groups of participants. The delineation seeks to clarify the involvement of this group as furthest from the policy making arena, but closest to the policy implementation space. Unlike the other groups involved in this study, the group of participants at this micro level included three distinct subgroups: teachers, parents and students. The very nature of this group and their deep involvement in the day-to-day experience of senior cycle meant that the perspectives offered were different to those of respondents from other groups. In the analysis of the themes as they emerged, it was obvious that this group had very strong opinions and views on the first theme: the purpose and aims of senior cycle, but that the depth of engagement on the other themes: the previous experience of reform and structure and agency, would be very different to that offered by the other groups.

The participants at this micro level consisted of three teachers who had been involved in the review from diverse school backgrounds, three parents who had been involved in the review from different schools and four former students who had been involved in the review from two different schools. The views of each of the groups were informed by more than their experience of the review. The teachers had a sense of the evolution of the system and the impact of changes at junior cycle to the system at senior cycle. The parent group was informed by the experience they had of senior cycle themselves as well as the varying experiences of their children. The former students offered very interesting dual perspectives both of what they thought at the time of the review and what they have discovered since leaving school and entering third level and experiencing education in a pandemic.

6.3.1 Theme 1: Purpose and aims of senior cycle

Unlike the other groups where the role the Leaving Certificate plays in society was seen as a pervasive influence on the purpose of senior cycle, in this group only one participant mentioned this role in maintaining the status quo of society. The commentary echoed many of the thoughts discussed at the other groups of participants, that the Leaving

Certificate was seen as a rite of passage and had a stabilising impact on societal norms. The stance is exemplified in the following comment:

> …it's maintaining the status quo…it's not explicit, but it's there all the time. We've seen it in so many other sacred cows in our society, Leaving Cert is one of the last ones. And, and because it suits the middle classes, it suits the educated classes, if you like, and the people who have been through third level, you know, there is also a kind of a, and a rite of passage and elements to maintaining the status quo as well with the Leaving Cert. (Participant 13, teacher)

6.3.1.1 Broad curricular aims

For most of the participants at this micro level there was an intense questioning of the broad aims of senior cycle and how well they are served by the overt focus on the final examinations. The teachers involved acknowledged the detrimental impact this focus on examinations has on deep learning or the relevance of the subject matter for their students, illustrated by this comment:

> …there is a lot of rote learning in exams, that's not deep understanding or deep learning in any way. And there is room within that, of course, depending on the teacher and the students for deep learning, but it is a system driven by exam rather than by curriculum at the moment. (Participant 13, teacher)

For students too, this focus on just passing the exam was obvious from their perspective, but some questioned whether that should be the case:

> …you're just a piece of paper, at the end of the day with the Leaving cert and it, you know, you're taught towards the exam, and that's it, there's no, it's even for the teachers, and it's not obviously not their fault, because it's their aim is to, you know, is to get you to pass this exam, but their aim shouldn't be that (Participant 22, student)

An absence of skills development in senior cycle was identified by one of the teachers as a gap in the provision at upper secondary. The impact of changes at junior cycle, where skills such as presenting and researching are part of the curriculum and assessment processes, has highlighted this absence at Leaving Certificate.

> …at the minute is you've got third year students CBA standing up making a presentation, and then you go through two years in Senior Cycle, you do none of that. And then next thing you're into college again…And I just think there's a bit of a misfit there at the minute, what's needed at college level of kind of practical, hands-on, self-directed, being able to research yourself. And also, I think what a lot of students get a land then when they go to college [with] things like referencing. (Participant 14, teacher)

This was echoed by the students who participated in this study who are now in third level and have recognised the gaps in their own education in skill development that they now feel has a place in senior cycle. The experiences of such a small sample of students can only be taken as representative of their own perception of their experiences rather than generalisable statements about senior cycle. The students in the study held strong opinions about what they now saw as gaps in their skill development at senior cycle. For these students, presentation skills and practical skills such as researching are proving imperative to their success at third level and they feel they should have been part of the learning at senior cycle. For one student, now in a university in Europe, the realisation that these skills form an intrinsic part of the learning of students elsewhere resulted in a sense of being let down by the system.

> I just presumed that I was bad at presenting and that… I wouldn't be ever good at that. I was like, how are the people? Like, you know, the Dutch or the Germans? How are they so good? …they were the same age …as me, and they'd stand up, and they'd be fine…you don't learn really any skills [in the Leaving Certificate], there's no presenting speeches, interviews, there's nothing like that. (Participant 22, student)

Some of the students in the study questioned the relevance of the learning they had experienced in senior cycle. One student spoke about her lack of proficiency in a language, despite receiving a good grade in the subject and the absence of real scientific experience in the learning in the sciences as examples of how more applied learning was missing from senior cycle due to an over emphasis on examination rather than learning.

> I went to Paris last year, and I didn't know like, how to do anything. I couldn't even read the signs on the street, … the subjects like biology or the sciences, they could be a bit more interactive…we didn't even do half the experiments we just watched them on YouTube …So you could probably get involved more just make it a bit more like hands on, it's done very to the exam and like this what you need to know for the exam so just know this kind of way. (Participant 19, student)

Two students pointed to the skills they had gained through programmes such as the LCVP and the work experience element and how they have proved to be beneficial since leaving school. For instance:

> …some of the skills that I've gained through LCVP have actually been more useful than anything I've done in six years in school…the way that they teach us how to make a CV, it just sticks with you. And it's actually a skill that you bring with you…into third level education. And then the work experience as well. (Participant 20, student)

The parents in this study questioned the singular focus on an academic pathway through senior cycle. For one parent, this pathway had suited three of her children but for the fourth, the system did not recognise their strengths and caused this parent to question the purpose of the Leaving Certificate:

> …I used to think it was for everyone, but it's not for everyone at all. And it doesn't really reflect a lot of children, doesn't really reflect the whole six years. It's sort of pinpointed into this just one a few days, depending how they are and what's going on and the stress levels (Participant 16, parent)

The need for alternative routes through senior cycle was raised by the same parent:

> … [there] could be different ways through which it [the Leaving Certificate] … wouldn't just be all academic subjects that you could have a mix and match of things that would lead you to… different stepping stones for different streams. (Participant 16, parent)

The teachers in this study commented that this singular focus on an academic pathway was causing difficulties for students in classrooms. This along with the lack of relevance of curriculum content for students who do not want a purely academic progression route after school fostered calls for change in senior cycle. The two comments below illustrate this:

> …as teachers, we see it every day, students who are getting into trouble students who do not don't identify with the academic content. And who basically misbehave because in our, in our perception, they misbehave because it doesn't ...they've no... nothing to latch on to in terms of what they're sitting in front of every day. (Participant 13, teacher)

> I think if we could have curriculum, such a curriculum where it is definitely beneficial to life after school rather than having something that teachers who are here 30 years, did when they were in their Leaving cert, I think that's really important. (Participant 14, teacher)

For one student, her experience in a university in another country where a focus on personal development was common practice, had made her question the absence of this focus in her experience in Ireland.

> …personal development and personal growth and reflection to see…you're just kind of following the crowd and people are telling you to do this… So, I think you need to maybe be able to have a meeting with someone… figure out what you're doing and why you want to do it. (Participant 22, student)

For the three subgroups (teachers, parents and students), there was a dissatisfaction expressed with the narrow examination focus of curricular aims at senior cycle and how well that served the diverse needs of students in the system.

6.3.1.2 Progression and points

One aspect of progression for students was mentioned by a parent in this group and that was the absence of progression routes into senior cycle for students who followed Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programmes at junior cycle. As previously mentioned, this was only the second reference to the L1LPs and L2LPs throughout the series of interviews. For this parent, her role as an SNA in the school had enabled her to see the other difficulties faced across senior cycle that she may not have been aware of from her own personal experience. The students following the L2LP units in her school were left in limbo with nowhere to progress in senior cycle.

> …they're going to do an L2LP, there's absolutely nowhere to go from that. I mean, as difficult the transition is from a regular Junior Cert to Senior Cycle, L2LP, like there's nowhere to go. And, you know, that's a big worry. It's currently it's more of a worry for their parents. Because I don't think the penny has dropped with the kids. (Participant 17, parent)

But for most, the issue of progression was strongly related to the route to third level. The reduction of examination results to a three-digit figure based on the ‘points’ allocated by the Central Application Office used for the purpose of filtering entry to third level

institutions was mentioned by respondents at other levels. But the role of senior cycle in providing a progression pathway to third level by means of the selection process of the CAO points allocation was most strongly questioned by this group. For one teacher, this assumed progression pathway was causing difficulties not only in senior cycle but also in third level:

> …in the bigger picture the Leaving Cert…has become a gateway to college, it has sold a pup in terms of college is suitable for everybody. And you just have to look at the first-year failure rate to realise that that's not the case. (Participant 13, teacher)

For one of the parents, the Leaving Certificate was just seen as a means to an end, that end being progression to third level.

> …that the Leaving cert was like seven, seven or eight subjects. And, you know, it was like a means to an end. And you had to get so many points to like, you know, to get on to the next step. It wasn't something that you went through and, and that you just you did all of these subjects as a love of them, or to learn or to have a love of knowledge. This was just sort of another stepping stone. (Participant 16, parent)

This utilitarian view of senior cycle as a facilitator for entry to third level was later questioned by the same parent. In this view of senior cycle, where achieving points is the ultimate aim, repeating the examinations to obtain maximum points was seen as necessary. Echoing the point raised by the student around the need for personal development, the parent recognised that where there was uncertainty about what routes the student wanted to progress, the points system did not offer any guidance.

> …my three older daughters knew exactly what they were going to do … because they wanted to do medicine and two of them had to repeat [the Leaving Certificate examinations] … to get more points … [but the youngest daughter] …she's still not 100% sure though what she wants to do so that's the dilemma. (Participant 16, parent)

For one of the students, this focus on points rather than career choice was having a detrimental impact on students' lives. Choosing a career based on what points may be achieved rather than genuine interest or aptitude was, in her opinion, leading to more stress, dissatisfaction and dropout rates in third level.

> …this is the problem with the points course, my sister is choosing her career based on the points what she can get. Because … she knows she's not going to get well, I think she's going to get 500 points, but she thinks she's going to get 450. So that's the courses that

> she's picking…She wants to do medicine, that's all she ever wanted to do... But she can't be a doctor, because there's no way she's going to get over 500 points… [the points] deter people from doing what they do people actually want to do. And then obviously, that leads to people dropping out a lot more. (Participant 20, student)

One of the more systemic difficulties raised by two of the students, was what they saw as the narrow curricular focus provided by single sex schools. Arguably for them, the absence of certain subject choices in their single sex schools from first year, limited the options available to them when they reached senior cycle. They saw this as further limiting options beyond an academic pathway into roles in apprenticeships or further education and training. Their concerns are captured in the following comments:

> …there's a lot of emphasis on going straight to third level….it was an all-girls school, and there wasn't a lot of talk about apprenticeships and stuff like that, even though there is lots of apprenticeships in like hairdressing, and beauty. (Participant 19, student)

> I know for boys, for example, they do DCG, and they do all that technical stuff, I don't even know because we didn't even have those subjects in our school. And they literally go into the exam with already 50...40 [percent] it gives them such an advantage because some schools don't even offer them subjects. So, it's just I don't think that it's fair. Like it's not balanced. (Participant 20, student)

This questioning of the fairness of the system was closely tied to the discussions on the purpose and aims of senior cycle as they are experienced through the assessment system. This micro level group was the one most closely involved in the assessment system and had strong opinions on how they would like to see it improve.

6.3.1.3 Assessment

While the assessment approaches undertaken in the Leaving Certificate were more likely to be described as 'brutal but fair' by other groups of participants, in this group the overwhelming opinion was that it was not a fair system. This can be seen in the comments below:

> …the injustice of the Leaving cert, and, you know, so… even though they did well, they had a lot to say and complain about. (Participant 17, parent)

> …the unfairness, the unfair aspect of the Leaving cert is obvious for all to see, in that it's just a snapshot. (Participant 13, teacher)

The overtly academic bias of the system of examination and assessment was seen by respondents to favour a certain type of student, one that retained information and was able to recall it on demand in an examination. This was recognised by the students themselves as they acknowledged how their own strengths were rewarded in this system. This is captured by the comments below:

> I don't think it's inclusive for all, and all children. And I think that if your talent isn't learning, and academia, there is almost a bias against you. (Participant 18, parent)

> …selfishly, it suits me, as in like, I can still rhyme off my Irish essay from two years ago. Like, that's just the type of person I am. (Participant 19, student)

But even those students who felt they had benefitted from the system of examination in place, now feel that they could have done better if a broader selection of skills had been examined, based on their experience of third level. This is exemplified in the following comment:

> I like the exams; I think I know that they suit me. So, I like the fact that I had to go in and I had to do exams. But if I, if I had continuous assessment throughout the thing, throughout the year, I would have done so much better. And it would have prepared me for college because college continues. It's just continuous assessment, really, it's a mix of exams and continuous assessment. (Participant 20, student)

As with the other groups of participants, the phrase 'continuous assessment' was used in relation to the types of assessments they would like to see in senior cycle. However, as with the other groups, there was a varied understanding of what this might entail. For each of the three teachers in the study, the experience of the predicted grades process had positively influenced their opinions on the idea of continuous assessment, as illustrated in the comments below:

> …the predicted grades really brought something to light, I think as well. And some teachers would have had plenty of results and things to go by and could have predicted things really well. And then maybe others didn't have as many tests and things to go by. So that definitely, I think the predicted grades, were kind of like, yeah, should there have been a continuous assessment all along? And can it be, can it be 50/50? (Participant 14, teacher)

> …if parents don't have students who are doing a lot of practical subjects, or subjects that are assessed, before they get to the exam, they don't realise that actually, quite a few subjects are like that already. And the world hasn't fallen apart, you know, and, and what the, that was the big message, there was a definite feeling that there should be some form of alternative assessment or continuous assessment, whatever you want to call it. (Participant 13, teacher)

> I think we saw last year with the predicted grades, if we had … more continuous assessment, it would have been easier to give grades to students…And I do think the students in our school were quite pleased with their predicted grades …you would have had a grade that was maybe a little bit more not fair but, accurate, I suppose, if we had more continuous assessment up along. (Participant 15, teacher)

The other influence reported by the teachers in the study was their experience of the changes at junior cycle, where classroom-based assessments include scope for assessment of skills such as presentation skills or research skills.

> …the thing with continuous assessment is as well, like we see the kids do under Junior cycle all of their presentations on their projects, you learn a lot more skills while you're doing it, as well, as you know, you learn you're learning the skills and the material, as opposed to just the material by rote to be able to regurgitate it at the end. (Participant 15, teacher)

For the parents, they expressed a desire for a more equitable system than the current arrangements in the form of continuous assessment that would take into account the work completed by the student over the course of the two years of study.

> …that seems unfair to have someone studying constantly and for it not to count you know, like to count for something. You've put in an awful lot of effort and for to mean nothing for all hinge on an exam at the end of Senior Cycle two years. (Participant 17, parent)

> If it was over two years, if there was a collective, like there is an England by the time you get to your final exams in England, you already have your place in college. And so, it's not a negative. I think perhaps if we did take into account the work from their fifth year, as well as their sixth year, it gives a better view of the student. (Participant 18, parent)

It was the students however who had interesting ideas informed by their experience about what could be included in continuous assessment, how it could be implemented and, importantly, the pitfalls to avoid. These considerations are outlined in the following comments:

> What we're saying is we want the exams to be less focused on the grades to be less focused on the exam, and the workload when you come to exams to be smaller as well. If they leave that the workload the same and just add on extra projects for us for continuous assessment, then that's just, that's just going to be bad and then that's gonna there's going to be difficulty changing, but if they do it properly, they take what we said into consideration. I think the change won't be too difficult. (Participant 20, student)

> …this man who said, you know, is it not... is it not stressful? His point of view is like, okay, it's an exam at the end or exams, exams, exams, it's like, you know, he's straightaway just thinking, he's putting it in a box, and you're like, you need to open up your mind a little bit more to that, and not to straightaway judge it as it's going to be stressful, it's going to be this. Because if you, you know, if you implement it, right, and I think you're actually taking away a lot of stress in one sense…So it's not just exams, it's not just projects, but you know, there's a lot of things that can be taken into play, there can be, you know, participation in class, presentations, projects, exams, you know, there needs to be a mix. (Participant 22, student)

The 'man' and the incident mentioned by the student here referred to a presentation made in the course of the review to one of the NCCA structures where the students spoke of their concerns and issues around assessment. The 'man', a representative on the Board for Senior Cycle, asked if continuous assessment would not just mean more stress as it would be more exams to be completed at different points in the two years of study. The experience of university in another country had reaffirmed this student's belief that alternatives to this written form of assessment could be found (such as presentations, participation) and that these would provide a more rounded view of student learning. The system of assessment currently in place was also seen as having a negative impact on the mental health of the students.

6.3.1.4 Stress

It is no surprise that in this group of participants, so closely involved in the processes under discussion, the impact on the mental health of students was strongly referenced. For all subgroups, teachers, parents and students, the negative impact of the stress of the Leaving Certificate was mentioned. Various factors were identified as causes of that stress: the pressure of a single assessment point, time constraints within exams, workload across subjects, media hype and the points system.

> It's a horrible experience, let's face it, and it's not good for mental health. It's not good. It's not good for a lot of students' self-esteem (Participant 13, teacher)

One student pointed out that even if a student had worked hard over the course of the two years and did well in the exams, the CAO system was such that they still would not know if they got what they needed to access the course until the CAO offers were published. The arbitrary nature of this supply and demand system increased the pressure on students where clear goals could not be specified.

> …the points system is the most stressing thing. That's the most … that's what stresses people out, it's not even half of it's not even the exam, you know, you've been preparing for the exams for two years, you know that you're going to go in and you have some sort of knowledge. But the points system is the uncertain thing in the Leaving cert. It's the thing that… and it's the thing that people fear the most. It's not the exams, it's the points system. (Participant 20, student)

But this pressure to achieve the points for specific courses was not the only pressure felt. One parent reported on the stress felt by a student who was not striving to achieve certain points.

> …students there who, you know, very high achievers, you know, they had a lot to say, they were under a massive amount of stress. But they were under the same amount of stress as students who like one girl, I remember vividly, she was going to be hairdresser, there was no real reason for her to be as stressed out as she was, but there, there's so much pressure even just from each other, from their peers, from parents, like everyone wants everyone, this is the be all and end all for kids their age, and it's just too much. (Participant 17, parent)

6.3.1.5 Mandatory subjects

The discussions on stress often reverted to commentary on the mandatory nature of certain subjects in the curriculum. As outlined in Chapter 2, the only mandatory subject for completion at Leaving Certificate is Irish (unless an exemption is gained). The influence of the entry requirements for certain universities, which dictate the inclusion of English, mathematics and in some cases a foreign language, has meant that for most students these subjects are viewed as mandatory. In these discussions, the subject most commented on was Irish.

Parents, students and teachers commented to some extent on the teaching and assessment of Irish. While some recognised that Irish was necessary for some occupations (primary school teaching was the most frequently mentioned), they also suggested that an

alternative, more conversational Irish should also be available for study, without the pressure of learning for examination. The most often mentioned aspect of the assessment of Irish was the oral examination, in particular, the inclusion of the *sraith pictiúr* (series of pictures).

> …if you could have Irish for people who want to go on to do primary school teaching versus Irish for people, maybe that want to carry out a conversation, write letters, write in Irish, but they don't want to know about the history or the literature. (Participant 14, teacher)

> …for the Irish oral, you're learning like, it's almost like people are learning to hate the language, like everyone, like no one wants to be learning the 20, *sraith pictiúr*, (Participant 19, student)

The *sraith pictiúr* are a sequence of twenty cartoon pictures of scenarios designed to initiate conversation in the oral examination. Any one of the twenty may be selected by the examiner at the start of examination. After the candidate describes what is happening in the picture, the rest of the formal conversation with the examiner begins. Since the introduction of the *sraith pictiúr* and the increase in marks for the oral examination to 40% in 2012, the unintended outcome has been that students are given pre-prepared descriptions to learn by rote to repeat in the examination. The longer and more detailed the descriptions, the less time will be available to engage in real conversation with the examiner. The negative impact of this practice has been well documented elsewhere (Nic Eoin, 2017; O Curraoin, 2017). For one student, the requirement to include Irish was seen as an added burden as she was born outside the state and had gained some of her education elsewhere, but she failed to qualify for an exemption. This situation was described as even more problematic as she was often taken out of Irish class to learn English during her primary schooling but yet expected to have achieved a certain level in Irish for secondary school.

> …so, you have to you've been learning Irish since you were before 11. And that's enough to, you know, enough to know, for going into secondary school, but they forget about the fact that we are always taken out of class, especially during Irish class to be learning English. And it's just like, I never, I had to learn two languages at once that were completely new to me. So, it was really, really hard. (Participant 20, student)

The case for the mandatory inclusion of some subjects, namely English and mathematics, was made by some participants who cited the need for a literacy or numeracy standard to be attained for Leaving Certificate students. But, for most of the participants in this micro grouping any degree of compulsion was described as unfair in a system where gaining points was seen as the primary aim of Leaving Certificate and yet, those who had talents in areas other than languages were seen as unfairly limited in the subject choices they could make. These concerns were found across the subgroups and are well captured by the comments below:

> I just feel that some students would love to be doing maybe four option subjects, five option subjects, and they've given up an option subject such as a science subjects or business because they have to do Irish, or they have to do maths. But yet, they're not their best subjects… I just think are they being kind of being denied? You know, two years of a subject that they really would enjoy and could do very well in (Participant 14, teacher)

> …but if you're, you know, if what you want to study doesn't need, or will ever include foreign language, like, a lot of work, I mean, a real lot of work goes into it, that you could focus on something that would better, you know, suit you (Participant 17, parent)

> I would have liked when you come to the Leaving cert that you … there's no compulsory subjects. (Participant 20, student)

6.3.1.6 Collaboration

For the student group in this study, all of whom were then in third level education, commentary on their experience of the Leaving Certificate often reflected on the contrasting educational experiences they have had since entering third level. One of the areas most mentioned was collaboration. Some felt that the Leaving Certificate assessment practices were focused on the individual and that their experiences of groupwork in third level had given them different perspectives on the importance of collaborative work in senior cycle. For instance:

> … most of the Leaving cert or if not all of it, is just you on your own. So obviously when the teachers are going to teach it, they teach to you mainly like you do your own work kind of thing. Whereas in college, there's a lot of group work. There's a lot of like, even just like in labs, like you have a lab partner, and you're both writing up the thing together…I would have been like, no, like, I don't like working with people. Like I'd rather just do it myself. But yeah, you have to do that in life. You know what I mean? Like you have to go to work

> and work …work with people. So, you may as well just do it from the start. (Participant 19, student)

Even for a student who expressed a hatred of groupwork, “I have a hatred for group work…I hate that my grade depends on somebody else.” (Participant 20, student), when reflecting on the experience in third level, she could identify some of the strengths of this approach.

> …in group projects is where you learn that is where you learn how to write essays and how to write assignments because that is where I learned all the few things that I'm like, there's some things that I wrote, I would do a group project and after that I would be like, going through the individual essays that I had written before the individual assignments that I had done before. And I'm like, I cannot believe I sent that in. (Participant 20, student)

However, these reflections are personal to these students and may not reflect the experiences of all students at senior cycle. But for all of the participants at the micro level one of the underpinning values that was consistently reiterated was fairness. Students talked about the fairness of the lack of subject choices, of the assessment methods and the unfair application of the points system to assign third level places. Parents talked of the unfair levels of stress experienced by their children and teachers spoke of the limited fairness of the assessment system. A further exploration of these values and principles will follow in the discussion chapter.

6.3.2 Theme 2: Experience of curricular reform

For the participants in the micro grouping, the engagement with previous experiences of reform in the education system was slighter than the other groups of participants. The transitory nature of students and parents in the system goes some way to explain this. As such, the discussions on the complexity of curriculum change were very different with this group of participants. The teachers in this study did have their experience of the implementation of Junior Cycle reform to draw from and made comparisons with their experience of this review.

The participants at the micro level were all directly involved in the review of senior cycle explored in this study. As such, their experiences of this aspect of curricular reform has more immediacy than the other groups. They were the students and parents consulted in

schools. They were teachers who organised the staff feedback and worked directly with the NCCA mentors. They attended conferences and brought back feedback to their schools to inform the second phase of the review. In this context then, the contributions of this group give an insight into the experience of the review on the ground and can give valuable guidance on engaging with different stakeholders in future reviews or consultations.

6.3.2.1 Lack of previous knowledge

For the student and parent participants in this study, their involvement in the Senior Cycle Review was their first experience of the processes of curricular reform. In the interviews, they were asked what their knowledge or awareness of the processes of curricular development was prior to that involvement. Most of the participants at the micro level stated that their knowledge of the processes of curricular reform was hazy or non-existent. Most referenced some distant authoritarian figure or group who they presumed made policy decisions from on high, illustrated by the comments below:

> I presumed the Department of Education and Science get together, and they come up with the curriculum, how they do it - complete mystery. No idea. (Participant 18, parent)

> I actually didn't realise that it was such a huge, huge undertaking, and that so many people would be consulted. (Participant 15, teacher)

> I thought that decisions were made by a few people up in the, I don't know, education sphere. (Participant 20, student)

The lack of awareness in the system, including in the teaching profession, of how curriculum is developed or that there is a wide consultation process embedded in that system, would seem to have implications for the authenticity and validity of any consultation process conducted. It also implies that greater communications are needed to promote those consultation processes in the system. But, unlike the other groups of participants, the cynicism around consultation was not found with this group. The opposite was the case. The participants were uniformly grateful to be asked to be involved and welcomed the opportunities to offer their opinions in the review.

> But I actually I was very glad to find out that students are involved in making decisions and changes and the way it was all done with the talking and the just letting ideas flow I really

> liked I didn't know that that was how change came about. So, I really liked that it was inclusive of everybody's opinions. (Participant 20, student)

6.3.2.2 Experience of the Senior Cycle Review

In criticism of the review, some commentators questioned the representative nature of the review participants, so in this study all participants at the micro level were asked about the representation of their groups: how they were selected, were voices listened to, the divergence or conformity of opinions. The teachers discussed various methods they had used to gather the opinions of staff including staff surveys, staff meetings, focus groups and wider feedback sessions. The students were of the opinion that the student groups were randomly selected and broadly representative of the varied school population. The parent groups had been gathered via the parents' associations and as such were limited by the previous involvement of parents in those associations. One parent commented that the representation at parents' associations was almost exclusively female and rarely included representatives of diverse ethnic backgrounds and so in the parental sector a more homogeneous group would seem to be represented.

> I suppose the Parents' Association, itself as a group doesn't give the complete perspective of parents. So, we may have been not getting the full view of parents…And so what would I do differently, and I would use more time to communicate with the Parents' Association. And for that word to go out and get more collaborative information back from all the parents. (Participant 18, parent)

The almost completely female representation on Parent Association groups was commented on by more than one parent in the study and on reflecting on this, the respondents considered the lack of balanced representation an issue for those groups on a local and national level. However, it is interesting to note that despite the almost exclusive female representation at a local level, at national level there have been various male representatives of the National Parents' Council Post Primary on curriculum structures.

> …the father's going to the… the interested fathers…they were looked at in amazement, because they could contribute so much. And they were amazing, because they had gone to the trouble of going, no, never mind all of us, like, like, 80/ 90% of us were women. We weren't admired at all, because it was almost like an unspoken thing that women... and I've

> always found that, and I don't know will that change? And maybe it has changed, but I don't think so. It's always the mothers. (Participant 16, parent)

> It was all moms …I know, my husband wouldn't have gone, he would have said, oh, you go You're the one who's dealing with [son] anyway. Mostly, you know? Maybe that's how it is? I don't know. I really don't know. I mean, we were kind of shocked like that it was all moms. (Participant 17, parent)

One comment that was repeated by each of the subgroups was that they felt listened to, often for the first time, in relation to their opinions on the big issues in education. The organisation of consultation events where students, teachers and parents were all present to hear other voices were commented on as promoting an egalitarian approach to the review. For instance:

> I liked the way we were seated, that it was teachers, parents, and all together at the one table that it wasn't us and them already, that there was... I was sitting beside the other staff members, you know, and so therefore, I felt was that my voice was equal. (Participant 18, parent)

> …for me, it was absolutely amazing to be able to voice my opinion, and not just mine, but like, you know, everyone's, and I think it's such an important thing to include the students as well, and to listen to them, because I don't think anyone you know… they're the people you should be talking to definitely. (Participant 22, student)

One teacher participant though, spoke of an occasion at an event where he did not feel listened to. The event was one of the national conferences outlining the emerging themes of the review to a broad audience of stakeholders and where some of the teacher, student and parent representatives were invited to give their feedback. The teacher involved was seated at a table with a number of other stakeholders that he described as “union city”. The response he received to offering his positive experience of junior cycle implementation is outlined below.

> …they were talking about the junior cycle and how it was a wholly negative experience and the way it was imposed, and all they were making unanimous, like just saying that all no teachers like this. No, no, nobody wants to assess their own students. It's all been a negative experience. And I spoke up at the table and I said: well, that's not my experience. I said, this is my experience, and I spoke for about 10 minutes, and nobody'd talk to me at the table except for except for one person. After that, that was towards the end, they looked at me like I was from a different planet, they talked to ... I the impression I get was

> that they, they're in agreement with each other a lot. And that my reality didn't interest them, because it didn't fit with their world picture. (Participant 13, teacher)

The overall experience of the review discussed by the participants was at odds with this incident. Participants at the micro level spoke of the variety of opinions that were heard, how diverse voices were listened to and how they began to appreciate other perspectives by being exposed to these differing opinions. This is well captured by the following comments:

> …they did voice their opinions. And people had different opinions. And you know, we'd be all amazed everybody else's thinking on it. (Participant 16, parent)

> …and so, it felt like we were our opinions were valued, like people were actually... they cared. (Participant 19, student)

> …if people did have different points of view, then that was welcomed. So, you would have, I would have felt very comfortable in expressing a view that that wasn't popular. So, I did feel there was an openness to listen to all views, whether they were popular or not. And in fact, I suppose most of the views were looking for change. And, and I felt that the whole process was very open to that. And listen, listening to voices that went No, we want we want something different. (Participant 18, parent)

In addition to the value ascribed above to feeling listened to, one teacher spoke of actively listening during the experience of the review and how valuable it was to hear other voices and perspectives on education.

> …it was a lovely balance to that year, in terms of my professional development, you know, in listening to those professional voices and best practice and international research and, having great conversations with all the school community was a lovely year. (Participant 13, teacher)

One area that caused the participants at the micro level some frustration was the timeframe for change outlined in the review. Many mentioned that they felt change could happen quicker in the system, and, given the context of when the interviews were conducted, referenced the magnitude of changes that had impacted the system as a result of Covid 19 that were implemented on a very short timescale.

> …I was shocked really about how long it takes, you know, like for something to me, that seems like oh, we should bang this out like in two years tops, you know, and for I remember they told us, I wonder, I think they said it was gonna take a minimum of eight years to roll this out. I just I could not get my head around that like, why? everything is there. Everything we need is already happening. (Participant 17, parent)

> I've left school and after two year and, like, still, nothing's changed. But you know, as in, it's a long process. (Participant 19, student)

The other frustration referenced by the participants was the lack of feedback on the final outcome of the review. As referenced in Chapter 2, the final advisory report on the review was completed in 2019 and due for publication in 2020 but due to the impact of Covid 19, the report was further amended to reflect the situation and eventually sent to the Minister in May 2021. It was finally published on March 29th, 2022. This delay has resulted in a lack of feedback to the schools and participants involved in the review. The frustration with the lack of feedback, closure or outcome from the review was evident in the comments.

> …there is obviously a hiatus, which is natural in these processes, you know, this ...that energy at the start, because it is so such a wide funnel up at the start and so many voices in so many useful conversations, and then there is that inevitable lull, kind of at the end of that stroke if you like. So, we're all waiting to see what will happen... cause that's the next stage of the process is internal, more than external, you know, but eh... it would be nice to be kept in the loop about that a little bit more, otherwise, that sense of a vested interest might ebb away a little bit...just be kept updated to be kept part of it. (Participant 13, teacher)

The importance of feedback and closing the loop at the end of a consultation process is well documented (Flynn & Hayes, 2021). The absence of that closure in the experience of the review may have unintended negative consequences for consultations in the future where these same participants, who did not have a cynical view of consultations at the outset of the process, may become more wary of involvement when they feel their participation has not led to any meaningful change. The importance of feedback and its impact on future consultative processes will be explored in Chapter 7.

6.3.2.3 Experience of Junior Cycle reform

The experience of junior cycle reform of the students and parents in the study was limited to their perspectives of younger siblings engaging with different types of assessment such as CBAs. Some of the students spoke of their surprise at seeing younger siblings engaged in preparing presentations for CBAs and expressed a wish that they had developed those skills before going on to third level. The teachers involved brought a perspective of junior cycle reform based on their experience in the classroom, unlike the perspectives of participants in other groups who viewed the experience of junior cycle from a more theoretical or political standpoint. For the teachers, the experience of junior cycle was positive involving a wider assessment of learning and development of skills that are absent from senior cycle. The inclusion of presentations and groupwork in the CBAs was commented on as having direct relevance for learning in third level or further education and that the absence of these skillsets in Leaving Certificate was seen by participants as a difficulty in the system. For instance:

> …at the minute you've got third year students CBA standing up making a presentation, and then you go through two years in Senior Cycle, you do none of that. And then next thing you're into college again…so you go from the new Junior cycle to the old Leaving cert. And I just think there's a bit of a misfit there at the minute, but yeah like what's needed at college level of kind of practical, hands-on, self-directed, being able to research yourself (Participant 14, teacher)

One of the participants felt that the compromises made to implement junior cycle in the Travers agreement (the reinstating of state certified assessment, the loss of the 40% weighting for the classroom-based assessments and the introduction of the assessment task) compromised the integrity of the curricular reforms proposed. He outlined what he saw as the problem of consensus thinking for curricular innovation:

> I think the junior cycle was a lesson in consensus failure. And in that there was a process of consensus. That was a process which the vested interests and the groups were listened to more than the individuals. And I know that's and almost impossible not to do because you have unions representing teachers, you have professional organisations representing teachers you have, you know, parents' groups, etc, etc. I think the short cut was taken a little bit with the junior cycle. And then in the mid part of that curriculum development the concessions are obvious to see in the day to day running of that now. And it was disappointing. And it was to try and force it over the line I saw in the last third of that

> process, there was a lot of stuff dropped out that was at the core of it. And that was the heart of the junior cycle development. And, and I think it's a little bit hollow now, and really needs to be revisited again. (Participant 13, teacher)

The positive perspectives of the students and teachers of junior cycle implementation is at odds with the negative experiences reported by policy actors in the other groups. The experience of the teacher at the conference where his positive experience was dismissed by policy actors at the table suggests, at least on this occasion, that there is a disconnect between the experiences of the teachers in the classroom and the opinions of the policy actors at the negotiating tables. This may implications for any changes or planned reform of senior cycle where the stakeholders engaged in policy development are not necessarily representing the full spectrum of experience of those on the ground.

6.3.3 Theme 3: Structure and Agency

Due to their lack of direct involvement with the structures around curriculum and policy development, the micro level group had less to say on the issue of structures in the system. They did however reflect on their agency or lack of agency within the system in relation to their experience of the review.

6.3.3.1 Agency

One of the most consistent comments emerging from the micro level group of participants was the value given to the inclusion of student voice and the agency all subgroups felt it gave the students. The student contribution was valued because it was articulate and spoke of issues not considered by the other stakeholders.

> I found as a parent sitting there thinking, I knew the system. I found it a revelation listening to the students themselves who are actually going through it. So, I think it's hugely important to have the students involved. I think their opinions matter. And I think even though we say we understand the students, it's not until we sit and listen to them, that, you get a good perspective. (Participant 18, parent)

The value of the student contribution to the review was contrasted by students with the sometimes tokenistic involvement of students in school structures.

> …when it came to like, education and curriculum, at the end of the day, the teachers are just, you know, they have to get you over the line to teach to the exam to get you. So, I don't think so. Like we obviously we have a student council and stuff like that for other issues. But like when it came to academic, I don't think it made a difference. (Participant 19, student)

One student spoke of the importance of involving students like them with different experiences, backgrounds and viewpoints, in the discussions around curriculum.

> …I mean, there should be because, like, students in a way are like clients right or like customers of this service, and you know, businesses, and company are always getting feedback on what customers think. So, kind of students are like in the same essence. (Participant 21, student)

Some of the schools represented in the study claimed a strong history of student voice in the decision-making procedures in their schools and felt that the involvement in the review built on those structures and gave more agency to the student voice. Illustrated in the comments below:

> …we would have a culture of student voice anyway, in the school. And so it was kind of a natural, the students didn't hesitate for a minute…And what we do with the student groups in school is we kind of almost ensure that their voice has a bit of product at the end, you know, that something comes of it, because that's feeds back into the energy for the next project if you like, you know, so rather than it being in any way, tokenistic. (Participant 13, teacher)

> …there's a lot of talk about student voice and everything like that, but it very much empowered the students to, you know, thinking that their opinion mattered and that their opinion was valuable. (Participant 15, teacher)

One of the comments about student voice made by one of the teachers was about the different type of student voices that were heard in the review. In the case of one of the conferences, students from an inner-city school spoke about their experiences of the review.

> …like hearing students with that accent and talk..., you don't hear that all the time, you know, and the two… they're very well spoken, very opinionated. And I think, you know, I remembered the people in the conference like clapping afterwards, you know, after the things that they said it was really, really good. Because you don't hear that accent all the time saying those types of things. It's extra, you know, extra special? (Participant 15, teacher)

In light of these comments, the issue of student representation is complex and needs considerable unpacking in further discussion on this topic.

For the parent participants, being asked to contribute to discussions on the key issues in education was a departure for the parents' associations. They felt their role was often relegated to fundraising and their inputs on other issues were not sought. In this way their involvement in the review gave them some agency.

> …I suppose Parents' Association sometimes can be seen just fundraising. So, this was nice that our opinions as parents were was taken into account as well. (Participant 18, parent)

Some of the teachers involved reported that the review gave them more insight into the macro picture of education that they are usually not privy to. This was perceived as a form of professional development that may not be adequately supported in the system.

> …I don't think teachers and deputy principals and principals get in the normal run of things get too much insight into that…I loved the conferences in terms of getting the macro picture we don't often as school leaders, get an opportunity to be exposed to you know, an international research and have conversations, important conversations with people about all sorts of people, from parents to students to, you know, school leaders to you know, ESRI the unions, etc. like sitting around your table, having those conversations is really healthy. (Participant 13, teacher)

For those who are directly involved in the delivery and outputs of the education system, this group of teachers, parents and students all felt in some way marginalised or side-lined by the curriculum development processes. Parents felt they had little role beyond raising funds for schools, students felt their voices were limited to in-school issues such as uniform policy. Even teachers and school leaders here felt that they had little insight into the processes involved in curriculum development. This has implications for all stakeholders in

the system which will be discussed in the next chapter. If there is no movement towards change in the system when these voices spoke strongly in favour in change, there may be implications for further developments.

> I think, voice, whether it's student voice, parents voice, when a lot of people are saying the same thing on a regular basis, I think, yes, that is one thing. If there's if people are beating a loud enough drum, something has to change. (Participant 14, teacher)

6.4 Conclusion

The close textual analysis of the interviews across the four groups of participants involved in this study across the external, macro, meso and micro levels of policy development, reveals some interesting areas of similarity and contrast in relation to senior cycle and the experience of the review. The purpose and aims of senior cycle in general and the Leaving Certificate in particular reveal a common concern with the role of the Leaving Certificate in maintaining the 'status quo' in society, the progression of students to third level and the development of a broad holistic curriculum. Participants at all levels queried the link between achieving those aims and the dominance of a singular assessment method. These concerns echo the work of Van den Akker and Thijs (2009) where dissatisfaction was experienced if there was a perceived imbalance between the multiple aims of the curriculum. For Van den Akker and Thijs these aims were summarised by the headings: knowledge/qualification, social preparation and personal development. Similarly for Biesta (2015) they are summarised by the domains qualification, socialisation and subjectification. In the Irish context, the overt focus on the qualification aspect of senior cycle to the detriment of the social and personal development aspects, was where the greatest dissatisfaction was expressed. These views on the aims of curriculum would seem to incorporate more of the concerns of the *Didaktik* tradition than the standard discourse around Anglo-American cultural constructs of curriculum. The inclusion of the personal holistic development, civic responsibility and development of critical faculties has echoes of the concept of *Bildung* and *Didaktik* curriculum theory outlined by Deng (2018, 2022), Klafki (2000) and Westbury (2000). This cultural shift, called for by Gleeson (2021), was seen at all levels of the discussions with the participants, not just at the policy-making

levels, but also at the policy implementation and curriculum enactment level of classrooms and schools.

For most participants the previous experience of reform had coloured perceptions of what was possible in the Irish system. For the external, meso and macro levels one of the difficulties observed by the participants was the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities within the curriculum development structures. For the teachers, students and parents at the micro level there was an almost complete lack of awareness of these structures and a disconnect from the process of curriculum development and consultation.

From a Critical Realist viewpoint, it was useful to take the Biesta et al. (2015) model of agency based on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to examine the agency of actors and structures in the policy development process. The importance of previous policy development experience as well as life histories and personal experience of the Leaving Certificate was obvious in the interviews but their importance in terms of agency is in the iterational space identified in Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's diagrammatic model (see 3.1.8). The iterational space of life histories and professional histories was evident in every conversation with the participants in this study. Every participant began with an overview of their involvement in education to date and most linked their formative experiences with strongly held beliefs about the power or value of education. Those who had experienced a different education system, either through working in another country or their experiences as students in other jurisdictions, brought that learning to their views of the education system in Ireland. In the projective aspect, they often referenced how they hoped the system would develop based on these experiences. The result in the practical-evaluative space was the agency they experienced in the policy development process bringing these influences together in a moment in time.

The engagement of actors with the present, the practical evaluative aspect, according to Biesta et al.'s model, can be examined under cultural, structural and material headings. Under the cultural heading, Biesta has listed ideas, values, beliefs and language. This echoes the findings of this research that the underpinning values and beliefs of the actors involved have an influence on the actions undertaken. The structural aspect, the relationships, roles, power and trust, between actors in the policy development field have

a direct impact on the agency experienced. In the analysis of the discussions with participants, the relationships between the actors and the structures and the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities has resulted in clashes between the groups and resulted in a lack of trust and arbitrary wielding of power, resulting in most actors reporting a lack of agency in the process of development

Underpinning all of the discussions was a fundamental belief in certain values and principles such as fairness, trust and equity, but how to achieve those principles varied according to the perspectives of the participant. For those at the macro level there were conflicting values placed on innovation and pragmatism which is not surprising given the negotiated space of the policy arena they inhabit. In the meso and micro levels there were increasing references to the transactional value of education, as the learning translated to examinations and points and eventually, access to third level and the prospect of economic stability. The implications for these underpinning values will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The insights gained from working with participants with various roles and capacities within a stratified system of policy development led to a powerful analysis of the data. The indications are that the experience of the policy development space is deeply rooted in the lived experience of the participants and continues to be influenced and shaped by that experience. A closer exploration and detailed discussion of these issues will follow in Chapter 7.

7. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

7.0 Introduction

The preceding chapters present the findings from a study in the nature and detail of partnership related activity within the Senior Cycle Review initiated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Ireland, 2017-2019. They describe and go some way towards clarifying the characteristics and determinants of this partnership and point to its specific and particular features – notably the stratified nature of opportunities to participate that it offered, the differing experiences of the participants depending on their roles, interests, and functions across the life of the Review, and the underpinning influence of the values and beliefs based on prior experiences of the participants in the Review. These values and beliefs are intrinsically linked to the cultural and societal value placed on senior cycle education in Ireland as experienced by these participants.

The work was approached from a critical realist perspective which drew its conceptual and theoretical stance principally from Alderson (2020), Elder-Vass (2007, 2012), Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015), and Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Consequently, the critical realist ontology which underpins this research sees the primary concern as determining the causal powers of structures in order to reveal what lies beneath. Following Elder-Vass (2007), the research examined social structures and outlined why studying these, even though these are the product of individuals interacting, can offer otherwise easily overlooked insights into causal powers that are not reducible to those of the individuals involved. This posits that critical realism offers a powerful means of revealing the origins and workings of both individual actors / agents participation in partnership activity and the structures connected to their roles and interests within the reform processes. In this way, we can access and so understand the world of partnership and its outcomes beyond the simply observable, empirical level. The research placed the partnership activities described by the respondents firmly in the social partnership tradition which can be argued to characterise much of the activity undertaken by government departments when there is a strong element of public interest in an area facing reform. It also located much of the policy processes underpinning the Review within

the highly technical, new public management modality increasingly evident in recent years within public policy work in the Republic of Ireland and indeed globally. This modality centres on agency in all its forms and the characteristics of structures that can assist or impede reform.

The findings chapters are therefore constructed around the detail of the experience of partnership reported by participants exercising very different degrees of authority and influence within the Review, and their accounts often hinge on what happens when the agentic power of those participating as social partners in the change process is undermined by the structures in place. The result is a unique reading of the partnership activities underscoring the Review that reflects both the cultural context and policy-work setting and presents the experiences and insights of the participants from their perspectives and in their own voices. Chapter 5 offers an essentially external perspective on the Review. The materials in this chapter are drawn from detailed interviews and discussions with curriculum experts and academics – both Irish and international – not directly involved in the review process but with deep and considered knowledge and understandings of curriculum reform. It also included a politician who contributed a unique perspective and interesting insights on the Review and the structures in place based on their experiences leading or supporting curricular reform from a political stance. Chapter 6 presents findings rooted in the experiences and insights into its partnership activities by participants directly involved in the Review itself. This chapter's materials are taken from detailed interviews with individuals drawn into the Review through social partnership arrangements, the individual teachers, parents and students who experienced the review in their context and also the professional policy makers charged by the curriculum agency to lead and manage the Review. The narratives carried the weight of the history of curriculum development these policy makers had been involved in. This curriculum backstory set the focus for the interviews and revealed the long shadows cast by previous events and the impact of these events on the beliefs and values of the participants.

The findings chapters give voice to the various participants in this study and reveals the commonalities and differences between these groups and their experience of the Senior Cycle Review. It also revealed the importance of the shared histories as determinants of

both contribution and outcomes within the partnership process. These shared experiences comprised not only understandings of the education system and of curriculum reform but also – in many cases – understandings gained through previous efforts at reform of that system. Perspectives from the different vantage points accessible to different participants provided valuable insight into the disparity between the experiences of the same events and the often contradictory beliefs and values that underpin the roles and positions adopted by the various participants. For those in the academic or political sphere, the experience of curriculum proved often detached and their concerns seemed to rest mainly with systemic difficulties. For those closer to the lived experience of curriculum – the teachers, parents and students – the concerns and issues articulated differently. The narratives offered by these individuals tended to centre on the impacts of reform and the implications of these for practice.

7.1 Finding agency

Considerable extra value was gained from the findings chapters by presenting the experiences of participants in the partnership activities in terms of concerns for what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe as the 'iterational space of life histories and professional histories'. The influence of this 'iterational space' was evident in conversation with every participant in this study. Almost inevitably, participants began their narrative with an overview of their involvement in education to date and most linked their most formative personal and professional experiences with strongly held beliefs about the power or value of education. Those who had experienced a different education system, either through their experiences working in another country or as students in other jurisdictions, brought that learning to their views of the education system in Ireland and to the account of their experiences in the Review process under study. In the projective aspect, they often referenced how they hoped the system would develop based on these experiences. The result in the practical-evaluative space was the agency they experienced in the policy development process bringing these influences together in a moment in time.

Of the characteristics relating to agency identified by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) the element which proved particularly useful in drawing insights from the findings presented in the preceding chapters was what they term the *practical-evaluative* – the idea that much

of the agentic opportunity connected to meaningful participation is limited by both the process and intentions connected to role. In their own treatment of this, they define this element as *"the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations."* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971, italics in the original). Biesta et al. (2015) delineate this further and ascribe certain cultural, structural and material aspects to this element. In the cultural domain they include the ideas, values, beliefs, discourses and language of the actors; the structural domain includes social structures (relationships, roles, power, trust) and the material domain includes resources and physical environment. Each of these elements is pertinent to this research but the values and beliefs of the participants along with the structures, roles and relationships emerged as essential to the agentic responses of the actors.

7.2 The importance of values

In the values coding carried out on the data, one of the striking themes that emerged was the strong values and principles espoused by all participants in the research; values and principles that were sometimes shared with other participants, but in some cases, values that clashed with the implicit values of other participants. These clashing values often underpinned the areas where conflict was evident in the policy development space such as assessment and aims of education. These values and principles often underpin the expressed views around the three themes heretofore examined: the purpose and aims of senior cycle, the previous experience of policy and structures and agency.

Values also proved important in another way. In the emergent spaces of curriculum policy development, the values explicitly and implicitly expressed by the participants in the study – regardless of formal role and interests in the Review – were seen to underpin in a marked, deterministic way the relational interactions between the participants over the life of the Review. Without an explicit naming of the values and negotiation of the spaces where these values intersect, further development of policy or implementation would seem to be limited at best – a point foregrounded in conversations with participants across the partnership. Additionally, these values were not always readily identifiable. In the study a number of such values emerged in conversations with participants. However, others were

revealed only through the analysis of discourse around certain topics, through for example the selection or repetition of words or phrases that captured emotive thought or action so revealing an underlying assumption or belief. Techniques taken from critical discourse analysis helped considerably with this (Krzyzanowski, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The values identified in the course of the analysis and how they are connected is outlined below in Figure 18. The values that were dominant across all levels such as trust, fairness and value of expertise are depicted at the centre of the map while the values referenced less often appear nearer the periphery. The exception is the reference to politics where, although not mentioned at every level, the impact of this aspect was seen to dominate some of the other motivating factors. The links between values or where concepts intersect are depicted using arrows.

One of the findings of this study is the need to interrogate and negotiate these values in the development of curriculum policy. While 'fairness' and 'equity' were dominant values and beliefs for most participants, how this fairness could be incorporated into the curriculum or, beliefs in the fairness of the current system, varied. The cultural significance of the legacy of the Leaving Certificate also cannot be underestimated. As stated by one participant, the Leaving Certificate is a victim of its own success; it has enabled generations of Irish people to educate themselves out of poverty, but, the unintended consequence of this success is that it is highly resistant to change. This echoes the work of Lasky (2005) where the mediation of teacher agency in reform initiatives was linked to perceived clashes with teacher values, professional identity and beliefs about the purposes of schooling.

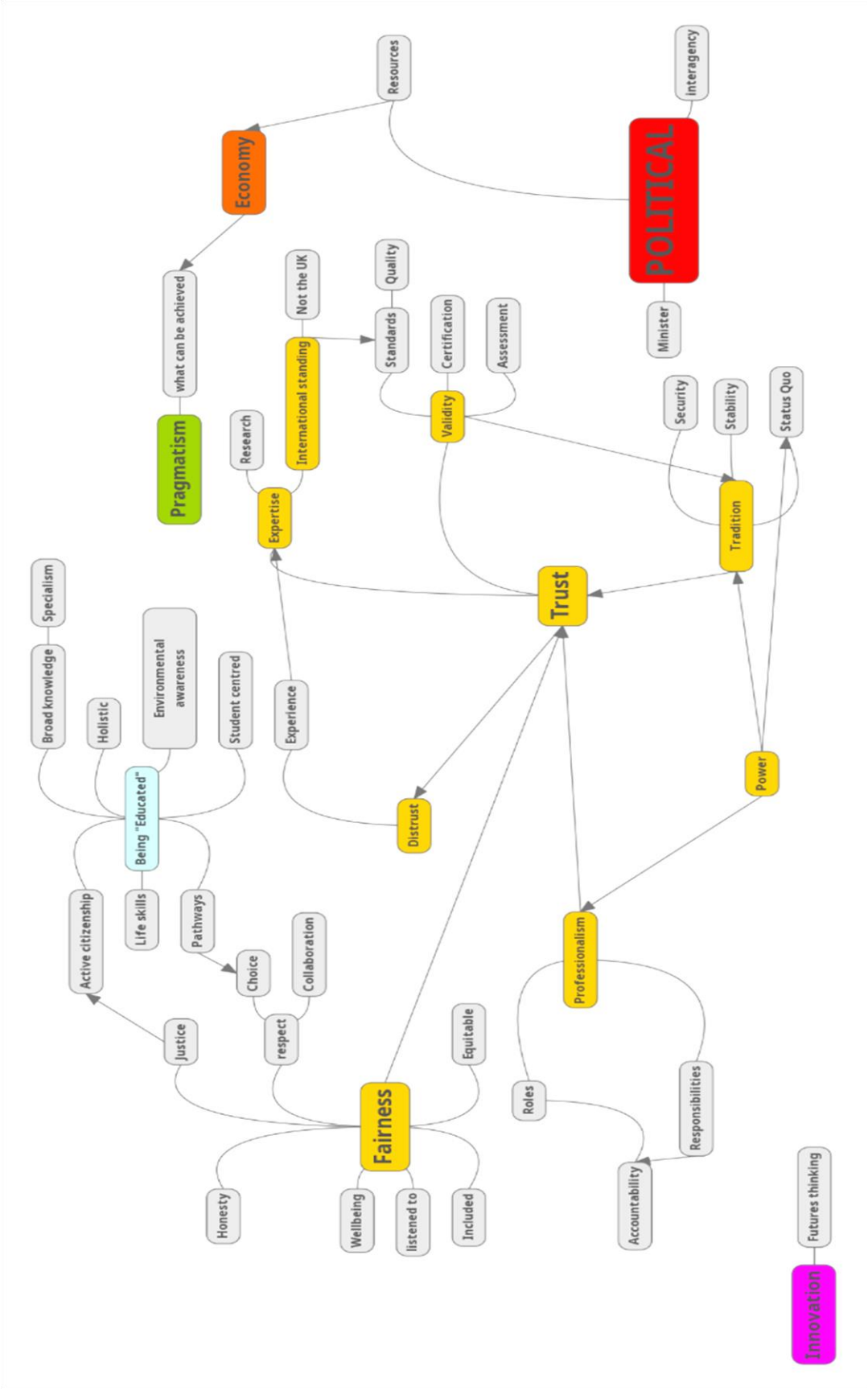

Figure 18 Underpinning Values as developed through analysis of data

7.3 Learning produced by the Research Questions

The research questions that frame this study centred on the nature of the partnership assembled to conduct the Review and the activity of those involved as they worked on a formal and extensive review of the senior years' curriculum for the Republic of Ireland over two years. It explored how this unique partnership approached the task with participants contributing from various representative and technical agendas, the roles played by the various participants, and, the characteristics and determinants of this partnership. This aimed to gather insights and improve understanding of a process not often researched in the Irish context and to foreground through a critical realist methodology the features of this partnership and the experiences of the participants within an important moment of curriculum development in Ireland.

Three general lines of interest informed the study:

- The characteristics and determining features of the partnership and the activities that underscored the Review;
- How the exercise of partnership manifested across the range of interests, underpinning values and roles of the participants, and the nature of the engagement that resulted; and
- What can be learnt in terms of the processes and methodologies of policy development from a critical realist centred analysis of the Review.

These are now discussed in close detail and then followed by treatments of the three aspects that most fundamentally defined and characterised the entire review process – the subtle politics of partnership as these unfolded in and through the review, the centrality of underpinning values and beliefs to action, and the defining though sometimes contentious nature of participant agency and its enabling structures as this played out over the course of the Review.

The following summarises the conclusions reached as a result of the analysis of the findings.

7.3.1 How did the partnership approach in the Senior Cycle Review work?

This question instantly invites the query as to what we mean by partnership. Are all parties equal partners with equal powers and influence? Is there a hierarchy of partners, where some hold more power and sway over decisions than others? Is it a functioning, healthy partnership where opposing views can be discussed and compromises reached?

From the findings at each of the levels it is obvious that parity of esteem is absent and there is a perceived hierarchy of partners. Despite the devolution of curricular development to an agency outside the Department, the NCCA still works under the aegis of the Department and so all decisions have to be not only approved by the Council but then subsequently approved and published by the Minister and plans for implementation developed by the Department. In the macro level, there were multiple comments about the power of the Minister, or former ministers, to change, accelerate or cancel policy decisions made by the NCCA and the examples of the influence of Minister Ruari Quinn in Junior Cycle Reform and Minister Mary Hanafin in previous Senior Cycle Reform, were explicitly cited. Actors at the macro and meso levels repeatedly spoke in physical terms of the impact of these experiences on the trust in the process. The archaeology of policy implementation has an impact on future policy development in the trust it undermines or engenders in the process. Trust lost as a result of experience is not easily renewed and the future involvement of stakeholders in the process of policy development could be adversely impacted if the implementation falters or encounters difficulties.

Within the structures of the NCCA a hierarchical structure was perceived by the participants with deference given to representatives from the Department of Education and an identification of what was described as “the power of the unions”. The power of the union representatives was commented on at all levels, but not necessarily with the same outlook. From the external and macro levels, the power of the unions in the policy negotiating space was seen to be something that had to be accepted and worked with in order to achieve any kind of workable compromise. At the meso and micro levels, there were more voices of dissent. Participants in the meso level who were present in negotiating spaces but also returned to schools and experienced the consequences of compromise decision-making first hand expressed far less satisfaction with compromise that didn’t have

student welfare at its heart. For the participants at the micro level who were at the centre of the curriculum experience, there was frustration at the slow pace of change and, from the teachers, a sense of their professionalism being undermined by the groups tasked with representing them. There was an evident disparity between the agency felt by individuals at the macro level of the partnership and those at the micro level.

The Critical Realist approach to this study aimed to uncover the causal mechanisms at work and the embedded systems not visible in the empirical domain. The impact of the power differential of the partners on agency was evident in the data. This echoes the literature on partnership models in education policy development. Griffiths et al. (2009, p. 198) outlined how failure to heed embedded hierarchical systems of power in partnership models can result in limited collaboration due to a "lack of trust between interest groups; conflict over roles; the dominance of particular actors over policy processes; as well as cultural differences as well as power differentials between interest groups." One of the implications of this finding could be that if there is to be a renewed focus on an authentic collaborative model, then the issues of embedded hierarchical systems need to be addressed.

One activity where there was some recognition of a parity of esteem was in the conference that brought the parent representatives to the induction meeting to discuss the plan for the review. For the parent representatives in this study, they commented on the parity they felt at the events where they were seated with teachers and school leaders, and they felt their voices were listened to. Reflecting on other events in the review, the students felt that they were given a platform to express their concerns at various conferences and at the discussions held as part of the Review within their own schools. The teachers at these events found that the conferences were useful in hearing other voices and different expertise on curricular matters that they would not usually be exposed to. This feature of the partnership activities undertaken in the review could be described as a 'listening disposition' where participants had the opportunity to listen to others and feel listened to. This feature links to what Harford and O'Doherty (2016) call the importance of clear communication. Communication in policy development can often be seen as one way communication, where messages are communicated out to the public. The defining feature

of this communication activity identified in this study is the two-way nature of the communication where participants felt listened to. Where this falls down however, is in the absence of a feedback loop at the end of the process to inform those involved of the current stage of the policy process, which has been identified as a key to authentic incorporation of 'voice' (Cook-Sather, 2006; Flynn & Hayes, 2021; Lundy, 2007). This absence was particularly felt by those at the micro level of participation.

One of the characteristics of the partnership activities identified in this study was the inclusion of voices in the process that were not heard before. For the parents and students especially, the inclusion of their voices in the process gave them a greater sense of being involved in the creation of an education system for all. The inclusion of student voice, as discussed in Chapter 3 and commented on by participants (see sections 5.4.3, 6.1.3 and 6.2.3) is one that has obvious benefits but also caveats. As pointed out by one of the external participants, students cannot know what they do not know. The value of the inclusion of students is in the voice they give to their own lived experience of the curriculum. What is more difficult for them to comment on is the other options that may be available to them or to longer term planning that is outside their realm of experience. It may be argued however, that the same maxim may also hold true for other participants around the curriculum development tables; if all they have known is a single monolithic system, then it may be difficult to conceive of any other way of doing things. The Critical Realist approach to the data revealed the importance and impact of embedded cultural and societal beliefs and values in discussions on the purpose and aims of education. This study revealed that exposure to a variety of cultural and societal norms opened conversations around different ways of achieving educational aims. This has implications for future policy development as a singular view was not evident in the various levels of participant in the study as many had experienced other cultures of education and questioned perceived norms.

For the parents involved there is a greater issue and that is around the representative nature of their organisations. More than one parent commented on the singular gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of parents involved in the parent associations. In the review there was a greater emphasis put on getting a more representative parent

involvement and some schools managed to do that. But it also caused them to reflect on the structures they had in place to date and the limited representation they have. Schools and classrooms are places of great diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background, if this diversity is not represented in the process of curriculum policy development, then it is unlikely that this diversity will be considered in policy making decisions. One of the students involved in this study was from an immigrant background and her concerns around language requirements were significantly different to her peers as her lived experience was different (see section 6.3.1.5). The inclusion of these voices in the senior cycle review would seem to be a positive step, broadening the input into the policy making arena to include those whom it most acutely affects.

7.3.2 What were the roles of the different levels of participant?

Examining how the exercise in partnership manifested across the roles and interests of the participants leads to a questioning of those roles. The roles of the participants in the review were dependent on their view of what their role was in the entire curriculum policy development process. Emerging from the findings, it was obvious that one of the main issues is the lack of definition of roles or responsibilities. Participants at the external and macro level gave contradictory descriptions of what they saw as the role of the NCCA, the Department, the Minister, the schools, the unions, and the stakeholders. One member of the external group who had been involved in the initial establishment of the CEB later reconstituted as the NCCA, described the separation of the curricular making section from the rest of the Department as a 'turf war' (Participant 27, Irish academic) where each side tried to gain control of particular sections of responsibility. The change in emphasis from the Curriculum and Examination Board to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, moved examination out of the remit of the agency but left assessment, without any clear definition of what that distinction was. The establishment of the statutory body, the State Examinations Commission several years later further muddied the waters as to the responsibilities of each organisation and where assessment lay in that overlapping space. For one of the external participants, the responsibility is clear, "it is the NCCA's responsibility to advise the minister on curriculum and assessment. And my

concern is that that's fallen somewhere, somebody has forgotten that, and that the assessment is getting lost." (Participant 25, Irish academic). But this view was different to that expressed by the politician who felt that the remits of the two organisations, the NCCA and the SEC, were worlds apart. The discussions of the participants detailed in Chapter 5 at section 5.4.4 reveal the often contradictory comments on the perceived roles and responsibilities expressed in the interviews.

For those within the macro and meso levels, the roles and responsibilities don't become any clearer. The NCCA was built on a premise of stakeholder partnership. It is a representative structure, but the members of the Council are nominees, that is, they are nominated by their parent organisation to carry out the work of policy development and have responsibility to feedback on developments to their parent body. But the experiences of Junior Cycle Reform where union representatives on subject development groups developed specifications for the new junior cycle but when the specifications were brought to Council, the union representation voted against or abstained from the votes on each specification, gives a very real example of the difficulties with this system. As outlined by one of the participants, this politicisation of the development process led to a straining of the parameters of partnership involvement in curriculum development as it "really upset some of the long-standing people in the council because there'd never been vote and the thing requires consensus" (Participant 7, civil servant). Further details on the commentary on roles can be found in Chapter 6 at sections 6.1.3.4 and 6.2.3.3.

This is not a new phenomenon, although the junior cycle reform situation led to the most extreme examples of the politicisation of the process. Gleeson (2004) lamented the representative rather than representational structures of the NCCA board and substructures which resulted in 'partnership' but with a sectoral agenda. In this study, this questioning of the roles played by the representatives on the structures echoes the previous research on the NCCA (Gleeson et al., 2020; Granville, 2004, 2010; Looney, 2014; Sullivan, 2018).

For those at the micro level, the teachers, students and parents, obvious in the discussions was their exclusion from the processes of curriculum development. There was a universal sense that the curriculum was developed by a very distant authority who issued diktats

from above. For the parents, they felt that they understood the Leaving Certificate as it was the same as the one they had completed, but there was an uneasy sense that there should be some developments. For teachers, their involvement in the review did reveal for them some of the machinations of the processes of curriculum development but in the absence of any progress on the reform of senior cycle, the review runs the risk of confirming negative biases relating to the lack of progress possible in the system. The most worrying aspect of the distance felt by these participants to the curriculum development processes was the lack of awareness of the consultative nature of curricular developments. This lack of awareness would seem to call the current consultation arrangements into question. On the Arnstein (1969) ladder of public participation, rather than consultation being seen as tokenistic, the lack of awareness of the process by those in the system would seem to reveal that actually public participation is closer to the bottom of the scale, in the non-participation zone. There are obviously serious steps needed to bring the consultation process closer to the deliberative process described by Fishkin (2011) but the enthusiasm of the participants for the time, space and facility to enter into a deliberative process would seem to indicate that the process of the review was a step in the right direction.

For the students, the role they played in the review was significant. Most of the participants who had been involved in the review spoke of the eloquence and articulate responses of the students in their schools and at national events. The students spoke of their personal experiences of stress and pressure, their sense of injustice and desire for change. For the other levels of participants in this study, the revelations made by the students prompted reconsideration of accepted norms in terms of assessment and examinations. For those closest to the classroom, these revelations came as no real surprise but, for those purely in the policy making sphere, the student involvement would appear to have been impactful.

The suggestion from the data of the need for a clarity of roles and responsibilities has implications for future developments in this policy development sphere. According to Biesta et al. (2015) the social structures embedded in this interaction of relationships, roles and responsibilities are situated in the practical-evaluative domain and have an impact on the agency of the actors involved. In order to enable an agentic response to involvement

in curriculum development clarity on roles and responsibilities may be necessary for all structures and agencies involved.

7.3.3 What are the factors that influence policy development at this level?

International research on curricular reform has documented many factors that influence the development of curricular policy (Cuban, 1993b; Hargreaves, 1989; Priestley et al., 2021; Van den Akker, 2012) and they include political will, public debate, teacher professionalism, change management, resourcing, international testing, previous experience of reform and league tables. The critical realist analysis of the data revealed that most of these factors were evident in the discussions with the participants in the study.

The structures in place in the policy development space in Ireland have evolved over time and have included the evolution of bodies such as the NCCA, the SEC and the Department of Education. The position of these structures is at a remove from the experience of teachers in schools. While the review sought to bridge that gap by involving the voices of teachers, students and parents in the discussions the absence of a feedback loop back to school has resulted in many of these participants feeling let down by the outcome and not sure of their input into the final advisory report or any future plans for senior cycle. Some of the participants also commented on the absence of a middle structural layer that would support and drive implementation in schools (see section 5.4.1). Some pointed to the ETB sector as a possible solution to this absent layer in its role at national and regional levels with oversight of school development and curricular planning. The comment made by many of the participants was that rhetorical agreement on change is relatively easy to achieve in the Irish system, but that there was a complete lack of agreement on implementation. This was summed up by one participant as “we're really good at articulating a strategy or a vision, absolutely rubbish at implementing them.” (Participant 26, Irish academic). This absence of implementation planning was seen as a stagnating factor in developments at this level. The division of responsibilities between agencies such

as the Inspectorate, the support services and the NCCA, and lack of clarity on the overlapping responsibilities for implementation may contribute to this stagnation.

Where there are participants who have been excluded from the development processes to date, such as the direct involvement of teachers, parents and students, their engagement in the review gave a sense of agentic power. In the extraordinary events of March 2020 to March 2022 the Covid 19 epidemic had a transformative impact on the education and assessment structures of the state. The long-term results of this have yet to be realised. But, as commented by more than one participant, there is nothing like a good crisis to get policy moving. The cancellation of Leaving Certificate examinations for the first time in the history of the state along with the wholescale involvement of teachers in devising the accredited and calculated grades for their students has given the education system an insight into what could happen if the sole arbiter of a student's worth was not just a written examination. The learning from that experience was commented on by many participants, not all of whom viewed it as a positive experience. Nevertheless, for many the importance of those events is that the learning happened, that "we actually can deal with quite complex problems" (Participant 4, union representative). This unprecedented event may have a long-term influence on the curriculum policy developments at this level. The impact of events such as the OECD report on education in Ireland in the 1960s (OECD, 1965), along with the actions of key political figures at the time, acted as a catalyst for curriculum developments that were unforeseen a decade previously. This interaction between socio-cultural events and agentic actors may be evident in the impact of Covid 19, the Senior Cycle Review, the publication of the Advisory Report and the announcements of Minister Foley in March 2022 on the changes to senior cycle.

The agency gained by groups such as the student union (ISSU) in their involvement in the discussions around the examinations with other key stakeholders such as the Minister, the Department, the unions and education agencies and management bodies, was significant enough that the place of students at the discussion tables has been accepted as a democratic right. The Minister recently announced that a student representative would now be present on the Council of the NCCA. How that role will be managed and how it will operate over the four-year term of a Council has yet to be clarified.

The influence of politics on all aspects of curriculum development is evident in any overview of events in this policy space. Despite many participants valuing the impression that Ireland was 'not the UK' where a change of government was seen to have far-reaching and immediate consequences for educational policy, the influence of individual political figures is still evident in the curriculum policy space Ireland. Due to the stabilising force of the Department of Education, there is less likelihood of large-scale immediate change as a result of a political decision, but this also leads to a stasis in the system where any change is difficult to plan, implement or manage. The announcements of Ministers on curriculum matters have been seen to have turned the tide on curriculum reforms, such as Minister Quinn on Junior Cycle, Minister Hanafin on Senior Cycle and even going back to Donogh O'Malley's speech announcing the introduction of free education in 1967. It remains to be seen if the announcements by Minister Foley on senior cycle reform in March 2022 will have the same implications for curricular developments in this space.

In previous studies, other influences on education policy have been outlined such as the prevailing influence of the Catholic church (Clarke, 2012; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2021; Raftery & Fischer, 2014) and international influences such as the OECD and the EU/EEC particularly in the area of vocational education (Cosgrove & Cartwright, 2014; Heraty et al., 2000; Iannelli & Raffe, 2007). In this study, the influence of the Catholic church was not mentioned by any of the participants. It would seem that while the influence of religion may still be obvious in other areas of curriculum development such as in the area of ERB and Ethics, or Relationships and Sexuality Education (Sullivan, 2018), for senior cycle the influence of the Church would appear to be negligible. While the analysis of the language used by the participants would seem to recommend a more holistic view of education, spirituality in general or Catholicism in particular were not mentioned by the participants.

However, the creeping acceptance of economic language to describe the partners in education as 'stakeholders' detailed in Chapter 4, would imply that the influence of international organisations such as the OECD and the EU is felt at all levels. This is nothing new, ever since the OECD report on education in Ireland in the 1960s, supranational organisations such as the OECD have had an influence on the development of policy aimed at furthering economic progress. The EEC and later the EU have had a similar influence and

the development of programmes such as Youthreach, LCVP and the LCA would not have been possible without the funding provided by the European Social Fund (ESF) (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2012). The influence of international organisations, ideas or discourses is not an inherently negative thing, no curriculum is created in a cultural vacuum. But for policy developers and those involved in the processes of development, an awareness of what the influences are and an interrogation of those influences and whether they converge with the negotiated and shared aims of that stage of education would be important. This study would hope to heighten awareness of this to encourage a questioning stance of accepted norms and behaviours.

7.4 The subtle nature of partnership, the centrality of values to actions and the defining essence of agency

Partnership and agency have emerged through the process of this study as key considerations in how the experiences of the review can be examined. An understanding of what these concepts mean within the Irish context and how this study has explored the subtleties and nuanced understanding of these concepts is one of the key learnings from this study. The link between partnership and achieving agency within these structures can be seen as being underpinned by the values and beliefs held by the actors. The role of these values also then forms part of this discussion.

7.4.1 The partnership model at work in the Irish context: potential for authentic collaborative engagement

The concept of 'partnership' is not unproblematic. As outlined in the preceding sections there is a specific and particular form of partnership utilised in the policy development space in Ireland. Harford and O'Doherty (2016) list adequate consultation, joint goal setting, establishing respective roles and responsibilities and a structure to support and scaffold that partnership, as central to the partnership model. But, "parity of esteem in the design of and decision-making for projects" was identified as an essential component of partnership (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016, p. 51). In the light of the discussion above, this parity of esteem does not seem to be present in the partnership activities described in this study and so there is a fundamental, structural fault line in the foundations of this

partnership arrangement. Clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities and equal status of 'partners' would be central to an authentic collaborative partnership.

Notwithstanding the embedded hierarchical structures in the partnership model, the powerful interest group represented by the teacher unions also threatens collaborative partnership. The conflicting views of the role of union representation as advocate / broker / agonistic questioner / obstructionist detailed in section 6.1.3, reveal a spectrum of deeply set patterns of institutional interaction that inhibits authentic engagement in deliberative spaces.

The creation of partnership structures is a political act. Who is included or excluded from the structures and the single homogeneous nature of the voices gathered, has implications for the functioning of that partnership. The commentary offered by the participants in the previous sections (see 5.4, 6.1.3, 6.2.3, *Structure and Agency*) on the voices missing from the partnership engagements focused on the importance of, and limitations to, the inclusion of 'student voice' in the structures. But there are other voices absent from the structures, not identified by participants. Despite the diversity evident in Irish society, representation on the structures remains a steadfastly homogeneous group: white, middle class, ethnically Irish. This is a threat to the authenticity of partnership where significant sections of society are not included in the structures that directly influence their lives. Within the partnership structures, 'representation' is a central supporting concept. Individuals 'represent' their sectoral or technical interests and present their agenda at all partnership activities. The representative nature of the parent group was questioned by participants working in the macro and meso levels of policy development. For the individual parents involved in this study, who had no links to the central parental representative body, they questioned the representative nature of the school parents' associations (see section 6.3.3) and argued their involvement in activities was side-lined to fundraising without engagement in substantive decision-making at a local level. This has implications for future partnership arrangements to take additional steps to endeavour to ensure a diverse and authentic representation of the partners involved in education. This echoes the findings of Buchan and Yates (2019) on the need to promote active recruitment practices to ensure diverse representation in policy partnerships and the findings of Carey

(2013) on the complex interaction between cultural, social, individual and structural practices on the nature of representation and the need to respond flexibly and reflexively in order to create authentic engagement in partnerships.

The matrix of public participation in policy decisions provided by Dean (2017) and described in Chapter 3 can be used to determine the extent of engagement in the policy partnership space. The struggles between the prescriptive, top-down policy development seen in the actions of a Department or Minister and the resistant questioning of those policies by the teacher unions, places these interactions in the arbitration and oversight quadrant. This form of partnership, as evidenced in the implementation of Junior Cycle reform, can result in a dysfunctional partnership where the outcome results in stasis or disruption in the system (MacPhail et al., 2018; Murchan, 2018). The aim of the Senior Cycle Review could be seen as an ambition to move partnership engagement to the 'participation as collective decision-making' quadrant of the matrix, through the negotiated space of identifying the shared beliefs in the aims and purpose of senior cycle and igniting a solidaristic orientation to the discussions. The horizontal axis of the matrix presents an interesting spectrum of activity. The solidaristic dimension, where joint aims are formulated to recognise the interdependence of members of a society and individuals pull together for the greater good, can be easily recognised in some of the commentary around the aims and purposes of senior cycle. Some participants commented on the education system as working for the good of society and referenced social justice ideals of equity, active citizenship and democratic engagement. The agonistic dimension, defined by the opposite action of pulling against the direction of travel is an essential element of a democratic state, where debate and contestation are necessary to make considered decisions. This was referenced by one of the participants in the need for "outliers" and a "12th juror" to query a cosy consensus and challenge unquestioned norms. Both sides of this agonistic/solidaristic axis are present in the partnership evidenced in the review, which could imply that the engagement was more in the negotiated space than the prescribed space. Nevertheless, the application of Ministerial or Departmental pressure in the outcome of the review could have the effect of negating the positive engagement expressed by the participants and moving the experience back into the prescribed domain

and the far reaching impact of Ministerial influence on policy has been well documented elsewhere (McManus, 2014).

The use of institutionalised partnerships to establish a flexible network of governance has been explored elsewhere (Hardiman, 2006) and the blurring of lines between the structures of the Department and the NCCA commented on by some of the participants (see section 6.1.3) , has implications for the perception of the independence of that agency and how well it can operate as a negotiating space. The agency of the actors is inhibited or engendered through the structures in place, but the critical realist analysis of the data revealed that the actions of the actors is often determined by the underpinning values held.

7.4.2 The underlying influence of embedded values on actions

The consistent references to underpinning values, such as the value assigned to 'fairness' or 'trust', across the dataset highlighted the significance of these concepts to the actions and orientations of the participants (see figure 18, p. 282). Where differences between the participants' beliefs were evident, it was in the contestation of how these concepts were interpreted. Some referred to the assessments at Leaving Certificate to be inherently fair, others, while still maintaining the importance of fairness, fundamentally disagreed with this viewpoint. The importance of fairness or equity however, remained unquestioned even if the means of achieving it was the subject of debate. There were other values that implicitly underpinned the expressed concerns of the participants that subtly influenced their decision-making and actions. The belief in a transactional value of education implicitly underpinned many of the discussions on the purpose and aims of senior cycle, even though a holistic view of education was explicitly expressed. The conflicting values placed on innovation and pragmatism were expressed particularly by the participants directly involved in the policy making arena, where a pragmatic orientation may well serve the purposes of policy goals when institutional conservatism is risk averse and the rhetoric of innovation is easily overcome by pragmatic concerns.

The study revealed an interesting mesh of values in relation to expertise, international standing and the troubled post-colonial relationship with the UK. Across all of the groups

of participants there was reference made to Ireland's policy space as 'not like the UK'. This desire to achieve distance from policy processes in Britain echoes what Limond (2010, p. 451) calls a "postcolonial hangover or shadow". This desire to assert difference was referenced in reflection on actions carried out or avoided in the policy arena by some of the participants who held significant authority over policy decisions. Contrasted with this, was the expressed need to have policy decisions externally validated by organisations such as the OECD or be regarded internationally as having "one of the best education systems in the world". All of the groups of participants valued expertise, but few recognised their own levels of expertise in their own contexts but looked to others to advise. This speaks to the commentary on teacher identity and professionalism in Chapter 6.

The nature and range of these deeply held beliefs are significant in the study of curriculum policy development space. The value placed on tradition and continuity has the effect of making institutions like the Leaving Certificate immutable and results in the stasis in the system around that institution commented on by the participants. While contrasting, conflicting and often contested values were evident in the analysis of conversations with the participants, the negotiation of these values to reach a shared understanding of what was valued in the system does not presently form part of the negotiated spaces of curriculum development. The influence of these socio-cultural structures and norms on the policy development space can be seen to have stabilising effect that makes the system very resistant to change.

7.4.3 Facilitating agency in partnership activity; the essence of engagement

Certain findings from this study, presented in Chapters 5 and 6 above, relate to difficulties reported by some of the participants in exercising full agency. The structures at work in the curriculum development process are multiple and many of these structures have evolved historically which has an influence on the functionality, power and relational influences these structures have and can engender or inhibit agency of the actors within. The actors on Councils and Boards are there in representative roles and the conversations detailed in Chapter 6 (see sections 6.1.3 and 6.2.3 *Structure and Agency*) revealed the limitations present in the structures for genuine agentic engagement on issues. For those involved or previously involved in the policy arena, one of the structures that limited

agency was the statutory but advisory structure of the NCCA itself. The absence of agency commented on by actors (see sections 5.4, 6.1.3 and 6.2.3) referred to instances when the actions of others outside the negotiating structures superseded the advice produced and so undermined the agency of the organisation tasked with the generation of policy. This absence of agentic power, clearly exposed in the negotiated curriculum that resulted from the Travers agreement, has had an impact on the continued and sustained engagement of actors at this policy level. The absence of agency and trust between partners may have an undermining influence on the democratic ideal upon which the partnership structures are based.

The research also pointed at two significant institutional constraints on agentic action within working partnerships. First, the determining effects of a strong culture of *status value* – where the role of the participant in the partnership is a key motivation for action or inaction. Second, the *conserving tendencies* present in institutions such as the Leaving Certificate and the educational system that revolved around this. These were seen to both affect and reflect the wider environment of curriculum review and reform that historically characterise action (or inaction) in this space in Ireland. The issue of stasis was expressed most strongly by those involved professionally in the creation of curriculum policy. Their narratives centred strongly on points to do with capacity shortcomings in the existing system, lack of resources to direct at meaningful change and the *lack of authority* to propose transformational change. Observations from the professional policy makers, both internal to the process and observing it from outside, regularly touched on this complex challenge. (See 6.1.2. 2 and 6.1.2.3.)

This study also suggests that agency is not engendered through a top-down, agenda-driven initiative (see sections 5.4.1, 6.1.3.1 and 6.2.3.1). Participant observations linked agency with building capacity and autonomy at local levels. The resourcing of curricular development, capacity building in schools, supporting structures at local and regional levels along with a recognition of professionalism and expertise of those in their own context would help to move away from a view of curriculum as being “done to them” but rather being locally created, developed and adapted. The importance of collaborative practice, teacher identity and ownership of learning was referenced as central to that development

of agency. What this present study suggests is missing from current understanding of meaningful partnership action in support of reviews such as the one addressed here, is a deeper and more contextualised / localised understanding of both the human and structural dimensions of agency. This would allow better attention to the subtleties and nuances of enabling and supporting personal agency to effectively work in partnership spaces. It would also facilitate professional policy workers in gaining foresight on the structural aspects of agency in a social partnership modality and in this way assist in acting to mitigate the deterministic effects of these.

7.5 Limitations of this study

This study examined the perceptions of the senior cycle review from the perspectives of people at various different levels and external to the review. The number of participants means that generalisations cannot be drawn from their experiences, however, the thick description (Geertz, 1973) given by each participant, means that their individual experiences have relevance as they are indicative of the experience of one and so the truth value rather than assumptions that can be made is most significant (Sandelowski, 1986). In order to mitigate against this limitation, consideration was given to the range of perspectives that would be present in the study. The external group was added to the initial plan in order to give an objective stance on the events and triangulate the responses from within the review. The importance of a multiple level vertical case study is that it can help to develop an understanding of the similar or different interpretations of the phenomenon under study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009). While the number of participants means that it cannot give every perspective available, the inclusion of a diverse range of participants from the various representative groupings involved goes some way to ensure that multiple differentiated perspectives were offered. The passage of time since the review has meant that perspectives of the participants may be coloured by events in the interim and the impact of global events such as the Covid pandemic on the recollections of the participants cannot be denied. However, context will always influence content and even if the

interviews had happened immediately after the review was held, the immediacy of the events would mean that they could not be viewed from an objective standpoint.

The positionality of the researcher is both an advantage and a limitation to the study. In order to obtain some reflexivity and try to mediate against bias, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document the process and reflect on her own positionality. This resulted in some awareness of her inclusion in the policy field, such as the unthinking use of the word 'stakeholder' and efforts were made to balance that view. However, as absolute objectivity is unachievable, the view of McNess et al. (2015) guided the researcher in this study in recognising that "neither the researcher nor the subjects of analysis are fixed, stable and coherent but are constantly shifting, incomplete, fragmented and contradictory in relation to both collective and personal existence" (p. 298).

7.6 Importance of this study

Irish and international writers in their commentary on the influences on curricular policy making have identified key influential factors such as: the influence of supranational organisations on reform (Sahlberg, 2011), economic influences (O'Sullivan, 2005), social context (Murray et al., 2021), cultural structures of curriculum making (Harris, 2021) and the influence of professional identity and values on curriculum making and enactment (Humes & Priestley, 2021). As detailed in section 7.3.3, this research reaches similar conclusions. The influence of supranational organisations such as the OECD is explicitly felt in the direct involvement of the organisation in the review and implicitly felt in the prevalence of language used relating to competencies and skills and accepted norms of ambition for curriculum in the 21st century. This research has found, similar to the previous work on curriculum development in Ireland by Gleeson (2021) and Granville (1996, 2004), that the socio-cultural significance of the Leaving Certificate examination extends beyond its assessment function and it is perceived as fair, just and beyond reproach by a large proportion of Irish society and this makes curriculum change in this area fraught with difficulties. However, conducted as it was in the midst of an unprecedented crisis, the impact of Covid 19, this study finds that the attitudes towards the Leaving Certificate of participants closest to the classroom experience (teachers, students and parents) have changed as a result of their recent experiences. The change in assessment arrangements

and the recognition by the teachers in this study of the validity of the new arrangements represents an attitude shift towards change that was not documented before. As outlined by Boin et al. (2009), an unforeseen crisis can have a substantive impact on the policy formation space as approaches that were not previously considered can now become part of the policy discourse. This study provides some initial evidence of a change of mindset in relation to assessment arrangements at this level in stakeholders in Ireland.

The role of partnership in the development of national curriculum in Ireland is unusual in comparison to international norms where national curriculum is often centrally designed or negotiated at a local level by teachers and schools (Handelzalts et al., 2019; Pinar et al., 2008; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012; Van den Akker, 2018). Curriculum bodies internationally, when they exist, tend to be staffed by experts in curriculum development, such as SLO in the Netherlands and ACARA in Australia. Having a space where key stakeholders are represented on a Council, such as the NCCA, where curriculum advice is devised and negotiated is unusual. The findings of this study in relation to the processes of partnership at work in this policy development space concur with some of the earlier findings of Gleeson (2000b), Granville (2010), Looney (2014), and Sullivan (2018) in that the power differential between key stakeholders reveals the partnership arrangements to be hierarchical in structure and that the teacher unions form a powerful force on the partnership structures. However, this research finds some disparity between the attitudes and values held by the representatives of the unions and the teachers themselves which calls into question the acceptance of the narrative that the union position is representative of teacher voice.

One of the other significant findings of this study is the conception of curriculum that emerged from the discussions with participants. Despite the discourse on the transactional value of education, most participants revealed a dissatisfaction with this view of education. The analysis of the data revealed a preference for a more child-centred (Dewey, 1902), holistic (Klafki, 2000) curriculum and that most angst was felt when there was a clash between these values and the experience of the Leaving Certificate. This is interesting as it places the underlying philosophy of education held by the participants as closer to *Bildung* and the *Didaktik* tradition than the rationalist/modernist tradition outlined in 3.2.1. This is

significant in light of Gleeson (2021) where the future direction of curriculum development in Ireland is questioned. In this vertical case study, for the participants closest to the lived school experience the beliefs and values held in relation to the aim and purpose of education were more aligned with the *Didaktik* tradition than the rationalist. This again is significant in terms of curriculum change and resistance to change. This also has resonance with the work of Deng (2022) in calling for a conception of the purpose of education as "beyond the conventional taken for granted view that is centred on access to acquisition of knowledge in relation to academic achievement and social mobility" (Deng, 2022, p. 14). The importance of aligning intended change with the beliefs and values held is central to change implementation (Humes & Priestley, 2021). In light of the findings of this research, future curriculum developments should be cognisant of the strongly held beliefs and values held by all partners in education and how they align with intended curriculum change.

7.7 Areas for further research

This study gives a snapshot of the perspectives of the participants of the senior cycle review at a specific moment in time. The context of the impact of Covid 19 on education would have had an influence on the interviews and the thoughts and speculations of the participants. Further research into the long-term impact of this crisis on the psyche of Irish educationalists would be interesting to undertake but would need the further passage of time to ascertain if the short-term impact of the crisis had any impact on the long-term thinking about the aims and purpose of this stage of education.

Further research into the dynamics of partnership and the role of institutionalised partnership in soft policy governance in the development of curriculum policy in Ireland would add another dimension to the research carried out in this study. The view of partnership in education in Ireland as part of a neoliberal 'new managerial agenda' has been the subject of some research (Lynch et al., 2012), but further exploration of the role of such partnership models in the development of curriculum policy and an examination of the deeper assumptions inherent in the model would add to the research carried out in this study.

The evolving role and shifting power dynamics in the partnership model, particularly in the roles played by the different unions would be another interesting study. This research has revealed a dichotomy between the rhetoric of the unions and the expressed feeling of teachers on the issues of assessment. This gap between union leadership and their membership has been evidenced elsewhere in the decline in ASTI membership and low turnout for ballots as well as internal pressure groups unhappy with the decisions of leadership such as *Voice for Teachers* and *Fightback*. These internal pressure groups have been aided by the growth in social media and membership now have direct access to information rather than having information filtered by the leadership. A study of the shifting power dynamics between unions, between leadership and their members, and, between the unions and other partners in education is beyond the remit of this study but would provide an interesting addition to research in this area.

The issue of representation in the partnership model would also provide another interesting addition to this area of study. Throughout this study issues of representation have arisen. Parental representation has been noted as singular in terms of the gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of those involved. The lack of diversity in this area, as with the other partners in education, can create norm circles and normative bias in decision making (Elder-Vass, 2012). The proposal to include students on the structure of the NCCA Council will also require further study to ascertain if this inclusion is authentic participation or tokenistic. Again, while this is beyond the remit of this study, further research in this area could provide interesting insights for the study of the specific and particular type of partnership model that exists in Ireland.

The modes and methods utilised in the processes of curriculum review and development of policy in specific curriculum areas in Ireland has not often been the subject of research. This study gives an indication of some of the methods utilised in the review of senior cycle in Ireland from 2017-2019, but further research on the processes involved, from curriculum review to implementation, would shed some light on processes that remain out of the focus of critical analysis.

The values coding carried out on the dataset revealed a range of values that explicitly and implicitly underpinned the positioning of representatives on a variety of issues. Even the

underpinning belief in a partnership structure within the political sphere reveals a democratic value system that is unquestioned in the Irish policy arena. A further examination of the unquestioned values that influence the policy formation space would provide further research in an area that is often overlooked.

7.6 Conclusions, implications and recommendations

This study has given voice to the perspectives of the various levels of participants as they experienced the process of the curricular review of senior cycle education. From the analysis of those voices, concerns and conclusions may be drawn that represent implications for the development of curriculum policy in this jurisdiction using the partnership model of policy development.

Firstly, there is a need for a **clarity on the roles and responsibilities for structures and agencies** in the education sphere. The lack of clarity over responsibility for advice or implementation issues has led to conflicting messaging in the system and conflicts and clashes over ideological standpoints that could be better resolved in the appropriate spaces. There is a need for a reflexive and reflective space where this clarity can be achieved and communicated to all actors involved.

Agency is important for action to be achieved. The lack of change and relative stasis in the system could be seen as a result of the lack of agency experienced by the actors and structures in the system. In order to be agentic**, underlying values and principles must be identified and negotiated**.

Within the structures there is an absence of a **truly representative voice**. While efforts have been made to include the voices of parents and students within the structures, these efforts need to become more than tokenism to allow for full representation of the diverse and disparate voices of all of those impacted and influenced by the education system. This has implications for the mechanisms used for consultation which at present, are easily manipulated and lack **authentic deliberative democratic engagement**.

Consultation has become a staple requirement of all curricular developments in Ireland, but this consultation needs to be seen as effective by participants. The threat is that with the extensive consultation that happened as part of the review, if the resultant changes don't actually result in any real change, then the engagement of stakeholders in the future is threatened as the process itself is undermined. The previous efforts of reform have had the same impact where those involved in previous experiences of reform don't trust the process to deliver anything other than proposals that are educationally compromised or without the necessary resources or support to ensure implementation success. **A steady and reliable feedback loop to all of the participants involved would be one step in this process**.

The context of this study has had an impact on all of the findings. The unprecedented impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on society and education has caused participants to question long held beliefs and look to the future with growing concern. The purpose of senior cycle to provide a feeder and filter system for third level entry is longer seen as adequate to fulfil the demands of an everchanging society with increasing environmental, cultural, political and economic pressures. There was a growing unease with the lack of emphasis on personal and social development in senior cycle and future directions of reform should be cognisant of those concerns. The macro level preoccupation with assessment was seen as increasingly out of touch with the concerns of those in the system with the health, wellbeing, resilience and growth of the students in their care. **Future development in curricular policy should be aware of the shift in values present in the system towards the need for a more holistic view of education at this level.** This goes beyond previous taken for granted assumptions of the value of education for social mobility or academic achievement only but includes a broader view of the societal, cultural and personal development aspects of education.

The work has also brought to the surface implications for the fundamental assumptions and values that underpin so many of the taken for granted beliefs about how we engage in curriculum policy development in a more general sense. The assumption of a negotiated curriculum through partnership structures is underpinned by a taken for granted democratic ideal but this is a fragile premise. The strength of a democracy is in the ability

of its detractors to challenge the status quo. The reverence given to the institutions of the Leaving Certificate and the assessment procedures attached seem resistant to challenge and some voices have been excluded from the discussions, despite inclusive rhetoric. The enthusiastic engagement of voices not often heard in the policy arena, were present in the Senior Cycle Review and the diversity of opinions heard offers hope that the democratic underpinnings of this type of engagement are well-founded. For all partners involved in the process of policy development, an **awareness of the fragility of the democratic ideal** is necessary. Where collaborative structures are undermined, circumvented or dominated by a singular voice or viewpoint, the democratic nature of the structure is threatened. The presence of these collaborative, partnership structures in the development of policy in Ireland allows for different voices to be heard. In the current international political climate, where diverse opinions are often silenced with the rise of more autocratic regimes, these collaborative structures represent a democratic ideal that should not be taken for granted.

Hopefully, the understandings and insights this research provides into the Senior Cycle Review and particularly into the ways partnership was constructed and experienced within that process – will aid future ventures in the curricular policy development space generally. These will also go some way towards providing hitherto absent contextualised insights into curricular development in Ireland for those in the system and those wishing to study it further.

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Appendices

Appendix A Email, information letter and consent form sent to participants

Sample Email
Dear xxxx,

Louise O'Reilly here from the NCCA. I hope all is well with you and your family in these strange times.

I just wanted to drop you a quick note to see if you would be interested in taking part in a study I am undertaking on the process of the Senior Cycle Review as part of my PhD programme.

The focus of the study is on the experience of those who participated in the review but will also look at the broad view of reforms and changes to policy on senior cycle in the preceding decades that led to the current review. In this regard, your particular experience and insight would be extremely valuable to the study.

If you think you would be interested in participating I can send you further details and we can go from there. If not, just let me know. As this is part of my own study it has no link to the work of the NCCA, so don't feel obliged to take part.

Kind regards,

Louise

Sample Information Letter

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: Seeing the wood from the trees: Perspectives on the curriculum development process in the Senior Cycle Review in Ireland.

Invitation

My name is Louise O'Reilly from School of Education, University College Dublin (UCD). I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project, by participating in a once off interview in relation to the curriculum development process involved in the senior cycle review.

What is this research about?

In 2017, the NCCA began the process of senior cycle review with the intention of developing an advisory report on the future of senior cycle in Ireland. Unusual in the process of curriculum development, this review undertook to gather the voices of schools in the formulation of advice. In a selection of 41 schools, teachers, parents and students were asked their opinions on the current Leaving Certificate programmes and their opinions on the future of senior cycle. The aim of this research is to gather the perspectives of those involved in the review, those on the periphery, those in the decision-making process that steered the evolution of the review and those in schools for whom the review may have the most immediate impact. In gathering these perspectives, it is hoped to shed some light on the processes that are involved in curriculum development and the roles and impact of those engaged in developments.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are an expert in the area of curriculum development, or you were involved directly in the review (or possibly both).

How will your data be used?

The data from all participants in the interviews will be analysed to give an overall view of the process involved and the various push and pull influences on the process. The findings from the analysis will be combined with information from other aspects of the study, such as analysis of accompanying documentation and previous policy developments in this area. The findings from the project may also be used to form the basis of a journal article, which may be published in an academic journal in the future. There will no identifying information in relation participants included in any such research paper and all data will be de-identified prior to analysis. Due to the small number of people involved in curriculum development in Ireland however, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

What will happen if you agree to take part?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. It will probably take about 30-45 minutes to complete the interview. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be organised for a mutually convenient time. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. There is a consent form included with this email and you will need to complete this form and return it before the interview. This is a form that indicates that you are consenting to take part in this research by participating in the interview.

How will your privacy be protected?

In the transcription of the interviews all personal data will be de-identified. The recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions will be managed in a secure data-encrypted hard drive. All recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed after the completed of the thesis and subsequent research papers.

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from the study?

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, you thus do not have to take part. At any stage during the research, you are free to change your mind and withdraw your permission to use your data. In order to withdraw your permission, you only need to contact the researcher stating your intention to withdraw.

Having read the information outlined above, if you wish to participate in the interview, please complete the Consent form and return it via email to the researcher. A digital signature is sufficient to indicate your consent.

For further information

Should you require any further information, I will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact me at: louise.o-reilly.1@ucdconnect.ie

Many thanks for taking the time to read this Information Letter.

Yours sincerely

Sample Consent form

By adding my signature to this form, I confirm the following:

- I confirm that I have read and that I understand the Participant Information Letter
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that there are no negative consequences to me deciding not to participate in the study.
- I understand that it will take about 30-45 minutes to complete the interview.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that all information will be de-identified and every effort will be made to protect my identity.
- I agree that the answers from my interview can be combined with answers from other interviews and from other parts of the research study and can be used in the writing of a thesis on the curriculum development process in the senior cycle review and that it may also contribute to a research paper published in an academic journal.
- I am over 18 years of age and I agree to participate in this study.

_____ Date: _____

Signature

Appendix B Information for Parents and Students

Research on Senior Cycle Review

My name is Louise O'Reilly, and I am carrying out research on the experiences of students and parents who were involved in the Senior Cycle Review carried out by the NCCA in 2018-2019. Your school was involved in the review, and I am interested in talking to some young people who were involved in the review in the school or parents who participated in the review.

What does it involve?

All I need is approximately 30 minutes of your time to participate in a short interview on your experience.

If you think you would like to participate, please let your school contact person know and they can pass on your contact details. I will be in touch to organise a time for the interview, or you can contact me directly on the email address below. The interview will be on Zoom.

If you would prefer not to talk to me face to face, you can write a brief note on the following questions and send it to the email address below.

Questions

1. Did your involvement in the review make you aware of how policy on education is developed? If so, can you describe how or why?

2. From your experience, what is your impression of the Leaving Cert or senior cycle overall? Is it in need of change? What would you change if you could?

3. The NCCA organized a review of senior cycle in 2018-2019 which included your school. Could you describe your involvement in the review?

4. Did you think the student voice in your school was representative of the range of students in your school? **OR**

5. Did you think the parent response was representative of the range of parents in the school?

6. Do you think the student involvement in the review had any impact? If so, could you describe what you think this impact was/is?

7. Change is always difficult. What are the things that you think make changing the Leaving Cert difficult?

8. Covid19 has had a major impact on education in the past year. Do you think this will have a long-term influence on the Leaving Certificate or changes to senior cycle? (I know this is a crystal ball question)

If you are interested in taking part in an interview or just sending me your responses to these questions, please contact me at louise.o-reilly.1@ucdconnect.ie

Many thanks,

Louise O'Reilly BA, M.Ed.

Appendix C Interview outlines

Interview questions

External level questions:

1. Could you describe your involvement in/experience of the process of curriculum development in general?

2. From what you know about the education system in Ireland, what is your impression of the Leaving Cert or senior cycle overall?

    a. Does it need to change?

3. From 2017-2019 the NCCA coordinated a review of senior cycle which included a public consultation. Were you aware of the review of senior cycle? Did you participate? If so, how?

4. There are many things that influence the development of policy, particularly educational policy. Some factors hasten change, some hinder change. What do you think have been/are the factors influencing the development of policy around senior cycle/upper secondary education in Ireland?

5. In Ireland, most policy developments are founded on a partnership approach with key stakeholders. What is your view or experience of such an approach? Are there strengths or weaknesses to such an approach?

6. One of the features of the review was the inclusion of student voice as part of the process. What is your view of the inclusion of student voice? Are there any strengths or weaknesses of such an approach?

7. In the light of the current Covid19 crisis, how do you think senior cycle and any future plans for development may be impacted?

Macro/Meso level questions:

1. Could you describe, in broad terms, your involvement in the process of curriculum development in general?

2. From what you know about the education system in Ireland, what is your impression of the Leaving Cert or senior cycle overall?

    a. Is it in need of change?

3. From 2017-2019 the NCCA coordinated a review of senior cycle, which included a public consultation. Were you aware of the review of senior cycle? Did you participate? If so, how?

4. The review started with international research then had a school-based review in 41 schools where teachers, parents and students were asked their views. What are your thoughts on the approach taken in the development of the advice for senior cycle?

    a. What are the strengths/weaknesses of such an approach?

5. There was a lot of effort put into building consensus in the review, from your perspective did you see/would you have seen any level of consensus in the review?

6. Do you think the student involvement in the review had any impact? If so, how would you describe this impact?

7. What do you see as the major influences for or against change at this level?

8. In Ireland, most policy developments are founded on a partnership approach with key stakeholders. What is your view or experience of such an approach? What are the strengths or weaknesses of such an approach?

9. In the light of the current Covid19 crisis, how do you think senior cycle and future plans for development may be impacted?

Micro level questions:

1. There is no right or wrong answer here, I just want to get a general sense of what your understanding is of how curriculum policy is developed.

2. Has your involvement in the review changed or reinforced your view (or made you more aware of) the development process for policy? Can you describe how or why?

3. From what you know about the education system in Ireland, what is your impression of the Leaving Cert or senior cycle overall?

    a. Is it in need of change?

4. From 2017-2019 the NCCA coordinated a review of senior cycle which included a public consultation. Could you describe your involvement in the review?

5. The review started with international research then had a school-based review in 41 schools where teachers, parents and students were asked their views. What is your view of this approach in the development of the advice for senior cycle?

    a. What are the strengths/weaknesses of such an approach?

6. There was a lot of effort put into building consensus in the review, did you see, or would you have seen any level of consensus in the review?

7. You will be aware that there was student involvement in the review, do you think the student involvement in the review had any impact? If so, could you describe what you think this impact was/is?

8. What do you see as the major influence/s for or against change at this level?

9. In the light of the current Covid19 crisis, how do you think senior cycle and future plans, may be impacted?

Student questions

1. There is no right or wrong answer here, I just want to get a general sense of what your understanding is of how curriculum policy is developed. Did your involvement in the review change or reinforce your view (or made you more aware of) the development process for policy? Can you describe how or why?

2. From your experience, what is your impression of the Leaving Cert or senior cycle overall?

    a. Is it in need of change? What would you change if you could?

    b. Has your experience since you left school influenced your view of the LC?

3. From 2017-2019 the NCCA coordinated a review of senior cycle which included a public consultation. Could you describe your involvement in the review?

4. Did you think the student voice in your school was representative of the range of students in your school?

5. There was a lot of effort put into building consensus in the review, did you see any level of consensus in the views of the students in your school?

6. Do you think the student involvement in the review had any impact? If so, could you describe what you think this impact was/is?

7. Change is always difficult. What are the things that you think make changing the Leaving Cert difficult? Nationally/Internationally?

8. Your education has been impacted by Covid over the past year. This has also had an impact on how senior cycle has been experienced by students. Do you think this will have a long-term influence on the LC or changes to senior cycle? What do you think they might be? (Crystal ball question

Appendix D Full List of Values Coding

Name	Description	Files	References
Attitudes on impact of crisis	Range of attitudes towards what has happened to the system in the past 18 months as a result of the Covid19 crisis	6	12
A happy with predicted grades	Attitude that the predicted grades process was a success and showed the possibilities of what was possible in the system.	6	6
A negative perception of handling of crisis	Views that the handling of the Covid 19 crisis was handled badly by schools, the education system and the government at large.	1	4
B changes in teacher behaviour	Belief that there has been a change in teacher behaviour because of Covid 19 crisis, mainly in the over assessment of students from Sept 2020	2	2
Attitudes to curriculum development	Range of attitudes towards aspects of curriculum processes	23	60
A student-centred	Student centred philosophy of curriculum development	9	16
A complex	Attitude towards curriculum development processes that recognises the complexity of developments, the influences and factors that help or hinder progress and the roles played by actors or events.	3	9
A deference to higher authority for decisions	Attitude that defers to other authorities for decision making, lack of autonomy or agency in decision making	6	11
A didn't know about policy development	Lack of knowledge or awareness before this process (or still) of what is entailed in the development of curriculum policy	4	6
A impatience	Attitude that pace of change is too slow	10	18
Attitudes towards the SC review	Spectrum of attitudes towards the review and engagement in same	13	18
A negative of review	Negative views of the structure, format or outcomes of the review	1	2
A positive to review	Attitude towards the review as positive	12	16

Beliefs about the current SC	Range of expressed beliefs about the current senior cycle programmes	29	175
B backwash effect	Belief that the current senior cycle has a negative backwash effect on the previous years of education	3	3
B College not for everyone	Belief that college is not for everyone and different options should be valued and open to all	8	9
B Dominance autonomy of third level	Belief that third level have dominance over the requirements for entry and autonomy on how to set them, no oversight by gov or rest of the education system.	6	10
B LC is supposed to be difficult	Belief in the value of hard work and sacrifice for positive outcomes, meritocratic belief system but linked to suffering and hardship as defining characteristics	2	4
B LC means to an end	Instrumentalist and utilitarian view of the LC as a means to accessing third level education and less about educational value or personal development	11	17
B LC not good for mental health	Belief that the LC as it currently stands has a negative impact on the mental health and well being of students in our care.	11	17
B LC suits status quo	Explicit belief that the LC suits replication of the status quo and that certain actors and agencies in the system are unwilling to disrupt that status quo.	5	5
B LC too exam focused	Belief that the senior cycle is too focused on the examination structures of the LC	15	22
B Nothing wrong with LC	Belief that the LC is fine as it is and needs no alteration	1	1
B role of LC in society	Commentary on the significant role the LC plays in Irish society as stratifying influence, replicator of status quo, but also as perceived bastion of meritocracy where passage to the promised land of economic stability can be achieved by participating in the LC.	8	17
B societal dismissal of alternative programmes	Belief that society doesn't value LCA or other pathways as their perceived value is less than the LCE and the accepted academic route through education	6	9

B too much media interest in LC	Belief too much media interest in the LC that is detrimental to the system	6	8
B smart equals points	Comments relating to a correlation of points achieved and perceived intelligence.	8	10
B teacher identity linked to current system	Belief that teacher identity is linked to the current system. Teachers valued on the basis of their ability to 'get As'. This linking of teacher identity with an examination system rather than with an education results in emotional resistance to change.	3	6
B too protective of the past shaped by the past	Belief that the current system is too protective of the past, resistant to change but also shaped by the experience of the past. Threads of history and previous decisions made are still visible.	6	8
B trust in current system	Belief that the current system is trustworthy and should not be tampered with or the assertion that societal view is one of trust	9	14
Gap in experience	Beliefs about gaps in continuity of experience	0	0
B Gap in experience JC to LC	Belief that there is a lack of continuity of experience in the learning at junior cycle and that experienced at senior cycle. Some view this gap as a step up others as a step back.	4	6
B gap to third level experience	Belief that there is a gap in the experience of learning at senior cycle and that required in third level	4	6
V Fairness	Value concept of fairness and notes of its absence, often related to the perceived fairness or objectivity of the current system or a commentary on its unfairness or limited fairness.	14	32
B Mandatory subjects unfair	Belief that a system of mandatory subjects linked to a third level access is inherently unfair and inequitable.	4	7
Beliefs and attitudes about change	Range of beliefs and attitudes about curricular change, particularly in light of the impact of the crisis on the system	26	143
B big change is possible	Belief that the system can handle large scale change, mainly based on an assumption that the events of the past year have led to a sense of	20	35

	resilience in the system, a sense of what is possible.		
B change is difficult	Expressed belief that change is difficult where there are entrenched views, trust in the current system and system inertia. Tendency of the system to return to default settings.	18	31
B change is necessary	Expressed beliefs that the current system needs to change due to inequities in the system, changing circumstances and mental health issues.	11	16
B conservativism of society	Belief that society is inherently conservative and resistant to change	5	5
B fear inhibits change	Belief that one aspect that inhibits change is fear. Fear of the unknown or lack of confidence in ability to handle change.	3	4
B Hearts and minds key to change	Beliefs that in order to get buy in for change both emotional and rational faculties must be engaged.	2	3
B implementation gap	Change is resisted due to pressures on schools and principals not accounted for in implementation plans	5	7
B resources are key	Beliefs that the key to implementing any change is having sufficient resourcing in place to support the change.	10	20
B rhetorical consensus vs implementation decisions	Recognition of conflicts between an agreed rhetorical consensus and the tough decisions that must be made to implement. Tends to stall change agreed at a rhetorical level.	6	9
B size matters scalable change	Change must be scalable to the system. Small changes tend to be more successfully implemented as larger change is not supported by necessary resources or support structures.	1	2
B system inertia	Belief that the system tends towards inertia. Changes that are implemented tend to revert back to what is known, expected or suit the status quo. Innovations are rare or ignored in favour of stability.	5	11
Consultation and consensus	Beartraps and benefits of consultation and trying to reach consensus	24	60

B Compromises made	Belief that many compromises have been made in the past. Trying to reach consensus has resulted in lowest common denominator reform where areas that are known as contentious are avoided to maintain partnership to the detriment of education.	9	13
B Consensus + progress	Belief in a middle road between consensus and progress in order to ensure some change is possible	4	5
B consensus not always possible or wanted	Belief that lack of consensus may lead to compromise or that full consensus is dangerous, variety and outliers provoke thought challenge assumptions (see also compromises made)	11	12
B conversations with diverse groups healthy	Belief in importance of diverse conversations in order to have full views heard rather than just replication of status quo.	12	15
B curriculum is built on consensus	Belief in consensus as the only method of constructing curriculum	3	7
V time for consultation and consideration	Time taken for consultation and consideration of issues is valued (see also impatience for opposite views)	7	8
Improving partnership	Features of an improved partnership model, key pitfalls to avoid	29	292
B impact of previous experiences	The impact of past experiences on present and future negotiations are repeatedly outlined. The archaeology of policy development, scarring experienced by those involved in JC reform are particularly vivid.	7	16
B lessons to be learned	Belief that lessons from past experiences have to be learned before developments can be made. What these lessons are varies.	11	24
Student voice	Views on the engagement of students in the process	27	54
B Importance of SV	Belief in the importance of student voice	27	38
B limitation of SV	The limitations of student voice include lack of representative quality, external influences, don't know what they don't know, and lack of expertise or experience.	13	16

V clarity on roles and responsibilities	Key value is clarity on the roles and responsibilities within the agencies and for the actors in the system	8	30
B divided opinions within organisations	Belief that organisations that have internal divisions are problematic in a partnership context. Main organisations mentioned included ASTI and NPC-PP	4	9
B limitations of stakeholder engagement	The difference between representative and representational involvement in the structures and processes of policy development, the representational nature of some organisations and lack of same in others, the absence of some stakeholders from the table all contribute to a limitation in stakeholder engagement.	14	30
B Mothers look after education issues	Lack of balanced representation in parental involvement	3	4
B role as civil servant to the union	Belief that the role of the actor is as servant to the union first.	1	1
B role as servant to the nation civil	Belief that role is firstly as servant to the nation, for the sake of national good, civil servant to the nation	2	4
B School leadership excluded from process	Belief school leadership are excluded from the process of curriculum development	3	5
B teacher as curriculum developer	Cross ref with previous coding	5	7
B union role is opposition	Expressed belief that the key role of the teacher unions is to oppose innovation or reform in order to maintain the status quo	11	22
V structures and processes	Values arising from (or revealing) the structures and processes in place or the weaknesses or gaps in those structures and processes	11	66
What is valued in partnership	Key values identified in partnership model	28	126

V accountability for decisions	Value when decisions made have built in accountability or that agencies have accountability for their decisions.	4	5
V Being listened to	Valued being listened to	16	34
V broad representation and cross sectoral discussion	Value voices from a range of actors in the system, a broad representation of all involved not just recognised stakeholders.	21	42
V clear communications	Value clear communication of ideas, decisions and plans.	3	6
v engagement in partnership	Value clear engagement with the concept of partnership on behalf of the stakeholders.	7	8
V face to face contact	Key value in review, in partnership and in policy development is the central role of face to face contact in order to generate relationships and trust to enable progress.	9	13
V feedback	Value feedback on decisions and being kept in the loop on developments	3	4
V Insight	Values insight gained through involvement in the process	5	14
Improving senior cycle	Features of an improved senior cycle and pitfalls to avoid	29	230
Assessment	What values in assessment are seen as worthy of inclusion	16	47
B balance between predictability and reliability	Belief in achieving a curriculum balance between predictability and reliability	1	1
V formative assessment	Value of formative assessment	8	10
V validity of assessment	Value of assessment validity, lots of questioning the current validity of assessment practices in recognising the broad learning of students.	13	36
Choices	Beliefs around choice, autonomy and pathways in senior cycle	16	42

V alternative pathways	Value of alternatives to the traditional purely academic route through upper secondary	14	21
V autonomy	Value of autonomy for schools, teachers and students in making decisions.	6	8
V choice flexibility	Value flexibility and choices for students in designing their own curriculum to suit their needs.	4	7
v coherence of programmes	Values around coherence of programmes on offer	4	6
Learning	What learning is valued at senior cycle	26	75
V Broader skills	Value of other skills and competencies not currently valued in the system such as teamwork, critical thinking and independent learning	13	28
V criticality	Value of critical thinking, criticality and questioning stance	6	11
V deep learning not rote	Value of deep learning for students rather than superficial rote learning	9	13
V face to face contact	Value of face to face contact for learning	9	13
V independent thinking	Value of independent thought and independent learning	2	2
V relevance	Value of relevance to real life	5	8
Principles	Underpinning principles of senior cycle	15	37
V equity	Value of equity in the system	6	13
V inclusion	Value of inclusion for all students	6	9
V personal development	Value of principle of personal development as a key component	4	5
V wellbeing	Value wellbeing of students not currently served by the system or lack of concern with wellbeing	7	10
Rationale	Values for a rationale for an improved senior cycle	12	18
B College not for everyone	Belief that college is not for everyone and different options should be valued and open to all	8	9

V open access to third level not determined by subjects	Value access to third level without restrictions	1	1
B not enough thought about purpose	Belief that the underpinning purpose of education has not been thoroughly considered by society in general or the system in particular in order to make decisions based on a rationale.	5	9
V prof development	Value of professional development to support implementation	7	11
Influences on educational change	Key influences of change in education	25	114
Pull away from change	Factors that hinder change or make the system more resistant	16	34
B limited public engagement with big issues	Belief that the public have a limited involvement in the discourse on the big issues in education, instead soundbites or singular perspectives dominate the discourse.	5	13
B powerless	Belief that many stakeholders are powerless to influence change	3	4
B shared experience of LC	Belief that the shared traumatic experience of the LC gives a commonality of suffering and so builds system inertia	11	11
V educationally good vs IR possible	The balance between what is educationally sound and what would be perceived as industrial relations possible	3	6
Push pull	Factors that can be experienced as both push and pull	14	45
B power of political leadership	Belief in the powerful influence of a political leader or minister in the progress or stalling of educational developments	13	37
V relationships	Key value of relationships in progressing or stalling change	4	6
V strategy	Value of strategic thinking	1	2
Push toward change	Factors that push the system towards change	19	35

A optimistic mindset	Optimistic mindset or growth mindset towards change	2	3
V confidence	Value of confidence and agency to enact change	3	7
V economic influences	Economic influences valued	5	8
V experiencing diff systems	The positive value of experience of other educational systems	12	17
Underpinning values and principles	Key values that underpin all relationships and structures in the system	27	252
B power of language	Belief in the power of language to harness or derail	3	10
B Professionalism of teachers	Belief in the professionalism of teachers to assess	12	21
V collaboration	Value of collaborative practices	5	7
V Energy	Value energy and enthusiasm for the project	2	2
V expertise	Value of educational expertise from experience or theory	3	9
V Fairness	Value concept of fairness and notes of its absence, often related to the perceived fairness or objectivity of the current system or a commentary on its unfairness or limited fairness.	14	32
V honesty	Value of honesty in dealings with others	3	3
V innovation futures thinking	Value of innovation of thinking about the future needs and seeing possibilities	5	15
V international standing	Value of international respect in relation to international organisations, experience or difference from the UK	14	24
V loyalty	Value loyalty for teachers in the system	1	1
V powerful role	Values having a role that is seen to be powerful or influential	7	14
V pragmatism	Value pragmatic thought, rational, realistic.	5	10
V quality	Value of ensuring quality	1	1

V Research	Valued the research and depth of information	9	14
V stability	Value stability in the system	1	2
V standards	Value of setting and achieving perceived standards	7	16
V trust	Value trust in dealings with others in the system	6	7
Validity	Value of validity in assessment and certification	13	38
V validity of assessment	Value of assessment validity, lots of questioning the current validity of assessment practices in recognising the broad learning of students.	13	36
V validity of certification	Validity of the certification processes	2	2
Value of education	Key value of education. What are the basic principles that are valued in education, what is educationally sound	12	26

Appendix E Full codebook

Name	Description	Files	References
Influence of previous experience	Influencing factors on the process of policy development	29	661
Attitudes to curriculum development	Range of attitudes towards aspects of curriculum processes	23	60
A student-centred	Student centred philosophy of curriculum development	9	16
A complex	Attitude towards curriculum development processes that recognises the complexity of developments, the influences and factors that help or hinder progress and the roles played by actors or events.	3	9
A deference to higher authority for decisions	Attitude that defers to other authorities for decision making, lack of autonomy or agency in decision making	6	11
A didn't know about policy development	Lack of knowledge or awareness before this process (or still) of what is entailed in the development of curriculum policy	4	6
A impatience	Attitude that pace of change is too slow	10	18
Consensus	Getting or trying to get consensus on curriculum issues	23	57
consensus + tradition+ consultation=slow	References to the tradition of consensus building and consultation that has an impact on the pace of change	1	1
Consensus less possible	References to the increasing media and societal discourse and the demand for consensus in an increasingly polarised society	3	3
Consensus necessary for implementation	References to the need for consensus for change or else there will be resistance in implementation	1	1
Consensus on broadening assessment	References to consensus observed on the need to broaden assessment modes/timing in the recent review	5	6
Consensus on broader education	Reference to evidence of consensus on the broadening of the LC experience for students beyond narrow focus on exams.	3	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Consensus on pathways	References to the consensus observed around the provision of additional pathways through senior cycle.	4	6
Consensus on third level access	References to evidence of consensus on third level access	1	1
Curriculum as consensus	Reference to curriculum as the result of efforts at consensus.	1	2
Evidence of diverse views	References to reflections on the review where diverse views were heard (opposite of consensus)	5	6
Evidence of general consensus	References to evidence in the review of consensus around general issues	6	8
Lowest common denominator consensus	References to the push for consensus leading to compromise at the lowest common denominator level.	1	1
Need for dissonant voices	References to the need for dissonant voices, the opposite of consensus, to challenge an echo chamber mentality.	3	3
No reform possible by waiting for consensus	References to the retrospective gathering of consensus. For reform to be innovative it must go ahead of consensus.	1	1
Previous areas of consensus and dissonance	References to evident from past consultations on areas for consensus and dissonant views	2	2
Rhetorical consensus	References to consensus at a rhetorical level but that changes as reality bites	7	11
Teacher welfare	Evidence of consensus on issues of teacher welfare	1	1
Consultation	Grouped responses on the issues of consultation	13	46
Better to have it than not	References to the importance of consultation regardless of limitations	1	2
Broader engagement	References to the broader engagement with different groups as part of the consultation process: students, parents	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Complexity of stakeholder consultations	References to the complex nature of stakeholder engagement	1	1
Cynical consulting	References to formulaic consultation for cynical reasons	2	2
Decisions based on principles	Reference to the limitations of consultation as decisions should be based on sound educational values and principles rather than general consensus	1	1
Different viewpoints in interaction	References to the benefit of consultation in giving people the opportunity to see and hear other perspectives	2	2
Difficulty in getting workable compromise	References to the difficulties raised in consultation to find a workable compromise curriculum	5	6
Genuine listening	References to consultation as opportunity for genuine listening to views	3	5
Have to get the unions onboard	References to the futility of consultation unless the unions are onboard, centrality of union perspective	1	1
Key to sustainable development	References to the need for consultation in order for change to be sustainable	3	3
Lack of buy in	References to consultation process where despite proposal, lack of public buy in	2	2
Lack of engagement	References to poor numbers in consultation events	2	2
Need for expert input	References to participatory approach but need for expert input rather than designing everything by committee	2	3
Nothing new emerging	References to the repetitive outcomes of consultation	1	1
Piloting with schools as consultation	References to piloting with schools as real consultation	2	3
Prior experience of developments	References to previous experiences of policy development and the consultation process or lack of as influencing engagement	1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Quality engagement	References to quality engagement in consultation with stakeholders including parents, students.	4	4
Resistance to stakeholder engagement	Reference to reluctance to engage with stakeholders on consultation	1	2
Slow pace of change	Reference to the consultation cycle as a contributor to the slow pace of change	2	2
Too many consultations	References to the constant run of consultations	1	1
Consultation and consensus	Beartraps and benefits of consultation and trying to reach consensus	24	60
B Compromises made	Belief that many compromises have been made in the past. Trying to reach consensus has resulted in lowest common denominator reform where areas that are known as contentious are avoided to maintain partnership to the detriment of education.	9	13
B Consensus + progress	Belief in a middle road between consensus and progress in order to ensure some change is possible	4	5
B consensus not always possible or wanted	Belief that lack of consensus may lead to compromise or that full consensus is dangerous, variety and outliers provoke thought challenge assumptions (see also compromises made)	11	12
B conversations with diverse groups healthy	Belief in importance of diverse conversations in order to have full views heard rather than just replication of status quo.	12	15
B curriculum is built on consensus	Belief in consensus as the only method of constructing curriculum	3	7
V time for consultation and consideration	Time taken for consultation and consideration of issues is valued (see also impatience for opposite views)	7	8
Previous experience of curriculum development	Impact of previous experiences on current and future developments	29	438

Name	Description	Files	References
Compromise	References to the compromises evident, necessary or detrimental to innovation in development processes at this level	7	10
experience of othering	References to experiences of respondents of othering at events	3	3
Feedback loop	References to the need for a feedback loop on the outcomes of the process	3	5
Gathering teacher voice	References to the gathering of teacher perspectives	1	2
Hearts and minds	References to the need to capture the hearts and minds of society to engender change	1	3
Junior cycle experience	Grouped references to the recent experiences with the junior cycle developments	22	95
Alignment of aims	References to the alignment of JC aims between NCCA and DES	1	1
CBAs	References to the experience of Classroom based assessments	4	4
Compromises made	References to the compromises made in the JC developments and the impact hey have had	3	6
Different grading systems	References to the different grading systems in place for the written assessments and the CBAs	1	1
Directly involved in previous developments	References by participants to their direct involvement in the previous developments at JC and how these influenced their current involvement	5	5
Gap between JC and SC	Reference to the gap in experience between JC and SC	4	8
How will SC build on JC	Queries relating to how the sc developments can build on JC	5	6
Implementation issues	References to issues raised around implementation of JC	1	3
Initiative overload	References to the impact of initiative overload on ability of system to implement JC	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Innovative developments in JC	References to innovation in JC and possibilities now present	9	14
Learning outcomes framework for JC	References to the LO framework for junior cycle	5	5
Lessons learned	References to the 'lessons learned' from the experience of the JC reforms	8	14
Political interference in JC	References to previous political interference in the JC developments and its impact	5	7
Professional development	References to the professional development structures in the JC reform	2	2
Resistance to JC	References to resistance in the system to any change at JC	1	1
Scarred by JC	References made to negative impacts of previous experiences with the JC developments: IR issues, compromises, negotiations, going to the brink	4	6
Standard orientation and culture	Reference to the concern re standards now gap with student orientation and culture of student focus	1	1
Student voice in JC	References to the experiences and impact of SV in JC developments	1	2
Tactical error thinking JC is done	References to the risks around thinking that JC developments don't need constant refinement	2	2
Union actions	References to actions of unions in response to JC developments	3	5
lack of information on curriculum	Distance from the development process, lack of knowledge, insight	10	16
Negative experience of the review	References to negative experiences during the review	9	11
Negotiating spaces	References to existence of negotiating spaces in development	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Pace of change	References to the slow/fast pace of change	18	38
Partnership	References to the partnership model	9	20
Policy vs practise	Reference to the gap between policy and what is practised in schools	3	6
Politicised	Refences to the influence of political intervention of ministers, governments etc.	14	61
positive experience of the review	References to positive experiences of the SC review	24	55
Principal as curriculum maker	References to the principal as a curriculum maker	4	5
Process of development	References to the process of curriculum development	10	38
Professional development	Opportunities for, lack of, where does it come from	11	21
Rolls Royce model	Specific references to the Rolls Royce model referred to by Minister Hanafin in her interview with the Irish Times on 2003 senior cycle proposals	8	16
Sense making	References to the spaces for sense making in other educational systems	1	2
Teacher as curriculum maker	References to the teacher as key curriculum maker	7	9
Vast experience in curriculum development	References to vast experience of the participant in the development of policy to date.	15	20
Purpose and Aims of SC	What is the purpose of SC education and aims within a social context	29	781
Assessment	Grouped references to Assessment	28	148
Additional points of assessment	References to adding additional points of assessment to spread assessment over time.	9	13
Assessment and curriculum as linked	Link between curriculum and assessment	6	7

Name	Description	Files	References
Assessment literacy and capacity	References to assessment literacy of teachers, the system and building of capacity in this area	2	2
Calculated grades	References to the calculated grades process initiated in 2020	4	5
Changes to assessment practices	References to the changes in assessment practices over the past 20 years	1	2
Continuous assessment	Specific references to continuous assessment as a viable alternative to current arrangements	9	23
Criticism of the examination	References to criticism of the examination	6	6
Different type of LC	Reference to the desire for a different type of LC where different talents were recognised	3	3
Dominance of final exams	References to the dominant impact of the final LC examinations on the teaching and learning experiences of the students	5	7
Education linked to assessment	References to how educational meaning can be attached to attainment in examinations, or not.	5	5
Exam questions and marking	References to the framing of examination questions and marking schemes	1	2
Exam validity and integrity	References to questioning if the examinations are a valid representation of the diverse learning of the student and ways to change the examinations to ensure integrity	5	8
External assessment	References to the need for or domination of external assessment at this level.	3	4
Focus on the LC papers	References to societal discussion on the LC papers	1	1
Important institution LC	References to the institutional status given to the LC	1	1
Lack of change in assessment practices	Reference to the inherited structure of the LC and the absence of change in the intervening years	4	7

Name	Description	Files	References
Logistical operation of the exams	References to the vast logistical operation of the examinations	2	3
Mocks	References to the use of mock examinations	1	1
Moderation	References to the need for moderation to accompany school based assessment	3	3
Modes of assessment	References to the use or absence of practical examinations or oral examinations or other assessment components or modes	11	16
Narrows education	References to the narrowing effect of the examination system on the education and learning experiences of the student	4	4
New technological methods of assessment	References to the new methods of assessment explored in recent months using the advances in technology used by schools.	3	3
Power of examiners	References to the direct or indirect power the examiners have or exert in the system	1	1
Praise for the exam system	References to praise for the experience of the examinations for some students or reference to fairness	3	3
Quickest way through highest points	References to playing the system rather than focusing on student aptitude or interest	2	3
Rote learning	References to learning off information for the exam, questioning the educational merit of same	1	1
School based assessment	References to the need for some school based element of assessment or experience of school based assessment at JC or third level	7	13
Significant structural change	Changes in assessment practices will require significant structural change	1	1
Beliefs about the current SC	Range of expressed beliefs about the current senior cycle programmes	29	175
B backwash effect	Belief that the current senior cycle has a negative backwash effect on the previous years of education	3	3

Name	Description	Files	References
B College not for everyone	Belief that college is not for everyone and different options should be valued and open to all	8	9
B Dominance autonomy of third level	Belief that third level have dominance over the requirements for entry and autonomy on how to set them, no oversight by gov or rest of the education system.	6	10
B LC is supposed to be difficult	Belief in the value of hard work and sacrifice for positive outcomes, meritocratic belief system but linked to suffering and hardship as defining characteristics	2	4
B LC means to an end	Instrumentalist and utilitarian view of the LC as a means to accessing third level education and less about educational value or personal development	11	17
B LC not good for mental health	Belief that the LC as it currently stands has a negative impact on the mental health and well being of students in our care.	11	17
B LC suits status quo	Explicit belief that the LC suits replication of the status quo and that certain actors and agencies in the system are unwilling to disrupt that status quo.	5	5
B LC too exam focused	Belief that the senior cycle is too focused on the examination structures of the LC	15	22
B Nothing wrong with LC	Belief that the LC is fine as it is and needs no alteration	1	1
B role of LC in society	Commentary on the significant role the LC plays in Irish society as stratifying influence, replicator of status quo, but also as perceived bastion of meritocracy where passage to the promised land of economic stability can be achieved by participating in the LC.	8	17
B societal dismissal of alternative programmes	Belief that society doesn't value LCA or other pathways as their perceived value is less than the LCE and the accepted academic route through education	6	9
B too much media interest in LC	Belief too much media interest in the LC that is detrimental to the system	6	8

Name	Description	Files	References
B smart equals points	Comments relating to a correlation of points achieved and perceived intelligence.	8	10
B teacher identity linked to current system	Belief that teacher identity is linked to the current system. Teachers valued on the basis of their ability to 'get As'. This linking of teacher identity with an examination system rather than with an education results in emotional resistance to change.	3	6
B too protective of the past shaped by the past	Belief that the current system is too protective of the past, resistant to change but also shaped by the experience of the past. Threads of history and previous decisions made are still visible.	6	8
B trust in current system	Belief that the current system is trustworthy and should not be tampered with or the assertion that societal view is one of trust	9	14
Gap in experience	Beliefs about gaps in continuity of experience	0	0
B Gap in experience JC to LC	Belief that there is a lack of continuity of experience in the learning at junior cycle and that experienced at senior cycle. Some view this gap as a step up others as a step back.	4	6
B gap to third level experience	Belief that there is a gap in the experience of learning at senior cycle and that required in third level	4	6
V Fairness	Value concept of fairness and notes of its absence, often related to the perceived fairness or objectivity of the current system or a commentary on its unfairness or limited fairness.	14	32
B Mandatory subjects unfair	Belief that a system of mandatory subjects linked to a third level access is inherently unfair and inequitable.	4	7
Improving senior cycle	Features of an improved senior cycle and pitfalls to avoid	29	230
Assessment	What values in assessment are seen as worthy of inclusion	16	47
B balance between	Belief in achieving a curriculum balance between predictability and reliability	1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
predictability and reliability			
V formative assessment	Value of formative assessment	8	10
V validity of assessment	Value of assessment validity, lots of questioning the current validity of assessment practices in recognising the broad learning of students.	13	36
Choices	Beliefs around choice, autonomy and pathways in senior cycle	16	42
V alternative pathways	Value of alternatives to the traditional purely academic route through upper secondary	14	21
V autonomy	Value of autonomy for schools, teachers and students in making decisions.	6	8
V choice flexibility	Value flexibility and choices for students in designing their own curriculum to suit their needs.	4	7
v coherence of programmes	Values around coherence of programmes on offer	4	6
Learning	What learning is valued at senior cycle	26	75
V Broader skills	Value of other skills and competencies not currently valued in the system such as teamwork, critical thinking and independent learning	13	28
V criticality	Value of critical thinking, criticality and questioning stance	6	11
V deep learning not rote	Value of deep learning for students rather than superficial rote learning	9	13
V face to face contact	Value of face to face contact for learning	9	13
V independent thinking	Value of independent thought and independent learning	2	2
V relevance	Value of relevance to real life	5	8
Principles	Underpinning principles of senior cycle	15	37

Name	Description	Files	References
V equity	Value of equity in the system	6	13
V inclusion	Value of inclusion for all students	6	9
V personal development	Value of principle of personal development as a key component	4	5
V wellbeing	Value wellbeing of students not currently served by the system or lack of concern with wellbeing	7	10
Rationale	Values for a rationale for an improved senior cycle	12	18
B College not for everyone	Belief that college is not for everyone and different options should be valued and open to all	8	9
V open access to third level not determined by subjects	Value access to third level without restrictions	1	1
B not enough thought about purpose	Belief that the underpinning purpose of education has not been thoroughly considered by society in general or the system in particular in order to make decisions based on a rationale.	5	9
V prof development	Value of professional development to support implementation	7	11
Perceptions of the LC	Specific observations on the current LC system	25	129
Competition	References to the competitive nature of this stage of education	4	8
Emotional	Emotional reactions to the questions asked, anger, sadness, resentment	4	10
Groupwork	References to the absence of or experience of groupwork as a methodology	5	8
Irish	Specific references to the experience of the Irish language in school or its curricular developments	9	16

Name	Description	Files	References
LCA	References to the LCA programme	8	15
Mandatory core subjects	Discussion on the mandatory nature of certain subjects	2	3
Maths	References to the experience of or special treatment of maths as a subject	7	13
Perceptions of subjects	references to perceptions of different subjects or subject areas	6	13
Programmes LCVP	References to LCVP	5	8
Programmes TY	References to TY	8	8
Student workload stress	References to the impact of the current system on student mental health and stress	10	27
What is it all for	Aims and purpose of the senior cycle	24	99
Aims of the curriculum	References to what the aims of the curriculum are or should be	2	2
CAO points	Grouped references to the CAO points system	18	36
Alternative proposals for points	References for alternative proposals for third level entry, past and future	8	9
Failure of the points system	References to failures of the points system to recognise aptitude, to allow for fluctuations in demand, to provide a level playing field.	2	6
Ignoring the points system	References to students, teachers, schools, parents, ignoring the points system as not relevant to their needs.	1	1
LC colonised by points	References to the dominant impact of the points race for third level entry on the education experienced by students and the third level dissatisfaction with same.	6	7
Necessary for third level entry	References to the points system as a necessary part of the transition to third level	2	3
Playing the points system	References to parents or students or teachers focusing on negotiating the points system ahead of education or transition goals.	6	7

Name	Description	Files	References
success = points	References to the success criteria used for this stage of education being reduced to points value.	3	3
Educating	References to the meaning of educating students, what is it for.	3	4
For the greater good	References of education being for the greater good of society and developments framed in that perspective	4	7
Futures thinking	References to the need to look to the future to ensure that education keeps pace with change and external factors	4	7
Personal development	References to the personal development of students in senior cycle or absence of	4	6
Qualifications	Discussions on the role of qualifications	4	6
Transition to college	Importance of the transition to third level on developments at this level	15	31
Structure and Agency	Enablers and disablers of agency in the curriculum development context	29	918
Agency	Grouped references to concepts of Agency	13	32
Autonomy for schools	References to the need for or absence of autonomy for schools	4	6
Autonomy for teachers	References to gaining autonomy or absence of autonomy for teachers	2	3
Capacity building	References to building professional capacity or system capacity or the absence of capacity in the system	2	4
Concept of agency	References to the concept of agency specifically	4	6
curriculum is done to teachers	References to the view that curriculum is a top-down process, teachers lacking in agency or involvement in the development process.	1	1
Developing curriculum	References to schools or teachers developing curriculum	1	1
Efficacy of students	References to student efficacy and role	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Empowering	References to the empowering of teachers, students or schools	3	3
ETB structures	Supports for schools at ETB level for innovations	1	1
Independent learning	References to independent learning as a positive or negative	3	3
Innovations in schools	References to where schools developed innovative programmes or practices	2	2
Improving partnership	Features of an improved partnership model, key pitfalls to avoid	29	292
B impact of previous experiences	The impact of past experiences on present and future negotiations are repeatedly outlined. The archaeology of policy development, scarring experienced by those involved in JC reform are particularly vivid.	7	16
B lessons to be learned	Belief that lessons from past experiences have to be learned before developments can be made. What these lessons are varies.	11	24
Student voice	Views on the engagement of students in the process	27	54
B Importance of SV	Belief in the importance of student voice	27	38
B limitation of SV	The limitations of student voice include lack of representative quality, external influences, don't know what they don't know, and lack of expertise or experience.	13	16
V clarity on roles and responsibilities	Key value is clarity on the roles and responsibilities within the agencies and for the actors in the system	8	30
B divided opinions within organisations	Belief that organisations that have internal divisions are problematic in a partnership context. Main organisations mentioned included ASTI and NPC-PP	4	9
B limitations of stakeholder engagement	The difference between representative and representational involvement in the structures and processes of policy development, the representational nature of some organisations	14	30

Name	Description	Files	References
	and lack of same in others, the absence of some stakeholders from the table all contribute to a limitation in stakeholder engagement.		
B Mothers look after education issues	Lack of balanced representation in parental involvement	3	4
B role as civil servant to the union	Belief that the role of the actor is as servant to the union first.	1	1
B role as servant to the nation civil	Belief that role is firstly as servant to the nation, for the sake of national good, civil servant to the nation	2	4
B School leadership excluded from process	Belief school leadership are excluded from the process of curriculum development	3	5
B teacher as curriculum developer	Cross ref with previous coding	5	7
B union role is opposition	Expressed belief that the key role of the teacher unions is to oppose innovation or reform in order to maintain the status quo	11	22
V structures and processes	Values arising from (or revealing) the structures and processes in place or the weaknesses or gaps in those structures and processes	11	66
What is valued in partnership	Key values identified in partnership model	28	126
V accountability for decisions	Value when decisions made have built in accountability or that agencies have accountability for their decisions.	4	5
V Being listened to	Valued being listened to	16	34
V broad representation and cross	Value voices from a range of actors in the system, a broad representation of all involved not just recognised stakeholders.	21	42

Name	Description	Files	References
sectoral discussion			
V clear communications	Value clear communication of ideas, decisions and plans.	3	6
v engagement in partnership	Value clear engagement with the concept of partnership on behalf of the stakeholders.	7	8
V face to face contact	Key value in review, in partnership and in policy development is the central role of face to face contact in order to generate relationships and trust to enable progress.	9	13
V feedback	Value feedback on decisions and being kept in the loop on developments	3	4
V Insight	Values insight gained through involvement in the process	5	14
Student voice	Experience of the student voice at school and conference	29	109
Authentic voice	References to capturing an authentic student voice	7	11
Challenge	Challenges of capturing student voice	1	1
Continuum of SV	References to the continuum of student voice from the tamed tokenistic voice to the real voices from the ground	1	1
Dismissal of SV	References to how some stakeholders dismiss SV as unimportant	3	3
Empowering students	References to the process of gathering SV as empowering students	6	7
Formulaic approach	References to the dangers of a formulaic, tick the box approach to student voice	5	6
Future engagement with SV	References to the possible future engagement of SV as a central part of any processes	1	2
Gap	References to where there is a gap in the processes of curricular development where student voices are not represented	3	3
Impact of SV	References to the impact of SV in the review	6	8

Name	Description	Files	References
Limitations of SV	References to the limitations of student voice, can only know what they have experienced	7	8
Political interest in SV	References to the political interest in SV, potential voters	4	4
Previous examples of student voice	References to examples of student voice in previous curricular developments	5	7
Proportional amplification of SV	References to the need to balance student voice against other voices	4	4
Right to a voice	References to the rights students hold to be listened to	13	14
Rise of ISSU	References to the recent increase in power of the ISSU	9	11
Student perspective day to day	References to the unique perspective given by students, the day to day working of curriculum as opposed to an expert or external view	11	12
Student voice at school level	References to the development of SV at school level to develop democratic practices	6	7
Underpinning values and principles	Key values that underpin all relationships and structures in the system	26	214
B power of language	Belief in the power of language to harness or derail	3	10
B Professionalism of teachers	Belief in the professionalism of teachers to assess	12	21
V collaboration	Value of collaborative practices	5	7
V Energy	Value energy and enthusiasm for the project	2	2
V expertise	Value of educational expertise from experience or theory	3	9
V Fairness	Value concept of fairness and notes of its absence, often related to the perceived fairness or objectivity of the current system or a commentary on its unfairness or limited fairness.	14	32
V honesty	Value of honesty in dealings with others	3	3

Name	Description	Files	References
V innovation futures thinking	Value of innovation of thinking about the future needs and seeing possibilities	5	15
V international standing	Value of international respect in relation to international organisations, experience or difference from the UK	14	24
V loyalty	Value loyalty for teachers in the system	1	1
V powerful role	Values having a role that is seen to be powerful or influential	7	14
V pragmatism	Value pragmatic thought, rational, realistic.	5	10
V quality	Value of ensuring quality	1	1
V Research	Valued the research and depth of information	9	14
V stability	Value stability in the system	1	2
V standards	Value of setting and achieving perceived standards	7	16
V trust	Value trust in dealings with others in the system	6	7
Validity	Value of validity in assessment and certification	0	0
V validity of assessment	Value of assessment validity, lots of questioning the current validity of assessment practices in recognising the broad learning of students.	13	36
V validity of certification	Validity of the certification processes	2	2
Value of education	Key value of education. What are the basic principles that are valued in education, what is educationally sound	12	26
Whose role is it anyway	Perceptions of roles and responsibilities	25	271
Positioning of stakeholders	References to the positioning of stakeholders while involved in policy developments	1	3
relationships	References to the key role of relationships	9	20

Name	Description	Files	References
Representation in parent voice	Queries on the representation in parent voice, absence of male representation, lack of impact of national organisation	14	26
Representation vs reflection roles	References to the clash between representation roles of members on committees and structures and the reflective role they should have in the developmental process	9	15
Role of NCCA	Discussion of the role of the NCCA in the process	10	25
Role of SEC	Discussion of the role of the SEC in the process	4	5
Role of stakeholders	Discussion of the role of key stakeholders in the process	14	29
Role of teachers	Discussion of the role of teachers in the process	11	27
Role of the Department	Discussions and insights into the role of the Department in the process of curriculum development and implementation	13	42
Role of third level	Discussion on the role of third level at this stage	10	18
Role of unions	Discussions and insights into the role of unions in the development process	15	59
Working with schools	Experience of working with schools to develop proposals or pilot projects	2	2

Appendix F Full summary of participants in this study

Participant		
Macro		
1	Union representative	
2	International Researcher OECD	
3	Former Deputy CEO Education Agency	
4	Union representative	
5	Researcher ESRI	
6	Former CEO Education Agency	
7	Former Secretary General DES	
Meso		
8	Member of BSC, School Leader	
9	Member of BSC, School Leader	
10	Member of Council, Management Body Representative	
11	Member of Council, Management Body Representative	
12	Former member of Council, School Leader Representative	
Micro		
13	Teacher	Suburban, Community School, Mixed (M)
14	Teacher	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)
15	Teacher	Urban, Community School, DEIS, Mixed (F)
16	Parent	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
17	Parent	Suburban, Community School, Mixed (F)
18	Parent	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)
19	Student	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
20	Student	Rural, Voluntary Secondary, Single sex (F)
21	Student	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (M)
22	Student	Suburban, Voluntary Secondary School, Mixed (F)
External		
23	International curriculum academic	
24	International curriculum academic	

25	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum
26	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum and former policy experience
27	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum
28	Irish Academic with specialism in curriculum and experience abroad
29	Former Politician with experience of curriculum policy

Appendix G Representation on Council of NCCA

Chairperson
Nominee of the Minister for Education
Nominee of the Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Joint Managerial Body – Deputy Chairperson
Joint Managerial Body– Ordinary member
Irish National Teachers Organisation-Ordinary member
Irish National Teachers Organisation – Deputy Chairperson
Irish National Teachers Organisation – Ordinary member
Education and Training Boards Ireland
Catholic Primary School Management Association
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
Church of Ireland Board of Education
Irish Federation of University Teachers
Ibec
Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
National Parents' Council (Primary)
National Parents' Council (Post-primary)
Foras na Gaeilge
State Examinations Commission
Department of Education
Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland
Teachers' Union of Ireland
Teachers' Union of Ireland