An Evaluation of Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Neoliberalism on Teaching Skills in the Senior Cycle

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Abstract

Skill development, in various forms, has always been a key part of education. However, over time, the composition, emphasis and implementation of these skills within second-level education settings in Ireland have changed. The move from vocational skills to softer skills is evident. This has been as a result of the societal, economic, political and cultural changes (Hoskins and Crick, 2010). The skills agenda is not going away, it is still central to educational developments in Ireland. The proposed new Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023) that matches skill development to seven key competencies to be targeted throughout upper second-level education as part of current developments is a testament to this policy agenda. However, while skills have been a part of upper second-level education since 2005 (NCCA, 2006), teachers interpret and action the teaching of skills within their own classroom, which can mean that this is not always enacted as set out in the curriculum. This could mean that alternative skills are being taught or skills on the written framework are being taught for different reasons. This study therefore explores the impact of neoliberal values and influences on the teaching of skills in Senior Cycle (SC) education and explores how neoliberalism may be operating in how teachers formulate a perspective around the teaching of skills. The research investigated firstly what were the participants views on the teaching of "skills" in SC education, as well as whether there were specific "skills" more valued by the participants at SC level.

This research gathered data using nonprobability convenience sampling where existing participants recruited other participants using the chain referral method for focus group discussion. There were four focus groups which were made up of four participants. These met once to discuss the research topic. The data gathered were analysed using the lens of Bernstein's Pedagogical Device (PD). Bernstein proposes that knowledge is ordered and disordered through the act of communication by three inter-related rules: distributive, recontextualising and evaluative (Bernstein, 1990). These rules firstly distribute and regulate power and meaning through the distribution of knowledge and identity, which is then recontextualised and changed through specific pedagogic discourse. This is then changed by the evaluative rules to construct the criteria of knowledge to be transmitted and acquired (Singh, 2002). These rules were used to explore how teachers' views and practices in teaching skills have been influenced by ideology and power, which operate at all levels of society (Wright and Froehlich, 2012). The analysis provided snapshots as to how these influences make an impact in theorising how practices can be altered in relation to teachers formulating and teaching skills within the SC.

Based on the data gathered and analysed from the focus groups, this study suggests that (1) teachers' values have a significant influence on what skills are taught and why they are viewed as important. In the main participants delineated these values as being focused on performativity and measurability in helping students to prepare and achieve in examinations, (2) the students ability to retain and reproduce the set curriculum was viewed as more important than teaching skills, (3) helping students gain entry to third-level education as well as preparing students for their future careers took precedence over teaching skills in this educational period (4) neoliberal elements have affected the perceptions of teachers on teaching skills in SC education through various influences such as policy reform, business partnerships and the focus on third-level education. Teachers illustrated how their professional identity was impacted by neoliberal influences to the extent that they described their work in technicist terms. The findings have implications for the current and future practices of teachers teaching SC as well as those implementing policies in this area.

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AIG	American International Group
CAO	Central Applications Office
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EU	European Union
GERM	Global Educational Reform Movement
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
JC	Junior Cycle
LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
LCX	Leaving Certificate Examinations
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ORF	Official Recontextualising Field
PD	Pedagogic Device
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment

PRF	Pedagogic Recontextualising Field
SC	Senior Cycle
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SFI	Science Foundation of Ireland
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
TY	Transition Year
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Senior Cycle helps students to become more engaged, enriched and competent, as they further develop their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions in an integrated way (NCCA, 2023, p. 1).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) (2023) Senior Cycle[1] (SC) Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) sets out that students should be taught skills throughout the SC, in order that they have the ability to develop competencies to progress in response to an array of contexts, tasks and situations. The teaching of key skills has been included in the SC framework within curricular reforms in all the subjects for SC since 2005 up to the present day. These Key Skills are information processing, communications, being personally driven, critical and creative thinking, and working with others (NCCA, 2002). SC education has also built further upon the *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014-2020* which highlighted the need '*to equip learners with the relevant knowledge (the 'what'), the key dispositions and skills (the 'how') and the values (the 'why') that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives*' (Department of Education & Skills, 2014, p.12). However, there has been little research conducted on what skills in general are being taught in the classroom, why teachers perceive these skills as important to teach in the Irish SC context, and where the emphasis on these skills came from. These three concerns are especially relevant as the SC is viewed by many stakeholders such as parents and students as an extremely important period of education for students and teachers due to the emphasis on the Leaving Certificate Examinations[2] (LCX) as a means for matriculation into third-level education (Hyland, 2011, Lynch and McGarr, 2016).

This research aims to explore whether teacher's perceptions of teaching skills to SC students has been affected by neoliberal tropes that include a focus on performativity in regards to teaching to attain

[1] Senior Cycle is a period of education in the Irish second level context for students between the ages of 15 and 18 where students study a range of subjects and which usually ends in the completion of the Leaving Certificate Examinations

[2] The Leaving Certificate Examinations (LCX) are examinations at the end of the Senior Cycle. They are taken by students studying the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and those studying the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). I chose to use the term Leaving Certificate Established because this is an older programme that is taken by more students in the Irish context (DE 2023).

tests results, instrumentalisation of the role of the teacher in their interaction with the curricula and the commodification of educational knowledge (Giroux, 2019). Using a Bernstein's pedagogical device as a theoretical framework, the research will critically explore how teachers' beliefs, values and practice in teaching skills have been influenced by the neoliberal agenda in both society and education. A number of critical theorists state that people worldwide are held in place by modes of being (Breunig, 2009) and that a disorientating and complex array of messages are being fed to citizens that makes it extremely difficult to challenge those in power or enact change within society (Fook, 2002). Neoliberal agendas aim to overcome traditional philosophical and societal norms such as high governmental expenditure for public services and through promoting private enterprise and individualism (Harvey, 2005). This is motivated by an idea of fairness and balanced economic regulation for the benefit of all classes however, critics argue that this has led to growing inequality and a poorly functioning society (Horkheimer 2002). There is a need to look at this dominant neoliberal status quo where the legitimising of unfair circumstances and structures such as unequal funding and provision in education is accepted (de Saxe et al., 2020a). Neoliberal influences are evident in areas such as the individualisation of society, the economisation of multiple aspects of education which include skill development, and the rise of successful educational outcomes being measured by quantifiable outcomes based on market needs (Lubienski, 2017, Lingard, 2010). The research aimed to explore what skills were deemed as important to be taught by participant teachers and wishes to explore whether the weighting of values that teachers construct around particular skills emerges from neoliberal influences such as those with large capitalistic power that include large corporations, supranational organisations and the most wealthy in society (Ampuja, 2016, Harvey, 2005a). This will be explored through the lens of Bernstein's Pedagogic Device to view how the ordering and reordering of knowledge is enacted through the three rules that comprise the PD, that are namely distributive, recontextualising and evaluative. The device operates through the above rules and mechanisms that convert knowledge into pedagogic communication (Bernstein, 1975b, Bernstein, 2005), the research aimed to gain a new understanding on how the knowledge, policy and practice of teaching skills is distributed, recontextualised, and explored by teachers within in the research. By

doing this the study aimed to gain a new understanding on what skills remain and become more relevant as a result of this research, which may help improve the practice of teachers (Shor, 2012).

The research explores this through using a qualitative focus group method to explore teachers' perceptions from within Irish second-level context. It is hoped the outcomes of this research may positively alter the practice of teachers in these settings, especially in regard to attempting to help students develop holistically rather than to maintain neoliberal ideals of governmentality and the development of workers for those in power. This holistic development is defined as the individual's skill set in order that they can develop the skills to self-actualise in all aspects of their life (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). This chapter provides an introduction to the study by first discussing the background and context, the significance of the study and finally, the rationale and research questions.

1.1 The Organisation of Irish Post-primary Level Education Context

This study explores the perceptions of post-primary teachers on the influence of neoliberalism on teaching skills. It does not make generalisable claims about teaching skills in specific school types. However, it is essential to explore this areas different makeup to inform the reader about the composition of schools in the Irish post-primary context and the history behind this. Post-primary or second-level schools are comprised of Education and Training Board Schools (ETB), voluntary, comprehensive, and community schools (Coolahan et al., 2017). There is a difference in who owns and manages these schools, with voluntary schools being privately owned and managed by religious organisations that founded the schools (Skerritt and Salokangas, 2020). ETB schools are former vocational schools, which are multi-faith schools and are part of 16 regional ETB's that manage a number of second-level schools, further education colleges, training centres and multi-faith primary schools (OECD, 2012b). The community and comprehensive schools are run by Boards of Management. Community schools operate under the Joint Trusteeship of the Catholic Religious Orders and local ETB's, with Comprehensive schools under the sole stewardship of specific religious (Skerritt and Salokangas, 2020). There is still a prevalence of single-sex schools in Ireland, with 28% of boys and 35.4% of girls attending a single-sex school (For more information, see DE, 2023; Eurydice, 2023). Schools are tasked with providing education according to the Education Act 2000,

which sets out the minimum standard of education children must receive in the state (Coolahan et al., 2017). The NCCA advises the minister on assessment procedures and curriculum in Irish schools through consultation with various stakeholders, including educators, students, parents, Teacher Unions and also the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) (Looney, 2006). These links and responsibilities are essential to this study when participants explore where their perceptions and values around the teaching of skills are influenced as these stakeholders affect the structure and content of Irish SC schooling.

Irish second-level schools typically enrol students from primary schools at age 12 or 13, with students staying normally until they are 18 years of age. They first complete the traditional Junior Cycle (JC) over three years (lower second-level). Programmes for students with additional educational needs are also available, and these are namely the Junior Cycle Schools Programme (JCSP)[3] as well as the Level 1 and Level 2 Programmes[4]. The traditional Junior Cycle went through large-scale changes in 2015 with short courses and a new focus on teaching skills being emphasised through the introduction of a new Key Skills framework (2006) and an increased ability for schools to offer subjects through short courses that are also accredited. According to the DE, the new JC,

> 'incorporates a shared understanding of how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of junior cycle students, both now and in the future. This shared understanding is informed by engagement with stakeholders and by national and international research' (DES, 2015, p.6)

The reform is currently being evaluated in a large-scale research study at the University of Limerick (See, for example, report McGarr et al., 2023). Key relevant findings from these reports are that key skills are seen as drivers for pedagogical change, with students reporting that they enjoy their classes more where there is an emphasis on key skills and that they feel they have a greater voice in and

[3] Junior Certificate School Programme is a curricular framework that follows the Junior Cycle Curricula with a framework that suits students specific needs to help overcome obstacles and develop a positive self-image.
[4] The L1LP and L2LP are progammes that have been designed for students with a high moderate to low/mild general learning disability who complete units of learning that are formatively assessed rather than the summative assessments that the traditional Junior Cycle and JSCP students complete.

greater awareness of their learning (McGarr et al., 2022). However, there is also a level of 'incoherence' in the actualisation of the reform in this area (McGarr et al., 2023, p.17).

After this, students who remain in education move onto the SC (upper second-level). The cycle can be completed over two or three years, depending on whether students decide to complete Transition Year (TY)[5]. This is a year with no state examiner curriculum, and schools have the freedom to develop their own programmes of study (Jeffers, 2015). 78% of students opt to take this year of study (DE 2023). As part of the SC, there is a Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), which is the most popular programme in this period; the majority of students in Ireland, 93.6% in 2022, sat the LCE (DE 2023). Additionally, some students decide to do an additional subject named the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a focus on self-directed learning, work and enterprise. In 2022, 27% of students took this option (DE 2023). Alternatively, there is the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA), which looks to overcome early school leaving and increase inclusion by focusing more on continuous learning, different modes of assessment and work experience for students whose strengths these suit. However, this is taken by only 6.4% of the cohort (DE 2023; Gleeson et al., 2013). The difference in participants' experiences and perceptions of these progammes are key to this study about the participants' perceptions of teaching skills. There is a national obsession with the Leaving Certificate Examination, with widespread media coverage (McCormack et al., 2020) leading to the conclusion that the examination becomes the curriculum, which can also be described as the 'backwash effect' of high-stakes assessment (Gleeson, 2022). This was highlighted in the Irish context by the production of league tables[6] for feeder schools into third-level institutions, which can be viewed as a measurement of schools' success in preparing their students for the LCX at the end of the cycle. The high stakes for the Leaving Certificate Established are also evident in the culture of paying for individual private

[5] This is an optional additional stand-alone year long programme that can be taken after the JC, and is designed to act as a bridge between the two programmes. It aims to provide students with a chance to develop without the pressure of examinations which come at the end of the two cycles, which are known as the Junior Certificate Examinations and the Leaving Certificate Examinations for JC and SC respectively.
[6] The Irish Times Newspaper publishes a breakdown of the percentage of students from every school who progresses to third- level. It publishes where they go and compares the breakdown of students who attend second- level against all other second- level schools.

tuition, known as ‘grinds’, as well as paying for access to private colleges for extra tuition (McCoy and Byrne, 2022). Furthermore, schools also underline the emphasis put on JC examinations and LCX by completing practice or ‘mock exams’ to prepare students for the format of these examinations. This focus on examination results is also key to the participants’ perspectives in this study, with the culture of exams and how this links to the different SC programmes being key. This will be discussed further in chapter 3, with the next section exploring the background to the study in terms of skills, the development of skills frameworks in the Irish context and how this may have been influenced by neoliberalism.

1.2 Background to the study

Teaching skills are a key part of a teacher’s role in education, not only for the benefit of the individual but for society as a whole. The development and formulation have always been a part of education. However, there have always been questions about what skills to teach and on what basis, considering the benefit of the individual or society and how these overlap. Over time, the composition and implementation of teaching these skills within second-level educational settings have changed. This has been as a result of the societal, economic, political and cultural changes that have occurred (Hoskin & Crick 2008). On many occasions, these changes are connected and limit themselves not to one area or country but to multiple locations and settings. This study explores the teaching of skills within the Senior Cycle in the Irish context. This is a fundamental question, considering the Key Skills Framework at this level and the new Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023) that could eventually replace this. Therefore, exploring teachers’ perceptions of how this and other influences have affected their teaching of skills has left a research gap.

Through Bernstein’s PD this study explores how the impact of neoliberal values may have shaped the teaching of these skills in the Irish SC context and whether alternative skills are being taught and why. Neoliberalism has different forms in different time frames and settings, its core elements for this research include the expansion of societal, cultural, economic and political practices that suit those in power and the elite in society (Ball, 2012). These values include the individualisation and privatisation of many formerly public structures in society, which also included education (de Saxe et

al., 2020a). As a result, these changes have influenced how schooling operates in many countries with the rise of an audit culture and prescriptive curricula and assessments that lessen teacher autonomy (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Neoliberalism also works to normalise changes in values and has been instrumental in the adoption of the language and value of commerce in place of an emphasis on democratic social justice in the Irish education context (Fitzsimons, 2017). Therefore, exploring the effect of neoliberalism on the participant's opinions on teaching skills in SC in this research is essential to the participants and potentially other people who are influenced by this study to work against any elements of neoliberalism that they don't agree with or accept.

There is a difference in how countries across the world approach and define skills and competencies within education, with several countries basing them on a subject basis, a cross-curricular basis and sometimes explicitly or implicitly (Gordon et al., 2009). Some countries targeted the development of competencies, whereas Ireland targeted the development of skills. This may change with introduction of a Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023), which aims to develop competencies with the development of skills integrated into this process. Chisolm points out that,

> *'they do not really mean the same thing. Competence means the ability to apply knowledge, know-how and skills in a stable/recurring or changing situation. Two elements are crucial: applying what one knows and can do to a specific task or being able to transfer this ability between different situations'.* (Chisolm, 2005, p.42)

A skill, however, can be defined as 'one's ability to perform a particular task,' (Sulaiman & Ismail, 2020, p.3537). In the context of Irish education implementation, the introduction of a skills framework, which occurred in 2008, skills and competencies were viewed as fundamentally the same as they were preparing students to live a fulfilled life and do their best within the educational context (Looney & Klenowski, 2008). However, in the new SC Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023), skills are an element that add to student competency development. Therefore, I will distinguish between skills and competencies in this research in line with the NCCA's (2023) assertion that while they are linked, they are different in their makeup, with skills being an element of competencies along with dispositions and values.

Ireland's education system has changed considerably since the 1970's. This is explored to situate this research with a particular focus being put on neoliberalism's influence on the second-level system of education, and the skills taught within its SC. As a country, from this period up until the present day, Ireland has become a part of economic and educational organisations such as the EU and OECD. These organisations can exert power in how countries advance their neoliberal agenda through the governance of education systems and the shaping of the role of schooling to suit neoliberal ideals, although Thrupp (2014) argues that they are nonpartisan. Neoliberal ideals include the individualisation and privatisation of all many formerly public structures in society, which also included education (de Saxe et al., 2020a). It also works to normalise changes in values and has been instrumental in the adoption of these ideals. For example, the OECD has situated itself in a position of great power through the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These assessments test score countries in a range of skillsets and subjects and rank them against the scores of other countries (Ball, 2016a). As a result of the availability of these scores, governments and societies feel pressurised to have a neoliberal capitalistic orientated education system which promotes certain knowledge, skills and fields for the attraction of trade and companies (Apple, 2001). This leads to countries and practitioners feeling pressurised into an instrumentalist approach to education that is obsessed with measurement and quantification (Giroux, 2019). It has also resulted in the marketisation of education with an ever-increasing amount of focus being put on results and global competitiveness (Apple et al 2005; Lauder 2006; Harvey 2005). This has empowered these organisations to promote a greater focus on school to prepare students to add to the capitalistic goals of those in power instead of developing them in a holistic way for all aspects of life (Grummell and Lynch, 2016). In the past, education systems focused on the development of democratic values for the benefit of the individual and society. However, with the power of neoliberal influences on education, the focus on developing individuals wholly for all their own individualistic needs has increased in many countries (Biesta, 2007). With power being defined by Bernstein (2003b) as the way a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits, and explores educational knowledge reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control. Education however has never been neutral, the adoption of neoliberal tendencies within education has called into question its place as a bastion of

common good and its important democratic position in favour of capital accumulation and managerial governance (Lipman, 2011). Giroux (2016) argues that this has been changed to place value on academic success rather than the democratic vision where possibility and citizenship are given serious consideration. Related to this, this study explores how participants practice in teaching skills during SC may have been affected by neoliberalism.

This study is based within the Irish second-level educational context. Economically Ireland's interests have grown exponentially in the last number of decades, and for its comparatively small size it has a large open trading market. The expansion of globalised systems of communication, trade and cooperation in general, along with key influences from cultural, societal and commercial interests, has significantly influenced the growth in the number of Irelands working population with third-level qualifications, especially when compared to the rest of the EU (OECD, 2012a). As a result, Fitzsimons (2017) and Power et al. (2013) have argued that education in Ireland been shaped by the global neoliberal narrative on education. This study will aim to critically explore the influence of neoliberalism on the teaching of skills within the SC. Neoliberal ideals such as individualism, measuring value and privatisation have shaped the practice, assessment and outcomes of education (Bourdieu, 1998a), which is evident in the Irish context in how skills that suit neoliberalism have been placed and normalised within the curricula and practice of schools. This is evident in SC educational context through a student-centred approach where there is an emphasis on the development of skills in preparation for the workforce (NCCA, 2009C). These skills were placed within the curriculum and are expected to be a part of the teaching and learning in all subjects within the SC (NCCA, 2009A; Gordon et al 2009). This firstly started with the creation of a key skills framework that integrated skill developed to all aspects of teaching and learning within the cycle (Gordon et al., 2009). The process started with student consultation around their experiences of the SC in 2002 (NCCA, 2002), which along with later consultation with teachers, management and other stakeholders led to a proposal of a six key skill framework in 2005 (NCCA, 2005). The six skills put forward were learning to learn, communicating, information processing, critical and creative thinking, working with others and being personally effective (NCCA 2005). Although learning to learn was left out at a later stage as it was

felt that there was an aspect of this in the other five skills (NCCA, 2008). The key skills implementation was developed through various stages of piloting, which firstly revolved around student and teacher interactions with the framework within partnership schools. It then progressed to whole school implementation in a limited number of schools, where a toolkit of resources and ideas for implementation was created with four partner schools and thereafter rolled out nationally (NCCA, 2009C). This implementation aimed to lessen the emphasis on summative assessment and give students more control of their learning (NCCA, 2009C). There has been a new development within SC as a result of the Senior Cycle Advisory Report (NCCA, 2022), with the drawing up of a new Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023) that includes seven competencies that develop skills, knowledge, values and dispositions within them. These include thinking and solving problems, being creative and innovative, communicating, working with others, participating in society, cultivating wellbeing and managing learning and self. Again, these are to be developed within subject disciplines with a focus on preparing students for societal engagement (NCCA, 2023). The neoliberal emphasis on preparing students for specific and narrow fields of employment, which benefit companies and employers may negatively affect the holistic development and practices of those within education (Lynch 2012; Holland et al 2016). Therefore, this influence on the practice of teachers when teaching skills to students in SC is explored in this research. This research is vital, as after two decades since the Lisbon agenda when skills development began, and skills were introduced into the SC curriculum, there is a new framework being introduced that takes little into account of teachers' previous experiences and attitudes to teaching skills in SC.

Neoliberal discourse has also emerged in the way in which capitalism has influenced the language around education. The interests of business has diminished the power of the school and educators within it to make decisions, by holding teachers accountable for not sticking rigidly to the process of direct instruction and test-based pedagogies within education which suit the current social order and labour market needs (Kincheloe, 2008c, Gramsci, 1971). This has transcended into the discourses and practices around skill development, which have placed too much emphasis on development for the sake of work after school rather than personal development (Ananiadou and Claro, 2008). It has also

changed how practice is structured and explored in the Irish context with testing and accountability being a key part of this (Biesta, 2007, Biesta, 2015a, Ball, 2016b). Freire (2018) and Althusser (1971) critiqued this perception of educators as mechanistic transmitters of knowledge for the benefit of those in power. Eisner (2003) argues that students and teachers should also be given leeway to structure and guide their own learning journey in a holistic way (Eisner, 2003). Biesta (2020b) also contends that education must be balanced between qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Therefore, not giving teachers space to holistically develop students for both working and social life in favour of promoting competition, individualism, and privatisation could lead to a less democratically orientated society as the governance of education and society as a whole is orientated away from this focus (Hursh and Henderson, 2011).

Supporters of neoliberalism often promote their ideals by using examples of international practices to support their agenda in other jurisdictions. This inhibits those outside the spheres of influence and normalises the preferred contextuality of those in power in the process (Giroux, 1988). This means that, particularly within education, it's important that all knowledge be contextualised and critically analysed in order to see the power constructs behind it(Jardine, 2006, Jardine, 2005). This is enacted in this study by exploring participants' views and values on the teaching of skills using Bernstein's PD (Bernstein, 2005, Bernstein, 1990, Bernstein, 2000, Bernstein, 1999, Bernstein, 2003, Bernstein, 2001). Certain critical theorists argue that these elements are invisible as a result of recontextualisation, and thus, looking at this through the lens of critical epistemology, all aspects of knowledge and structure must be taken into account, especially in education (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011). This is particularly important in this research as aspects of neoliberalism's influence on skill development are tacitly accepted as norms, which can lead to a lack of questioning around the aims and consequences on the educational field. In the case of the development of skills in the Irish context, the NCCA was building upon the agenda set by various organisations and countries, particularly by the European Council at the Lisbon conference in March 2000 (Lynch 2012). It was also influenced by global players such as the OECD and economically successful countries that had developed skills or competency frameworks in education and specific industries such as technology,

science and commerce (Ong and Collier, 2005). These aims were reflected in an Irish context where the NCCA report on the overview of the SC explains that the skills framework was developed to be 'in line with international trends and influenced by the Lisbon strategy and the OECD initiative' (NCCA, 2009A, p.19). The background review presented in this section has provided an overview of the previous and current makeup of teaching skills and competencies and how this has been influenced in the past, especially by neoliberal elements. Therefore, this thesis seeks to address the research gap through the research questions listed below to add new insights into understanding this topic in the Irish SC context.

1.3 The Research Question:

The research questions emerged from my experience as an educator in SC, where I observed little knowledge among teachers where I worked of what skills they should be teaching during this period. They also emerged after I observed that there was little research in the Irish context on the values put on teaching skills in SC and what skills teachers felt they were teaching.

This research explores the following questions:

1. Are there certain skills valued by the participants in the senior cycle?

2. What were the participants' views on the teaching of "skills" in senior cycle education?

3. Where did their views on the importance of certain skills emerge from?

Significance

Although research on skill and competency development within education has been conducted internationally, particularly the skills frameworks in Ireland (Banks et al., 2018, Dempsey, 2016, Johnston, 2021, Johnston et al., 2015, Lamb et al., 2017, Walsh, 2008, Smyth, 2019b), this research holds significance due to multiple elements. Firstly, the framework in the Irish context is nearly two decades old (NCCA, 2005), and the rationale behind the development and teaching of these skills could potentially be dated as education practice and society have developed since this release. While there has been a Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) framework (2023) developed, understanding the practice of teachers' teaching skills in SC prior to this introduction may help further the

understanding of what skills have been taught and what values have affected this. Also, while there have been explorations of teachers' perceptions of teaching key skills to second-level students in Ireland, no studies have explored teacher's perceptions of teaching skills in the SC through the lens of Bernstein's PD (Looney and Klenowski, 2008, Dempsey, 2016, Printer, 2020), which adds to the significance of this research and the potential for other researchers in the future to use this theoretical framework if it proves successful in addressing this research question. Researchers have also not explored whether teachers feel that neoliberalism has influenced teachers' perceptions and practices when teaching skills to SC students in the Irish context. As a result of the literature review, I observed the potential gap in prior research and therefore explored key tenets of this research question, including the development of the skills agenda in the global, European and Irish contexts. Part of this policy borrowing among countries was driven by supranational organisations such as the OECD, WB and EU, among others (Lingard, 2010, Phillips and Ochs, 2003, Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). I endeavoured to explore how these elements may have manifested themselves within educational discourse and practices to influence both society and teachers. This research will help teachers who are formulating views and actively practicing the teaching of skills to improve the understanding of their practice. It hopes to do this by helping them to critically analyse their views on whether they perceive certain skills to be more important than others, where this sense of importance came from and if they need to reflect on this. Furthermore, it may, inform the policy and practice of those who read the research findings and results.

1.4 Positionality

Positionality is an important element within research, especially in critical qualitative research, where the researcher influences its direction and findings (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Therefore, the following section informs the reader of my background and influences from my life. However, that is to say, I took steps to reflect on these throughout the research to better understand how this may be affecting my research process, data collection and analysis, and accept that these biases and flaws add complexity to the research rather than making it inherently flawed once it is acknowledged (Ravitch and Carl, 2019). The topic of teaching skills at SC is one that I am passionate about, as I am currently holding the position of Deputy Principal in a second-level school. When the research data was being

gathered and analysed, I worked as a Guidance Counsellor. As part of my role, I observed the experiences of students who struggled to balance the need for holistic development with their academic pursuits and the pressure they felt from different stakeholders such as parents and labour market employers around this. Throughout my time in the role of Guidance Counsellor, I visited various third-level settings and multinational companies. I perceived from this that these organisations had become ubiquitous in their ability to influence educators and societal expectations around the need for education to conform to the needs of the labour market. However, I was unsure whether this was the case in other schools or if this was my own subjective experience, and wished to find out more, which is a key part of critical research where situating knowledge and fostering alternative and diverse views is key (Levitt et al., 2021). The teaching of skills was also important for me because, upon completing SC myself, I reflected that I had not developed my own skillset to adapt to a new educational and social environment when I first went to university. I wanted to assist teachers in exploring their practice related to an important aspect of education around teaching skills. As a critical researcher, my objective was to help them enhance their practice by gaining a better understanding of their thought process. This approach can contribute to accountability, collaborative inquiry, and reflexivity among participants (Désautels et al., 1998). Furthermore, within my own family, I have observed how family members seemed to be more successful in their personal lives and careers than others, and this did not seem to correlate directly with how they performed in SC, which was based on written assessment and did not, in the main, take into account other strengths. This was influential to my choice of research method. I had a negative experience using surveys in previous research, where I struggled to gain rich insight into participants' views because there was little rich data from subjects who were poor writers, which also could have been down to a lack of written literacy but had other strengths as my family showed in life (Bloor, 2001). I, therefore, felt that a qualitative focus group would be ideal for exploring the nuances and power dynamics of how the participants thought about and taught skills, which is a key strength of focus groups as a research method (Morgan, 1998). This also was exceptionally important for me, as through this research, using a critical paradigm, I aimed to contribute to knowledge by exploring the power elements that led to the participants' forming opinions on skills, which directly influenced their practice. This exploration of power, influence, and

consequences is crucial to critical research (Kincheloe et al., 2011). However, as a critical researcher, there were ways that I looked to enhance the trustworthiness of the study through several steps that are outlined further in the methodology chapter.

1.5 Structure of the Study

Chapter One

Chapter one of the dissertation provides readers with an introduction to the background of the research area. It also outlines the research questions along with the significance of the study. The following section details how this dissertation is structured through the various chapters.

Chapter Two

Chapter two provides a review of the literature. It sets the context for the study by analysing key elements of neoliberalism and how this has manifested in many education systems. It reviews the development of the skills and competencies agenda and explores how this has influenced the practice and policies within the Irish context, focusing on the role of the EU and the Lisbon Strategy on policy within Europe. It further addresses how curricula and assessment have a bearing on how skills are taught in the Irish education system. The chapter then goes on to provide a context to how teacher agency can be influenced by these societal and policy influences when teaching skills in the classroom. A particular focus is put on the professional role of teachers in being able to understand their values and decisions in relation to this.

Chapter Three

The third chapter presents the methodology used in this research. The chapter locates this research within the critical paradigm. It also sets out how critical theory developed and how it aims to help those who might be in unjust and oppressive situations to explore any suppression, and to bring awareness to any powers or orthodoxies that shape relations between societies, organisations and people. The rationale for using this paradigm with a Bernsteinian PD lens will also be explained with the ontological and epistemological perspectives set out. The research design and the choice of focus groups to gather data from are rationalised. The chapter outlines how the data is analysed through the

use of the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis and the six steps that needed to be taken to achieve this. The quality criteria within the study, which included reflexivity, trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability and transferability, will also be discussed, as well as the limitations of the study.

Chapter 4

This chapter presents data from the focus groups where n= 16 post-primary teachers were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of the teaching of skills in SC that was analysed through Bernstein's PD lens. This chapter analyses three major themes: Recourse to Rationalities on the Values of Teaching Skills in SC, Qualifications Framing Skill Development in SC, and Marketisation and Intense Privatisation Driving Skill Development.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter reviews the major findings of the research, draws conclusions from the process and addresses the research questions. This is followed by an exploration of the potential implications for policy development and practice as a result of the study around the teaching and learning of skills in the Irish SC context and possibly further afield.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1.1 Introduction

In this literature review, I will first explore some of the fundamental concepts of neoliberalism, its emergence, and how it can manifest in society. Furthermore, I will endeavour to analyse its current manifestation in education and explore how this can impact the perception of education in different settings. I will particularly focus on exploring key constructs of neoliberalism within the Irish second-level system, with a specific emphasis on the EU and Irish skills and competencies frameworks and skills embedded in the SC Irish context.

2.1.2 Neoliberalism

Venugopal (2015 p.1) argues that,

> 'Neoliberalism is everywhere, but at the same time, nowhere. It is held to be the dominant and pervasive economic policy agenda of our times, a powerful and expansive political rationality of class domination and exploitation, the manifestation of 'capital resurgent', an overarching dystopian zeitgeist of late-capitalist excess'.

Neoliberalism has different forms in different time frames and settings. Its core elements for this research include the expansion of societal, cultural, economic and political practices that suit those in power and the elite in society (Ball, 2012). These values include the individualisation and privatisation of formerly public structures in society, which can include education (de Saxe et al., 2020a). According to Lubienski and colleagues (2016), those who support neoliberal theory aren't doing it to promote liberalism, which emphasizes less state intervention and the empowerment of individuals. Instead, they are pushing for their own interests through a coordinated effort involving think tanks, policy entrepreneurs, public officials, and private interests. They orchestrate policy changes that align with their pro-privatization agenda and serve their self-interest. These agendas often represent opening choices for individuals while removing trade barriers. However, in many instances, options are limited for the poorer classes, with a lack of government support available, which thus negatively affects these classes more (Tyack, 1974, Harvey, 2005b). Olssen (2002) proposes that from a neoliberal viewpoint, human beings are rational, self-interested consumers, and that they will have more fulfilling lives by having more authority to make decisions and choices in their lives. These aspects were upheld by the Keynesian claim that allowing the economy to have low

regulation, high individual responsibility and low taxes, furthers the chance of full employment and 'optimal economic outcomes in every respect—efficiency, income distribution, economic growth, and technological progress—as well as securing individual liberty' (Kotz, 2015, p.12). Western governments, according to (Lipman, 2011), were tasked with upholding these conditions and to protect the rights of private property and interests of individualised citizens. Epstein (2005a, 2005b) argues that the operation of economies and, by extension, societies have become linked to the increasing role of financial actors, markets and institutions, which has led to the financialisation of many aspects of life, much to the detriment of many people. However, Davis and Walsh (2017) argue that financialisation is not the same as neoliberal theory, as those who pursue financialisation do not necessarily knowingly follow all aspects of neoliberal theory. Instead, they focus on microeconomics and frictionless transactions rather than consumption and production. While these nuances may be true in some cases, the increased financialisation of aspects of formerly public and social realms is a key construct of neoliberalism in many countries (Davies, 2014, Duménil and Lévy, 2001). Supranational organisations such as the European Union, International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organisation use 'soft' power to influence aspects of a country's ability to solve problems that are a result of neoliberal-orientated individualism, financialisation and entrepreneurship that even extends to areas such as education (Burbules & Torress, 2013; Peck & Ticknell, 2002). Soft power revolves around cultivating voluntary compliance through a positive image that endears the want to change or follow an agenda (Gallarotti, 2011). This is enacted through the use of funding, of distribution, and focus of policy, as well as sponsorship of research, which magnify norms that suit their interests (Hill and Kumar, 2008). These are just some examples of how supranational organisations' agendas are enhanced. The use of soft power and influence will be returned to later in this chapter, when I analyse the EU's Lisbon Agenda (European Council, 2000) was enacted through subsidiarity or soft power, which furthered the ideals of competence or skill development for the workforce through decentralised guidance where states decided how this was implemented in each country.

This research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, neoliberal elements within society and the economy became more apparent (Ryan, 2020). Many corporations seemed to profit from the crises through increased sales and government support, with some proceeding with share buybacks in this period as a result of increased profits (Šumonja, 2021). Meanwhile, those who held assets and shares during this period saw their worth increase in many cases, especially when compared to many blue and white-collar workers who rely solely on their salary and have few assets (Galasso, 2020). Many Western countries are also shifting their education systems to align with the needs of the labour market, where creativity, communication, and a growth mindset are valued more than repetitive skills (Zhao and Watterston, 2021).

The following three subsections will explore some of the significant constructs of neoliberalism that have crucially influenced the development of neoliberalism in Ireland due to economic, social, and cultural links with many stakeholders and countries in a globalised world. Although Ireland never adopted neoliberalism in a top-down fashion like the US, it has merged elements of neoliberalism while keeping other aspects of the European social welfare system through the privatisation of some public services, low individual taxation and light-touch regulation (Kitchin et al., 2012).

2.1.3 Governments and Neoliberalism

In this subsection, there will be an exploration of governmental neoliberalism and how its policies and standing have affected society, which has also meant that education has been influenced. According to Lipman (2013), neoliberalism has led to a more individualistic and capital accumulation-focused society, which is reflected in the governmental policies of many countries. Neoliberal agents, such as multinational businesses and individuals, have ‘gained power not only through their economic dominance but also through particular discourses and practices that shape individuals and society’ (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, p.176). Neoliberal-orientated norms consist of individualistic goals and capital accumulation, with governments being a vital part of this through deregulation and privatisation (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism has become focused on using governmental power to

measure individual worth and deploy this for the benefit of those whose interests they represent (Peters, 2012). Rose (1993) contends that rather than this, governance has been top-down in all cases, and has been introduced in all directions through audits, accountability and financial expectations being established. This has also affected how governments view education, enact change, and establish discourse around areas such as the teaching of skills.

The emergence of neoliberal-orientated governments was profoundly affected by US President Richard Nixon and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who expounded neoliberal tendencies within their administrations. These became mainstream in many other western countries due to the international influence of these prominent world leaders. One of the rationales for less state intervention with the emergence of neoliberal influence was during Richard Nixon's term as the United States President, where companies' profits were being undermined by the introduction of governmental supports, including in education (Harvey, 2005). This, by extension, it was argued, undermined the market's ability to regulate itself through competition, which was being stunted due to too much government control (Harvey 2005; Shin & Park 2016; DeSaxe 2015). The change in many governments' policies was also driven by the structure of many economies changing from state-led industrial economies to expansionist globalised economies, which likewise impacted the Irish context (Venugopal 2015; Delaune 2019). This change to a neoliberal globalised economy, and how government facilitated this, was reliant on its citizens believing that they were rational consumers who had an unlimited choice and therefore accepted the lack of support afforded to them by the state government as a result of this (Roberts, 2007). This consumer rationale filtered down to aspects of society such as education and health, where teachers and students, as well as doctors and patients, were viewed as suppliers and customers respectively, which affected relationships in this area (Giroux, 2012).

However, the manifestation of less state control in some areas has been contrasted by increased control in others, such as immigration, tax and the auditing and accounting of services that the state still controls (Zeichner, 2010, Lubienski, 2017). One of the ways that governments have attempted to

continue to pursue neoliberal ideals, even to the detriment of the individual, is to focus minds on future economic growth and individual opportunity rather than viewing the wreckage of failed neoliberal policies (Peck & Ticknell 2002). Furthermore, governments have changed the analysis of the processes under government control, such as education, to focus on economic costs instead of analysing the actual process as before (Davies and Bansel, 2007, Hursh and Henderson, 2011, Peters, 2005). This has also meant that the logic of the market has been transposed into governmental agendas that suit those in power and now permeates every element of life and culture (Giroux, 2018). This subsection explored governmental neoliberalism and how its policies and standing have affected society and education.

2.1.4 Supranational Organisations as Strengthening Structures of Neoliberalism

While governmental control can be a key part of neoliberal power in many countries, including in the Irish context, other organisations and stakeholders such as businesses and think-tanks also have a role in furthering neoliberalism. Thorsen and Lie (2006) argue that neoliberalism often uses organisations and influencers in conjunction with the state to further neoliberalism in a top-down approach. This is evident in how the state plays a key role in producing citizens who will further its entrepreneurial and economic capacity by influencing explicit societal and implicit norms (Barnett, 2005, Ong, 2006). Others argue that neoliberalism is furthered in a more implicit and undirected manner and can appear differently depending on the setting (Ong, 2006, Rose, 1999, Ball, 2016b). Either way, according to Ambrosio (2013), the role of the state is to set the rules of the neoliberal game. However, other key stakeholders such as lobbyists, businesses and successful entrepreneurs help contribute to furthering this agenda. These stakeholders naturalise neoliberal government and governance by normalising its make-up and goals through positive reinforcement via various influencers and narratives. These narratives underline the potential benefits of neoliberal-orientated policy for both individuals and society (Apple, 1979).

Multiple supra-national mechanisms enable and strengthen neoliberalism globally. The tripartite of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are key parts of this, especially regarding education, through their publications and networking, which

espouse neoliberal norms and values through underlining what best practice should be from a neoliberal perspective (Kotz, 2015; Roberts, 1995). These organisations exacerbate state interventions, where citizens are subject to control through a mechanism that focuses on influencing the population's conduct through various means, especially through normalising life, dialogue and expectations according to neoliberal goals. This ultimately helps to internalise these beliefs and behaviours into everyday life and the peoples' psyche (Rose, 1998, Larner, 2000). While these organisations are not attached directly to any government, their influence on many countries is great, as governments often unknowingly use these organisations' viewpoints as a reason to reform areas such as education (Rizvi & Lingard 2009).

These supranational organisations help the levers of economics, particularly globalisation, individualism and the normalisation of neoliberal capitalist goals, to spread through their influence. One way in which this is enacted is through the constant crisis narratives of these organisations and governments (Slater, 2015, Giroux, 2008). These crises facilitate the need to cut back on social support, which in many cases negatively influences the balance or equality of the society. It can also be used to further private interests, such as producing a specific type of workforce through altering the narrative and practice of society, particularly within education. According to Harvey (2005), one of the means to normalise this culture of crisis while not letting it destroy neoliberalism is to have the WTO, IMF and WB maintain a balance between neoliberal ideals and their acceptance within society. These institutions could be viewed as tools to normalise crises that come as a result of neoliberal ideals and also to find a way to emerge from the crises. A number of scholars argue that these organisations use their influence, money and tools to maintain the status quo while ensuring that the upper classes of society are protected from crises (Putzel 2020; Harvey 2005; Peet 2003). These organisations, although unelected, in many national situations, act as experts and key influencers on subjects which concurrently take power away from democratically elected individuals within the state (Lipman 2015; Hursh & Henderson 2011; Waller et al 2015). These subjects can be issues such as the financialisation of sectors, which include education, as shall be later explored, as well as the fetishisation of entrepreneurship within society, but also in education through competitions and the

heightening of certain school subjects' importance that suit the needs of the workforce such as the need for technological skills (Ampuja 2016; Harvey 2005; Apple 2001). The following section will explore some of the important consequences of this in terms of inequality and the individualisation of society.

2.1.5 Inequality and Individualism

Inequality and an atomised view of society and the individual's place within it are key elements of neoliberalism (Williams et al., 2014). Regarding inequality, neoliberalism supports the notion that this is a natural element of life, and the responsibility is on the individual and not the state to overcome this (Azevedo et al., 2019). This has translated into policy and governmental actions in many countries, even within areas such as education, where there is an increased pressure on teachers and students to take personal responsibility for all aspects of their practice, such as skill development, while disregarding other conditions that influence this (Ball, 2016a). In the Irish context, examples of this include how teachers have the same contact time and curriculum to cover with students, despite the Department of Education continually adding new elements of practice that need to be focused on. For example, the Wellbeing Policy (Department of Education, 2019), with the Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) potentially being added (Department of Education, 2023). With a distinct lack of balance in terms of time and stakeholder expectations from students, parents and society remaining high against these new routines and needs, the teacher is expected to overcome these challenges (Attick, 2017). Also, as a result of these neoliberal ideals, there has been a movement in many countries to cut state interventions or supports and to move to an entrepreneurial-focused agenda (Queiroz, 2021). There has also been a shift to a more privatised society, which has also seen a rise in the amount of economic inequality in many Western societies up to the present day (Jomo & Baudet 2007; Hursh & Henderson 2011). This is showcased in the rise of income inequality in the US, UK and Ireland in various stages since the 1970's (Kotz, 2015, Jacobs and Myers, 2014, Huber et al., 2004, O'Callaghan et al., 2015). Due to the cutbacks in government expenditure and the lack of controls and barriers to trade, many governments were able to justify growing inequality as a problem

that was personally the individual's fault and not down to the structure of the society and economy (Azevedo et al., 2019). One of the ways in which neoliberalism has held sway is that even with its limitations, it does not have a range of fixed aspects like other social ideologies but can take many forms within specific contexts and countries and is in many cases evident only in incremental change (Ong 2007; Holland et al 2016; Peck 2010). By embedding its ideals into already established systems, neoliberalism normalises its ideologies by establishing norms that can affect how neoliberal tropes are interpreted in everyday life (Venugopal, 2015, Giroux, 2019).

It can be argued that neoliberal policy is fundamentally based on trying to control societal and economic relations by encouraging people to take individualised positions and actions to improve their situation. This is a means of transferring wealth to the upper classes, especially in times of economic contraction, as in many countries, only the rich usually have the means to maintain and expand their riches in these periods (Lipman 2013; Hardt & Negri 2011). This enhanced process of individualisation can be covered up through limited state support in areas such as education and health, or entrepreneurial opportunities being given to workers or the lower classes throughout this process on the premise that life will eventually improve (Slater 2015). The furthering of inequality and individualism within society has caused change and, in some cases, tension about the means and results of neoliberal policies and norms in some countries. It also impacts the perceptions of what skills are important economically and societally, which can be translated into teachers' practice in the classroom. The following section will explore how this may be evident.

2.1.6 Tension From Neoliberal Ideals

One key aspect of the neoliberal movement is the establishment and maintenance of a globalised system of communication and trade. The neoliberal agenda seeks to normalise individualism, free trade and small government by structuring a positive façade of these aspects (Mirowski, 2013). However, this façade often leads to tension between the normalised aspects of neoliberalism and conservative policy that many neoliberal supporters espouse, as in some cases, conservative policy, such as less state intervention, presents economic and societal problems or does not suit neoliberal

interests (Apple, 2006). This tension could also be viewed as a means of control as national failures or faults can be justified by governments or the upper classes as a normalised aspect of the growth of a globalised world or be down to inefficient organisations, groups or individuals (Ball, 1998; Rizvi and Lingard 2009). This, in many cases, is blamed on certain segments of society, such as education, who are tasked with adapting or overcoming a perceived limitation or narrative. However, these ideological faults and governmental failures, in many cases, lead to tension between the global and local, according to Lipman (2014), as local issues are negatively affected by neoliberalism's ideologies and influence. However, this has seen some aspects of neoliberalism change, such as a renewed focus and tension on the growing inequality in the labour market between the top 1% of earners and the lower classes in society and has emerged in countries such as the US and the UK (Palma, 2011; Piketty, 2014). Along with this, in many cases, populist governments rowed back on supporting minorities and the disenfranchised in society that liberalism had sought to support through policy changes as well as economic and educational provisions and funding (Essletzbichler et al., 2018). This was in return for allowing a lassiez-faire attitude to neoliberal advances, by stoking anger at the loss of traditional industries and professions, which were lost due to free market globalisation (Putzel, 2020). In many cases, this has resulted in a more national-focused drive to protect jobs and bring traditional industries back. According to Peck and Ticknell (2012), this has led to a move away from the 'roll back' political agenda, which once sought to reduce unwanted government interventions within the labour market and economy, and alternatively defines a strategy in normalising positive parts of neoliberalism that suit the neoliberal ideals, while blaming negative developments such as job losses on outside influences such as immigrants and foreign regimes. The way in which many neoliberal policies are pragmatically adopted as common sense in relation to limited state intervention and supports, Fougere et al. (2017), as well as Keil (2009) argue, is evidence of the emergence of a 'roll with it' type of neoliberalism that normalises its social formation. Neoliberalism has transcended to a numbers-based approach to many aspects of society, leading to tension on the part of those on the wrong side of these numbers, according to Mirowski (2013). This statistical accountability culture is also evident in education. The following section will explore how neoliberal ideals such as this have transcended and manifested in the field of education.

2.2 Neoliberalism and Education

2.2.1 How Neoliberalism Manifests in Education

Neoliberalism's emergence has greatly impacted many countries, with education being a key part of this. This section will analyse how many neoliberal dimensions have become apparent and influential in education systems since the 1970's. Neoliberal elements are at times not obvious but are present through the actions of different stakeholders as well as the actions and values adopted within areas of the education system. According to Lipman (2011), the neoliberal agenda aims to bring education, along with other public sectors, in line with the goals of capital accumulation and managerial governance and administration. Through a neoliberal lens, education is viewed as a means of socialisation and the extension of globalisation (Rizvi, 2017). This means that now more than ever, parents and students are ostensibly given a greater individual choice when choosing different schools, universities, and settings to educate themselves (Bernstein, 1975b), even though this appearance of free choice is a neoliberal facade (Harmes, 2006). With this, education came to be viewed by many stakeholders such as parents and governments as a transaction whereby the child or adolescent, with the aid of their parent or guardian, has choices to make regarding the type of school and curriculum they would like to enrol in (Biesta, 2020a, Hursh and Henderson, 2011). Neoliberalism sought to help stakeholders focus on how valuable education might be, and how it was an opportunity for social investment to significantly help disadvantaged citizens (Deeming & Smyth, 2014; Lauder 2006). One of the first enactments of this in Western countries was Reagan's 'A Nation at Risk' report in 1983 in the US, which sought to link employment and economic problems directly to the education system's failings (Berliner and Biddle 1995; Klees, 2020) with many countries regularly placing blame on education for their societal or economic problems and often educators directly, which has influenced the narrative of educational success. As a result of this neoliberal agenda, school values in many countries have changed to a predominant focus on grade achievement in state exams, with teacher effectiveness viewed as a crucial part of this (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Gaches, 2018). Schwartz (1992) argues these values are standards and beliefs that transcend specific actions and situations and

are crucially ordered by priorities and importance. Through a neoliberal lens, in many instances, teachers were blamed as the sole reason for poor student performance. Even in recent years, this has been underlined in the globally influential 'Race to the Top' and 'No Child Left Behind' policies in the US, where schools were rewarded with more or less funding in some states based on how their students performed academically, which in turn affects teachers' priorities in the classroom (Hursh 2007; Slater 2015).

In many countries, successful businesspeople have a substantial say in the direction of educational policy and practice to further their neoliberal agenda and the narrative around this, as well as education's role in creating a workforce (Ball, 2012). This effect on policy and practice can also affect teachers' perceptions when teaching skills. For example, the Gates and Walton educational foundations have had a significant bearing on the US and worldwide education systems' perceptions of good educational policy and practice whilst also promoting their agenda (Klees 2020). Gates claims that students receive an unequal education not because schools differ in resources but because successful students are taught by good teachers who work harder (Hursh and Henderson, 2011). This may underline the transactional lens through which some of these influencers view education, which could potentially influence other stakeholders (Shiller, 2010, Hursh, 2007). These people and corporations also hold significant sway by employing lobbyists to fight for their interests in governmental decisions and appointments, even in areas such as education (Crouch, 2011).

Furthermore, when analysing how schools in the US measure teachers and performance, a more neoliberal business-orientated language based on accountability and quantitative performance metrics emerged (Gray, 2010, Giroux, 2020). As a result, Lipman (2011) talks about how school administration is geared towards management techniques designed to meet production targets such as test scores, with teaching and learning often driven by these performance indicators. This narrows the curriculum and produces a new regulatory culture of performativity (Ball, 2000, Ravitch, 2014, De Lissovoy et al., 2014). Some scholars contend that there is a global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions, as well as public education, due to this performativity and regulation (Apple 2006;

Lipman 2013; Giroux 2019). Loh and Hu (2014, p.19) contend that this culture continues to grow and permeate every aspect of a teacher's life and decision-making, which has depowered and de-professionalised teachers (Ball 2003; Zeicher 2010). Furthermore, with the focus on teaching based on these strict ideals, neoliberalism disciplines teachers for not sticking rigidly to the set curriculum by critiquing those who don't conform to neoliberal ideals as unprofessional and incapable while heightening surveillance (Zeichner 2010: Holland et al 2016). This could be argued as a means to technicise the role of the teacher into a profession where teachers are expected to stick to a strictly structured curriculum or subject matter based on neoliberal ideals. Added to this, one of the main neoliberal agendas within schooling is that its standards and performance targets are shaped to produce the knowledge and skills needed for the function of the state economy (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009). According to Ball (2000), this has led to a growing focus on performativity on behalf of administrators and teachers, with key aspects of neoliberalism such as deregulation and marketisation being forced upon them. Teacher education, in particular, is one means of ensuring that this agenda is furthered by exemplifying what good practice looks like through a neoliberal lens (Ball 2000; Zeichner 2010; Dahlstrom 2009). This can affect how teachers perceive the importance of some elements of subject matter or skills by rationalising and normalising neoliberal aspects within education through team, group and communal relations when teachers are being taught in university as well as when they are working in the school environment (Ball, 2000). This has ultimately changed how teachers view their relationship to their practice as they accept neoliberal norms concerning labour market needs, class and individualism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, Zeichner, 2010). According to Shin and Park (2016) the pervasiveness of the skills discourse through educational policy and instructional agendas, naturalises practice around skills development.

With a heightened culture of neoliberal performativity, accountability has increased the demands on stakeholders within education, situating failures as primarily the result of educators and also crucially reducing government and other stakeholder responsibility (Klees 2020; Lipman 2011). Furthermore, the inspectorate system and language of inspections, which focus mainly on success criteria and

evidence, may be viewed as a lack of confidence in teachers while acting in the elite's interests in providing for neoliberal economic advancement (Biesta, 2010, Perryman, 2006, Simola et al., 2013).

The emergence of blended learning and technology in education is another area which captured the growth of neoliberal ideals within education (Grimaldi and Ball, 2019, Ball, 2017). The skillsets employers need have become exceptionally important when considering how to implement technological advances within the educational sphere (Ong, 2006, Ong and Collier, 2005). New subjects, such as computer science and specific skill sets, such as coding and data science, have been adopted within education by many governments, and there has been a renewal of competence and skill-based educational curricula (Hohne & Schreck 2009). This has also been reflected in the key skills and competencies targeted within many education systems, as I shall explore later. The introduction of IT into education is not just based on producing knowledgeable employees for the economy, but also on producing consumers and profits for the technological companies themselves (Decuypere, 2019, Hodge et al., 2018). This is one of the reasons technology companies such as Apple, Google and Microsoft, to name a few, have entered the educational market and why technology has become a key to cementing neoliberalism in a capitalistic society (Ampuja, 2016). An example of this in the Irish context is where Microsoft has opened up an area on their campus to bring students, with the promise of enhancing their understanding of STEM and the skills needed to be successful in this field (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Additionally, they have also begun an educator programme to train teachers in using Microsoft products (Meyer Jr and Billionniere, 2021). This could also be viewed as a means of cultivating interest in their workforce development and normalising the use of their products during these visits and the subsequent online learning students engage with through their online modules. Ireland has also introduced a new subject in upper second-level in Computer Science (NCCA, 2018). This subject was fast-tracked ahead of others in order to meet labour market needs (Quille et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier the WB, IMF and WTO have considerable power in spreading the neoliberal economic and social agenda. These organisations also have an influential say in the direction and makeup of the education system in many countries throughout the world. The WB also finances

research and policy on education and thus is one of the drivers of the neoliberal agenda (Peet 2003; Klees et al 2012). Furthermore, they also release periodic strategic reports on how countries should invest and structure education (Klees et al., 2012). According to Harvey (2007), the WTO and IMF look to remove barriers to trade and establish education systems that suit the neoliberal elites. For example, both promote neoliberal agendas by encouraging countries and educational stakeholders such as governmental departments to foster the attainment of skills for trade and production that suit certain Westernised countries and interests, even if, in some cases, this is to the detriment of the countries or individuals adopting these practices (Spohrer et al., 2018, Dollar and Kraay, 2004).

Other organisations, such as the OECD and EU, also hold considerable power in how countries advance their neoliberal agenda, although some scholars would argue that they are non-partisan (Thrupp, 2014). For example, the OECD has situated itself in a position of great power through the introduction of the PISA assessments (Grek, 2009, Meyer and Benavot, 2013). These assessments test countries' scores in a range of skills and subjects and rank them against the scores of other countries (Ball, 2016b). As a result of the availability of these scores, governments and societies feel pressure to achieve high grades when trying to attract trade and companies through the promise of an excellent education system. This has meant that great weighting has been put on achieving excellent scores within many countries (Lawn and Grek, 2012, Sireci, 2015, Biesta, 2010). Some researchers report that this has led to PISA being a type of governmentality with some countries actively shaping their policy around PISA test results, which could be argued as furthering the OECD's neoliberal agenda around furthering different subjects and skills (Sireci 2015; Burbules & Torres 2013). These organisations also have the capacity to carry out large-scale research and present copious reports on every aspect of education. Therefore, there is a datafication of education at the supra or higher level where data is available on all facets of education (Jarke and Breiter, 2019). This further leads to competition and a future push for more and more data to quantify results. According to Philips and Ochs (2004), these organisations have enabled and pushed policy borrowing on a global scale that has facilitated the application and copying of educational policies in many settings. As a result of some of these being of a neoliberal nature, some aspects of neoliberal educational values have spread tacitly

between countries (Lingard, 2010, Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, Peck and Theodore, 2015). This has been especially pushed by key figures such as Andreas Schleicher from the OECD (d'Agnese, 2022, Hirtt, 2012). Policy borrowing and comparison have also resulted in the marketisation of education, with an ever-increasing focus on results and global competitiveness (Apple et al 2005; Lauder 2006; Harvey 2005). It has also led to the lifelong learning focus becoming a key part of the neoliberal agenda. This concept pushes workers to constantly upskill and become self-responsible in keeping their skillset up to the demands of employers while also competing for scarce educational and financial resources (Waller et al 2015; Rose 1999). While many education systems in the past focused on the democratisation of the individual, the concept of democratisation could be argued to be individualistic in nature as an investment in the self rather than focusing on communitarian needs (Lynch, 2022). This Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argued, feeds the narrative of the rational consumer who is given the 'opportunity' to keep themselves rational, with this being one of the central pillars of neoliberal ideology, with a juxtaposition created between the rational subject and the irrational other. We should be careful not to just class lifelong learning as learning through structured educational settings but that it should incorporate informal training outside the classroom according to Stiglitz (2014).

This is a key point as regardless of where the learning occurs, this individualisation of learning takes the responsibility from the state to provide public education, which is paid for by the citizen through taxes and this puts the onus on the individual to source and finance their lifelong learning. As a result of neoliberal values being accepted by many in society, there is enormous pressure on education systems not only to increase the amount of formal education young people are now required to have but also to align the content of this education with the requirements of the global economy (Bernstein 1996; Delaune 2019).

According to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), this has influenced educational curricula, which the pressure of globalisation and the so-called knowledge economy has altered. This has meant that 'curriculum reform has been linked to the reconstitution of education as a central arm of national economic policy, as well as being central to the imagined community the nation wishes to construct through schooling'

(Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p.24). This neoliberal emphasis reinforces inequities and capitalistic goals rather than adding to an equal and democratic society (de Saxe et al 2020; Apple 2001; Saltman 2007). Giroux (2019, p.35) goes as far as to say that the struggle against neoliberalism begins within education, as this is a democratic public good and the recognition that education is a moral and political practice. Therefore, this constitutes a struggle over identity, agency and the structure of future paths (Biesta 2022). More recently, the OECD has played a key role in assessing the Irish SC reform and even the way in which the Department of Education allocates funding (OECD, 2020). This exemplifies how the EU and OECD has played a key role in creating and enacting the skill development agenda in both the EU and Irish contexts in a myriad of ways. This is showcased by how the EU's Lisbon agenda, aimed at turning Europe into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based world economy, has influenced the makeup of the skills frameworks within the EU, including in the Irish context (Gordon et al., 2009; NCCA 2009A).

This section investigated neoliberalism's influence on education, which has been influenced by organisations such as the OECD, EU and supranational organisations, amongst others. The next section will aim to examine how the Irish system may have been influenced by neoliberalism, with a special emphasis placed on key skills in the senior cycle of second-level education.

2.2.2 Key Skills and Competencies

According to the NCCA Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (2023, p.11), competency 'refers to a person's capacity to use their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions in a co-ordinated way to act in response to various tasks, contexts, situations and events.'. Rychen and Salganik (2003) propose that competencies refer to the ability to complete highly valued complex challenges that are present in a wide range of contexts that need knowledge as well as cognitive and practical skills. A skill, however, is defined as 'one's ability to perform a particular task' (Sulaiman & Ismail, 2020, p.3537), with skills being a part of competencies which are made up of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that come together to complete complex tasks (Hipkins, 2006). Skills can be cognitive, metacognitive, social, emotional, practical, physical, creative, innovative and critical thinking (Geisinger, 2016). For this study, Hutmacher's (1997, p.45) assertion that 'competencies cannot be reduced to factual

knowledge or routines' is important, whereas skills are understood to be composed of routines and the application of learning through knowledge to perform and execute tasks. Although values, prior experiences and outside influences have a part in determining what skills are taught or performed and why (Schunk, 1991). The teaching of skills in Senior Cycle in Ireland and the perceptions of teachers on the influence of neoliberalism on this task are the focus of this study.

The outgoing key skills framework first emerged within the second-level Irish context in 2002 (NCCA, 2002) and is due to be replaced by the new Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) which has been in draft format since 2023 (NCCA, 2023), with skill development as a key aspect embedded within it. The earlier framework aimed to develop key skills within all subjects and aspects of the SC (NCCA, 2009A). The skills chosen to be incorporated were information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking and working with others, although these were not the only skills intended to be taught by teachers during this time (Ananiadou and Claro, 2008). These skills were to be embedded across the curricula, with emphasis on the whole school implementation approach. Responsibility was given to individual teachers to embed these skills within their classes, and they were given autonomy about how to implement this in their own classrooms (NCCA, 2009A). The new competency draft publication, which incorporates skill development at SC, aims to achieve this at a whole school level and across the cycle. Skills that lead to the development of the following seven competencies were targeted in this framework: thinking and solving problems, being creative, communicating, working with others, participating in society, cultivating well-being and managing learning and self (NCCA, 2023). However, the development of skills in both the above-mentioned Key Skills and draft Key Competencies publications for SC were not produced in a vacuum within the Irish education system. Other countries and organisations have also researched and implemented the teaching of skills or competencies, which has influenced the Irish education system (Dede, 2010, Geisinger, 2016). This focused development of skills within the classrooms of many countries has been in line with a shift in many educational concepts and a move towards a social constructivist model of teaching (González-Salamanca et al., 2020). This approach

promotes a holistic notion of the individual, combining the development of the values and attitudes of the individual for both education and life (McRobbie et al, 1997; Hoskin and Deakin Crick, 2008). From this point of view, 'schooling should help to equip young people with the tools they need to become engaged thinkers, resilient and resourceful learners, creative problem solvers and active members of their communities' (Lamb et al, 2017, p.3). This, in the future, could enable people to update their skills throughout their lives through lifelong learning (Komisyonu 2009; Autor et al 2008; Goos et al 2009; Goos et al 2014), while at the same time punishing those who do not have a valuable skillset (Wade, 2004). On a global level, various countries and actors have adopted different competency and skills frameworks, with some of the main frameworks being from the OECD and American Universities 2007 Framework, which have impacted how countries have approached this aspect of education (Dede, 2010). This was followed by the NCCA's development of the Junior Cycle Key Skills Framework in 2006 (NCCA 2006), which targets students aged 12-15 before the Senior Cycle. This framework was broadly similar to the SC framework, with the skills chosen being 'managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others and managing information and thinking' (NCCA, 2012). However, there was little enacted in terms of addressing systematic inequalities or disadvantages that may affect skill development, which took away from the organisational elements of this period of education (Power et al 2013; Mooney Simmie 2014). Skerritt (2017) found that this is still challenging for many Irish students in this period today.

Continuing on with the development of skills frameworks in the post-primary context, the NCCA began a major reform of the JC as a whole in 2011 as a result of economic contraction, poor PISA scores, and a longitudinal study by an economic think tank known as the ERSI (Printer 2020). The findings from this organisation were, according to the NCCA, given unequivocal standing in terms of their results and recommendations, despite, according to Printer (2020), having little teacher engagement, with less than 1% of teachers in second-level responding to it. Meyer and Benavot (2013) also argued that PISA had a huge bearing on the economic focus of the Irish educational ensemble at that time, with skills relating to numeracy, literacy, maths and science being put forward

as most important due to the need for multinational economic investment (Merriman et al 2014). Dale and Robertson (2015) argued that this led to the neoliberal trope of productivity being a key aspect of this reform. This neoliberal shift was captured by Smyth and McCoy (2018), arguing at the time that education must reflect value for money, which Mooney Simmie (2014) argued was a move towards reducing teachers' autonomy as well as seeing education less as a means of the public good. Mooney Simmie (2012) also argued that this neoliberal expectation led to reduced teacher agency in terms of curriculum enaction. Teachers' unions rejected this reform strongly, with this period being viewed as a fight for the purpose of education and between developing students holistically or for economic reasons (O'Sullivan 2005). Mooney and Simmie (2012; 2014) argued that the outcome of this was that education and teachers' practice reflected a narrower view of what education should be, with less of an emphasis on this being a public good with high teacher autonomy, but more about schooling being about curriculum completion through affective pedagogy which leads to better assessment results. The literature review will next examine the relationship between the development of social capital and holistic development.

2.2.3 Skill Development for Social Capital or Holistic Development?

Skill development for social capital or holistic can be unbalanced depending on the context (Comer, 2015). This study will explore how skills are valued and perceived by participants who teach SC in the Irish context. Many countries also see the importance of skill development in terms of social capital and active citizenship to help people adapt to the changing job market and innovation within the economy. This has been one of the key advancements neoliberalism has made in the psyche of citizens about their social needs (Larner, 2000). This is evident in the fact that 'nearly all OECD countries and partner economies have considered these skills in their national and subnational school education policies, including learning frameworks and curriculum standards' (Lamb, 2017, p.31; Rychen & Salganik, 2003). This shows that a large number of developed countries have adopted this agenda as they make up the majority of members within the OECD. According to the OECD, this has led to a bias and an increased focus on educational success being seen as a determinant of social and economic outcomes (OECD 2010). The constant underlining of skill needs within society allows

governments to move up the value chain from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy (Brown & Lauder, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Robertson, 2010). This neoliberal focus on education and skill development for economic gains has led to an education system which focuses on the formation of human capital as an economic advantage (Giroux, 2013). Therefore, this understanding rationalises the neoliberal economic aims within all aspects of society, especially education and has been reflected in how discourses shape individuals in society (Hursh and Henderson, 2011). It has also transcended to society accepting this reality in many countries, as no alternative is on offer, with Western governments controlling more and more aspects of society through the constant crisis narratives of supra-national organisations and governmental agencies such as the OECD and the EU (Slater 2015; Giroux 2008B). This emphasis on the development of the individual wholly on the basis of adding appropriate skills to the workforce has created an individualistic view of education and skill development (Tan et al., 2015).

From a holistic educational perspective, skill development should work against the neoliberal ideals of developing a skilled workforce purely for the benefit of economic and capitalistic goals. From a holistic development viewpoint, education should accept the importance of economic-orientated skills but, at the same time, aim to develop the skillset of people in order that they can holistically develop and self-actualise in all aspects of their lives (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). However, education systems and settings struggle with this holistic aspect of development (Freire, 2018, Dewey, 1916, Larochelle et al., 1998). Tan et al (2017) argue that schooling worldwide has had pressure exerted on it to meet the learning needs of students while also meeting the new human capital demands of industry. Teachers are being bombarded with the concept of professionalisation around implementing reforms and ideals so that they keep in line with expectations, which stunts the autonomy of those within the profession to actually implement change and strategies to achieve this in their own classroom (Carr and Hartnett, 1996). Teaching has come to be viewed as a transactional process, which is a key neoliberal norm in education (Ward, 2012). As an alternative, students and teachers should be given leeway to structure and guide their own learning journey (Eisner, 2003), rather than being used as mechanistic transmitters of knowledge for the benefit of those in power (Althusser, 1971). This is so

they can help students develop holistically, which requires freedom, time and assistance to move beyond common sense knowledge (Voogt et al, 2013). However, while many neoliberals may agree with this in essence by giving teachers more freedom in some senses, this may paradoxically place more pressure on teachers to achieve set expectations through covert accountability practices and set criteria that suit neoliberal values (Lynch et al., 2012). Therefore, change must be planned with the professional role of teachers in mind and how these changes affect all stakeholders and practices. Fullan (2007, p.7) argues that effective theories of change 'must simultaneously focus on changing individuals and the culture and system in which they work' and thus look to structure the education system to facilitate achieving this. In the placement of skills in the curricula, therefore, it is important to build in flexibility and local interpretation so as to refrain from limiting the professional agency of the teacher (Caena and Redecker, 2019, European Commission, 2013). Participants' views on this ability to enact strategies and change in relation to teaching skills in the Irish SC is a key aspect of the research questions in this study.

With the growth of neoliberal interests within education and through the globalised business-orientated educational movement, highlighted by Sahlberg's GERM[7] movement growing, there may be a need for a rebalancing between holistically developing the individual whilst also getting them ready for the labour force (Lingard, 2020). Fullan and Scott (2014) also outlined that students and teachers should be proactive learning partners who work together to achieve learning goals. While the world of work and business should be a key part of educators' thoughts in preparing students for a wholesome life, it should not be the only emphasis. Rather, with the growth of Artificial Intelligence and the ability of machines to do menial tasks, it will be people who have developed wholly as individuals and are able to adapt and work with others creatively and in complex situations that will thrive throughout the societal and economic displacement that will occur over the next century (Smith and Anderson, 2014).

[7] The Global Educational Reform Movement emerged in the 1980's promotes educational reform, often through international agencies and private enterprises which aim to fix public education problems and share perceived good practice and policy. It could be argued that this increases the power of these organisation and leads top policy borrowing, increased standardisation and a focus on testing.

As we have seen, there has been a worldwide focus on key skills and competency development. This has affected the makeup and emphasis on skill in terms of policy and action in the classroom within many education systems and societies, which, in some cases, have focused on skills for social capital rather than holistic development. In the next section, the role of the European Union in influencing this development will be explored.

2.2.4 The Role of the European Union in Skill Development within Education

The European Union played a central role in developing the key competency focus that has emerged worldwide and has influenced the perceptions and teaching of skills within the Irish educational context. This section will explore the key meetings and policies produced and influenced by organisations and countries within the EU.

The skills framework for education within the EU context emerged due to an international emphasis in education on how to develop skills so as to prepare people to contribute to society and become more productive workers (Lynch, 2012) Such was the perceived rate of change within the globalised economy and job market that the EU introduced a strategy after the Lisbon Conference of the European Council in March 2000. It defined its aim for the EU to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Council, 2000, p.7). This resulted in the 2006 EU Key Competence Framework being created (European Commission, 2006), which identified eight key competencies needed for a healthy life, employability, and citizenship, which were literacy, multilingualism, numerical scientific and engineering skills, digital and technology-based competencies, interpersonal skills, and the ability to adopt new competences, active citizenship, entrepreneurship and cultural awareness and expression. This agenda for skill development for the labour force was also influenced by global players such as the OECD and economically successful countries that had developed skills or competency frameworks in education and specific industries (Halász and Michel, 2011). These trends looked to balance the integration of skills in workers and students along with the holistic development of people within society to be able to be active citizens

who could add to democratic societies through increased equality and social cohesion (European Council, 2018). As the new skills agenda for Europe report outlined,

> 'young people need a wider range of competences than ever before to flourish, in a globalised economy and in increasingly diverse societies. Many will work in jobs that do not yet exist...In this increasingly complex world, creativity and the ability to continue to learn and to innovate will count as much as, if not more than, specific areas of knowledge liable to become obsolete. Lifelong learning should be the norm' (European Commission, 2008, p.1)

These changes have also meant that skills have, in many cases, become 'soft' non-technical interpersonal skills, and with this, there is a concern within the field of education that 'traditional approaches are insufficient' for the changes within modern society (Istance, 2010, p.22). This has led to a re-emphasis on supporting teacher development by setting expectations around competency development while giving educators the flexibility to do this within their own setting, although there was also an emphasis on using outside settings for education, such as local businesses (European Commission, 2020b). The European Skills Agenda (Commission, 2016, p.5) argues,

> 'the goal is to develop a shared understanding of key competences and to further foster their introduction in education and training curricula. The revision will also provide support for better developing and assessing these skills. Special attention will be paid to promoting entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented mind-sets, including by encouraging practical entrepreneurial experiences'

This focus on employment, entrepreneurship and the labour market is also evident in the European Commission (2018a) publication on ideas for better learning with competency development being an aspect of this, as can be viewed in figure 1 below, which classes businesses as important as parents, the ministry of education and the local community.

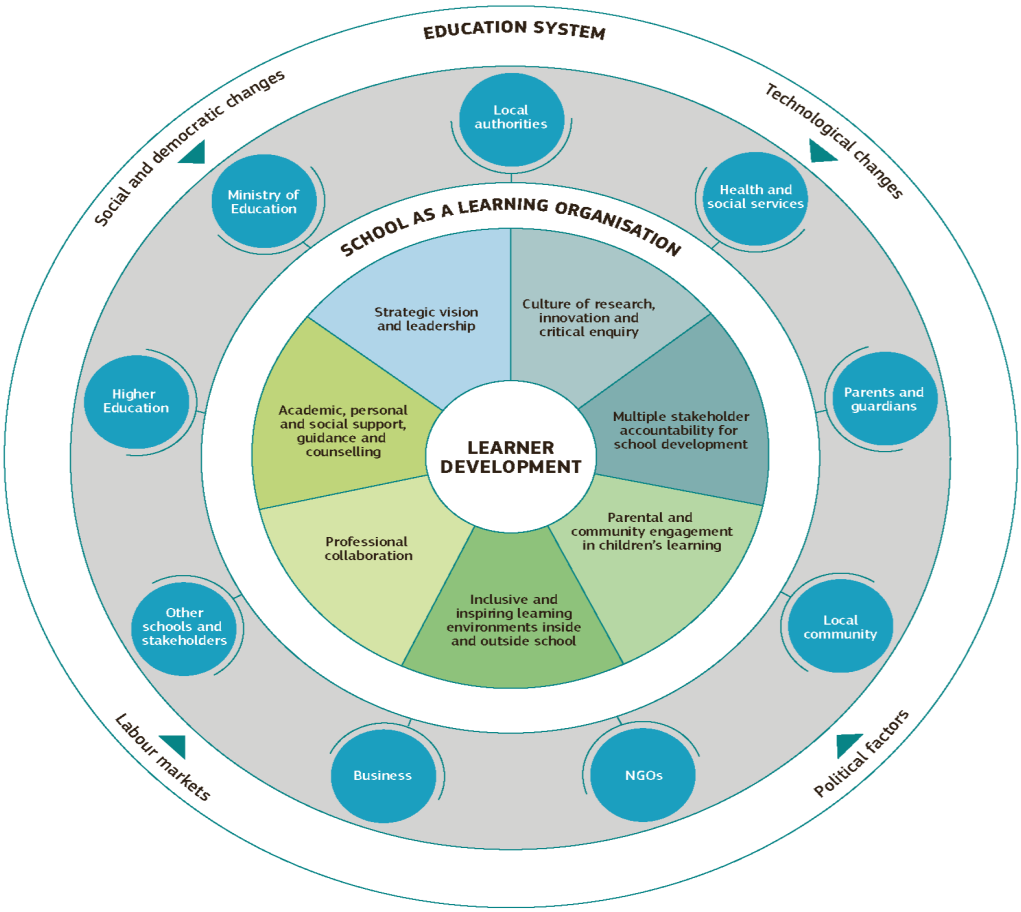

Figure 1: Schools as learning organisations within a learning system (European Commission, 2018b, p. 7)

Interestingly, the European Skills Agenda 2020 (European Commission, 2020a), while paying lip service to the fact that competency and skill development should be done on a national and local level, put forward that the EU has a vital role to play. However, it fails to mention that many of the national and local decisions and protocols are based on EU research. There was also a focus on establishing and normalising excellent educational practices that built upon the 2008 framework. However, research (European Commission, 2018b) found that there has been a polarisation in the reforms within countries around the teaching of skills and competencies that had led to a lack of overarching generalisable results and themes. Interestingly, though there may be an argument that while the results are not generalisable, the language adopted by many countries around skill and competency development is similar to that used in the EU directives and frameworks, with the Lisbon agenda being a key part of this (Krzyżanowski, 2016, Dale, 2009). This could be viewed as a sign that

this neoliberal agenda has spread its ideals and been made to fit, albeit differently, in different settings. Neoliberal tendencies were also evident in the EU Commission's 'Key Competencies for All: Policy Design and Implementation in European School Education' report (Looney et al., 2022), which emphasised in the Irish context that increased student-teacher satisfaction by focusing on teaching skills was evident, without providing a link to the study that this claim was based on. Improved links with third-level institutes by giving them a key role in empowering a culture of reflection on practice through interacting with different stakeholders such as schools was argued to be positive to second-level education. However, there was a lack of any discussion on the potential for third-level agendas potentially affecting findings on skill or competency development which may suit their needs and the needs of students who advance to the third level, without considering the needs of students who enter directly into the workforce or access alternative educational pathways such as apprenticeships. Interestingly, union representatives were also put forward as a barrier to reform without discussing the viewpoint on the potential consequences of reform, which was expressed when the report stated,

> 'the teacher unions, through their bilateral negotiations with the DE were able to strongly impact on the design of the final product and the process of its implementation. School management bodies expressed some dissatisfaction with their ability to impact on these final arrangements. Objections by the teacher unions in advance of implementation attracted a lot of media interest, impacting on communication of the changes more broadly and leading to some negative reaction and confusion among teachers, parents and the general public'. As can be viewed above there has been a significant influence and amount of research conducted by the EU around this area' (Looney et al., 2022, p.114)

As can be viewed in the preceding paragraphs in this section, the EU played an important role in spreading viewpoints and frameworks around the teaching of skills and competencies. While it could be argued that this was to develop society holistically, various neoliberal tropes and assumptions around education's link to the labour market and the idealisation of individualisation and enterprise were also present. The next section will explore how skills develop within both curricula and assessment.

2.2.5 Skill Development within Curricula and Assessment

Ireland and many Western countries have relied on basic written assessments, merged with small project work within their second-level schooling system. As a result of this emphasis on externally assessed examination, the teaching and assessment of skills or competencies are difficult to measure and quantify (Pellegrino & Hilton 2012; Voogt & Robin 2012). Some countries have chosen skills based on thematic approaches to assessment, which focus on personal qualities and issues in society, while others are goal-driven and principle-based, which is reflected in their assessments (Halász & Michel 2011). Ireland enacts this by embedding skills within their curricular subjects and assessments in SC (Gordon et al, 2009, p.102). In the main, in most countries the development of these skills within curricula aims to integrate 'useable knowledge, rather than the sets of compartmentalised and de-compartmentalised facts' as had been historically the case in many countries since the industrial revolution (OECD & CERI, 2008, p.1). The ability and skillset to deal with change are crucial as 'adaptability shapes self-extension into the social environment as individuals connect with society and regulate their own vocational behaviour' as well as in life in general (Savickas, 2013, p. 156). However, Pepper (2011, p.341) argues that a balance has to be struck between learning subject matter and competencies, 'but not with so much prescription that the process of developing competencies is reduced to a series of procedural tasks that are completed without full appreciation of underlying concept'. Research has found that many students and young people believe they are not learning the required skills within curricula for meeting the demands of the labour market, which raises questions about the current effectiveness of many European education systems (Generation Europe Foundation 2010; Commission of the European Communities, 2009; Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2009). This has become of greater concern within the European context as it has an ageing workforce which could mean that more people are at risk of their skillset becoming obsolete over their lifetime as the retirement ages of workers increase (Commission of the European Communities, 2008, p.3). This may increase the importance of education in overcoming this. However, Ananiadou and Claro (2009, p.808) argue that this emphasis on preparing students for the

world of work through curricula and assessment is a form of cognitive capitalism where 'intellectual capacities are highly valued in the knowledge production process' while others which are not important to this function are ignored.

Throughout this section the place of skill development within educational curricula and assessment has been presented. The underlying factors in how the design and implementation of this is impacted by societal and educational norms which may have neoliberal labour market ideals have been explored. The next section will build upon this with specific focus being centered on how neoliberalism has affected agency.

2.2.6 Neoliberalism and Teacher Agency

Somekh (2008) argues that teacher agency is constrained by the structure in which they work. While it may argued that teachers have a great say in how they structure the teaching and learning in their practice, the ability of teachers to make decisions in the classrooms are stunted by large class numbers, overbearing management and narrow evaluative practice, which forces the teacher to focus on examination attainment (Brown et. al 2008). This means that there is little movement away from the industrial style of teaching, which was used in the last century and focused on rote memorisation from the all-knowing teacher, to a more learner-centred approach within the classroom, which some argue is already present within the education system (Voogt et al 2013; Reigluth et al 2009). As a result, teacher autonomy when teaching skills could be argued to be more limited than imagined by many stakeholders who don't have experience in the classroom such as Departmental officials in the DE. Teacher agency has also been affected by the structure of education, which has changed due to neoliberal elements. With changes in the societal, cultural and economic makeup of countries due to the advancement of technology and artificial intelligence, teachers require further freedom, time and assistance to develop evaluative and success criteria for their practice. The 21st-century professionals must be capable of adapting their practice for the common democratic good of society to prepare students for their own individual lives, as well as to be capable of adding to the needs of a democratic society (Biesta, 2017). This professional practice is crucial to ensure students move beyond common sense knowledge, which used to be prized but now can be easily stored within computers, and which

may undermine the social position that these young people may be able to hold in future years (Voogt et al., 2013, Mansilla et al., 2009).

2.2.6.1 Teacher Agency and the Structure of Education

Teacher agency can be described as the ability of the teacher to look beyond the structure in which they practice and the prescribed outcomes and values that this entails to being able to use what Biesta (2017) terms as the 'telos' of the profession to give meaning, identity and direction to help students develop on a holistic basis. Conway et al. (2009) argue that understanding assumptions and cultural values within the education system, as well as the professional status of the teaching profession within society, is key to lasting and meaningful change and agency that will positively affect the learner, the education system and, crucially, the place of teachers as professionals in the 21st century (Conway et al., 2009). However, Kamens and McNeely (2010) argue that the emphasis on competency development has resulted in a new neoliberal educational ideological structure emerging, with the OECD and PISA being key players in governing its implementation and the values within education. This change toward seeing the student as a customer who consumes educational information and develops skills and competencies to get better economic outcomes in the future may have lessened the professional agency and status of teachers (Morgan, 2016, Simola et al., 2013). The implementation of advanced data analysis within the professional practice of teachers places value on measuring success through quantitative data in comparison to scores in other countries (Delaune, 2019). This may have an impact on teachers' practice within the classroom and the values they hold. Especially in the post-austerity and Covid-19 crisis, neoliberal interests have moved to focus more on value for money and the need to legitimise demonstrable outcomes related to a large policy ensemble, with the threat of aspects of education being replaced or privatised (McGimpsey, 2020; Singh 2020)

Supporters of the idea of structuring education toward evidence-based practice fails to see the difference between the field of medicine or science and education. However, the outcome of the practice of successful education is more nuanced because it is based on culture as well as structure (Biesta, 2007). The multi-dimensional nature of education is not always evident in what can be seen, measured, and verified as in other fields, and accepting only these privileges, certain methodologies, and beliefs limits teacher agency and professional understanding. Effective theories of change must

simultaneously focus on changing individuals (such as leaders, teachers and students) and the cultural values and system in which they work and thus look to structure the education system in which teachers work (Fullan, 2007).

From this section, it is evident that the structure in which teachers find themselves can limit the professional practices, values and agency of teachers, and so, at times, can stunt their ability to make pedagogical choices. This is crucial to this research as the values and practices that participants enact when teaching skills with SC could impact what skills they teach and why they value certain skills over others.

2.2.6.2 Professional Agency in the Teaching Environment

Teacher ability to enact positive educational practices to aid what Biesta (2017) classifies as the democratic good through a relationship of authority has changed in education as teachers could be argued to be controlled by a lack of professional trust by other stakeholders such as the Department of Education, senior management within schools and parents to do their job within their own remit. This can be captured by inspections and school league tables, which promote a high-stakes accountability culture, according to Salokangas et al. (2020), and which may also affect teacher agency and professional standing. The classroom is the primary professional environment for learning in the 21st century, and the teacher's ability to use positive educational and relational choices plays a key role in this (Kim et al, 2019). This is especially important in the enactment of curricula , where teachers' practices can give key insights into how curricula are affected by teachers' professional standing in the educational framework and how this affects their implementation and adaption of the curricula within the classroom (März and Kelchtermans, 2013). Griffin and colleagues (2012) propose that the incorporation of 21st-century skills into teachers' practice poses a fresh, professional challenge and recommends new ways of teaching and learning to counteract this. Teachers, according to Hagger and McIntyre (2006), should be afforded the agency to be responsible for their development and to adapt to the changes that are needed to heighten their competencies. Meanwhile, Conway et al (2009) argue that while the competence of teachers to do this can be made clear through statements and

frameworks, the development of these competencies should be enacted through a holistic rather than an instrumental approach which neoliberal elements espouse.

Teachers in the 21st-century context need to know how and when to use their knowledge and skills in order to facilitate learning in a complex and ever-changing school environment (Darling-Hammond, 2017, Corno, 2008, Elmore, 1996, Willbergh, 2015). However, Biesta (2017) contends that the rise of technical instruction has led to professional action and agency being undermined along with the belief in the ability of the teacher to enact positive change. The professional concept of competence in teaching involves tacit and explicit subject knowledge and the cognitive and practical agency to interact and teach (Rychen and Salganik, 2003). The beliefs of the teacher are crucial, particularly when facilitating skill development and implementing curriculum change (Handal and Herrington, 2003, Prawat, 1992). This professional facilitation is one of the key characteristics of teaching because teachers are the key decision-makers within their classrooms (Butler and Schnellert, 2012). According to Biesta (2017), decision-making role must remain, as giving students and other stakeholders such as parents great powers of choice in education, particularly within the classroom, narrows the broadening of thought through the exploration of the unknown. However, Boyd and Watson (2006) contend that when the value of student voice is made explicit, especially in regard to teaching key skills and competencies, it can help shift the teacher engagement with students from management to facilitation. This calls attention to the need for a culture and structures that provide space for student voice and value it in the educational process (Pearce and Wood, 2019, Raymond and Cloonan, 2022). It also highlights the need for students and teachers to be proactive learning partners who work together to achieve learning goals (Fullan & Scott, 2014). Giving teachers primary agency within curricula subsequently enhances their engagement and the quality of their practice within the framework (Menter and Hulme, 2013, van de Oudeweetering et al., 2018). The modelling of key competencies in the classroom can positively normalise and influence students' adoption of skills and competencies (Hattie, 2012, Hipkins, 2006). The way in which participant SC teachers interact with the curriculum in order to teach skills, as well as the values, experiences, and norms that affect their perceived agency and professional ability, is a key research gap that will be explored in this study.

Within the Irish context Smyth et al (2019) argued that the structure of the SC encourages preparation for examinations as a means of gaining points. This undermines the professional place of teachers as it lessens the focus on the holistic development of the student. Biesta (2017) posits that teachers' own perceptions should be a key part of how teachers plan to shape and enact the holistic development of students. Greenlaw (2015) argues that the role and agency of the teacher in helping to frame students' learning is being largely ignored by the metanarrative on 21st-century learning. Pellegrino et al (2012) also argues that updating teachers around different and new pedagogies and strategies is overvalued when compared to the number of practices that educators must unlearn. Thus, teachers require considerable time and agency to change their practice and values, even if they are given the agency to do so. However, the difference in agency and time given to teachers to develop their professional standing and practice differs in many settings, even within the Irish context, which may affect how skills are taught in the participants' SC classes.

Neoliberalism in Ireland has also had an impact on the status and agency of teachers and others involved in education, mainly through accountability regimes where data is given a higher status than professional judgment (Tan, 2019; Tenet al., 2015; Biesta 2017). This push for teaching for economic outcomes has resulted in cutbacks to funding, which may have weakened the power of teachers to have the basic necessities to teach their subjects (Giroux, 2019). There has been an acceptance of market logic within education that has particularly been focused on meeting the learning needs and social futures of the students while also meeting the new human capital demands of industry (Tan, 2019, Bourdieu, 1998a). Teacher agency is being attacked with the concept of professionalisation, especially around implementing reforms, so that they keep in line with expectations, which stunts the autonomy of those within the profession (Gibbs, 2018). This has led to the teacher's role changing from the content expert to the learning facilitator with little agency (Dede, 2005; Friesen and Jardine, 2009; Carr and Hartnett, 1996. This may lead to the expectation that teaching has come to be viewed as a transactional process, which undermines teachers' professional ability to make autonomous changes that positively affect their practice and classroom (Ward, 2012), especially in regard to the teaching of skills. There is also often a tacit assumption that certain pedagogical features in teaching

will lead to the development of particular competencies and skills (Law et al., 2002). These are mainly portrayed through a positive lens by neoliberal parties due to the perceived economic benefits of these strategies being used to teach. As a result of these strategies and priorities not being implemented, a belief that many educators are resistant to educational innovation and would neglect student interests and disappoint those they are supposed to be serving has been spread (Hodge et al., 2018). In a neoliberal light, this would mean not serving as the provider of the service to the stakeholders or customers of education. However, Biesta (2018) argues that a teacher's professional view in how they balance the economic benefits of some practices with the subjects, skills and concepts that they wish to teach is crucial for education to remain more than a technical job and skillset, and even more crucially, to help students fully develop for all elements of life. This section has underlined the importance of teachers being aware of any neoliberal influence which may affect their agency and beliefs around their teaching practice. Exploring how teachers feel neoliberalism has affected their agency when teaching skills in SC is a major aspect of this research, which has not been extensively explored in the Irish context as of yet. The next section will explore how neoliberalism has affected education in Ireland through privatisation, changing teacher identity and the evolution of the curriculum.

2.3 Neoliberalism and Education in Ireland

2.3.1 Privatisation in Irish Education

The emergence of neoliberal values within education has affected its structure in many settings, with the privatisation of multiple aspects of education being used as a means to pursue neoliberal goals (De Saxe et al 2020; Robertson 2008; De Saxe 2015; Shin & Park 2016). In Ireland, these aspects of privatisation can be exogenous, which involve the opening up of public educational services to the private sector participation on a for-profit basis (Green et al., 2020; Delprato and Antequea 2021). Private providers of teacher qualifications are examples of this. This privatisation has also seen a large amount of second-level teacher graduates being trained privately by Hibernia College (Skerritt et al 2020). This for-profit organisation sets out how these teachers are educated, and while they are guided

by the Teaching Council of Ireland there is a question on what they prioritise compared to other not-for-profit teacher training colleges. This is something O'Donoghue, Harford, and O'Doherty argued (2012, p.661 cited in Skerritt and Salokangas 2019, p.90), when they found "where education is promoted as being a private effort leading to individual good, the inherited and previously accepted culture of teaching as a collaborative and shared engagement may be undermined".

The Irish educational context has also adopted the language of commerce, where language has come to reflect businesses in terms of performativity, measurability and accountability (Biesta 2010), which reflects the neoliberal influence on how what is valued is put forward in business orientated language. Skerritt (2019A) also argues that this is reflected in the way in which education and, by extension, educators are expected to display education as a high-value aspect to the public, which has paradoxically damaged the feeling of high standing in the profession and left many teachers feeling undermined. Privatised interests are also prevalent in the Irish context through the setting up of private, for-profit grinds or exam preparation-focused schools (Lynch and Moran, 2006, Power et al., 2013), which orient specifically toward academic results but are not under the remit of the Department of Education inspectorate and so are free to focus primarily on academic results, in comparison to state subsidised schools which set criteria in terms of hours for certain subjects to complete in SC, for example, the hours for wellbeing or physical education in SC. At the same time, these businesses are only available to those who can pay, which shows that, like private tuition for public students, it is limited to those who can purchase this service, which is a neoliberal element of the SC (McCoy and Byrne 2022). This is a systematic social inequality that extends neoliberal values and merits into education. While this section has explored privatisation in Irish education, the next section will examine how neoliberalism has affected teacher identity in the Irish educational context.

2.3.2 Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is everchanging as it is affected by the teacher's own background, society and the school environment in which they work, and this identity is important in understanding their practice (O'Keeffe & Skerritt, 2021). However, as a result of neoliberal influences, teacher identity has

changed rapidly in the Irish context in the last twenty years, especially since the global recession of 2008 (Skerritt et al, 2020). This is evident in the way in which teachers have been affected by a growing lack of agency and trust that has been spread as a result of neoliberal influences (Ball 2016a). Due to the effect of outside stakeholders and researchers in the Irish context, such as IBEC and the OECD, teacher identity has been affected by changes within their educational sphere and also, by extension, as a result of societal and cultural changes. In the early 2000s, public sector reform brought education into the field of having to publicise its value (Conway and Murphy, 2013). This meant that performativity and professionalism were expounded as vitally important to show this value (Ball 2016a). It was also affected by business lobbyists and other stakeholders having an increased voice in the pathway that the field was taking (McNamara et al, 2020). Teacher identity was affected by having to conform to this with the rapid advancement of statutory self-reflection within schools through SSE and also through increased external assessment through the inspectorate (Skerritt, 2022), with peer regulation a key aspect that affects teacher identity in this environment. Furthermore, success in this environment is based on meeting targets in order to be eligible for promotion, which is emphasised through meeting expectations while being monitored (Skerritt 2019A). This business-like identity (Skerritt 2019A) has found this evaluative culture leads to a raised feeling of isolation in Irish teachers with appropriate teaching styles and skills to teach being underlined in policy documents (Printer 2022; Skerritt 2019A). Outside of school, trust has been lowered in education in general, but also in teachers' ability to teach skills and knowledge that students require, which has been furthered by governments through an educational crisis narrative with the constant pushing to improve standards (Ball 2003). This has been reflected in the Irish context in the publications of the Department of Education (Curran et al 2023), as these often cite economic and neoliberal discourse, they reflect the othering of the teacher in comparison to other elements within society, such as private educational partners, which are viewed to be more effective. This has resulted in a market-led system of teaching that lessens the professional responsibility and identity of the teacher to that of a service provider (Mooney Simmie, 2012). This is also normalised through a political common-sense narrative that pervades political and societal discourse (Ball 2016). The effect of these aspects, according to Skerritt (2022), is a feeling amongst many educators that they are overwhelmed and undervalued due

to their practice and identity being torn between student needs and accountability processes. In terms of competencies and skills in the Irish context, Gleeson (2023) argues that these have been affected by international discourses around skills and competencies frameworks. It is noteworthy that some of the organisations most respected in the Irish context were neoliberal organisations, such as the OECD, which furthered neoliberal practices relating to the development of these frameworks, such as accountability (Gleeson 2023). However, others, such as the IBEC, have influenced policy directly relating to how teachers are perceived to perform in the classroom (Printer 2022). Skerritt (2022) further argued that teachers are dominated by externally imposed regulations that shape their practice. Furthermore, Ball (1990) argued that education has been shaped by teacher bashing, which has changed the perception of themselves and their place in society. The next section will explore how supranational organisations also influence the Irish curriculum context.

2.3.3 Neoliberalism and Supranational Influence on the Curriculum in the Irish Context

Neoliberal organisations and influences have had a bearing on the Irish educational context. In educational terms, Ireland has been influenced by neoliberal tropes that were incorporated and spread by an Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence that centered on didactic learning, with enormous value being put on assessment (Skerritt 2019C, Gleeson 2021). It also led to a change in the emphasis on education being viewed as a public good, to education being looked upon as an avenue mainly for human capital formation (Lynch et al 2016; Lynch, 2022; Gleeson 2022). This is reflected, in the Irish context, in how value for money was a new lexicon being used in how resources within education were allocated and in how stakeholders and, in particular, teachers were being held accountable through these metrics (Gleeson 2023). As well as this, there was an advancement in accountability regimes in the Irish context through the adoption of economic logic driving education, with the OECD a key influence through the publication of research and also through the advertisement of PISA scores (McNamara et al 2022). Other stakeholders, such as businesses, put forward their labour market needs as key societal needs also, with education being viewed as a foundation for capital accumulation (Mooney Simmie 2012). This, according to Gleeson (2023), had resulted in an input-output model being adopted by many stakeholders in the Irish educational context. This is important to this research

when questioning why specific skills were chosen for the Key Skills (NCCA, 2006) and draft Key Competency proposal (NCCA, 2023) without real explanation within the Department of Education when there were other skills that could have been chosen. Furthermore, Irish education has been affected by policy influencers and in particular lobbyists (Mooney Simmie 2012), who have become part of the system through aspects such as partnerships in policy formulation (Curran et al, 2023), which directly affects teachers' practice within the classroom. Mooney Simmie (2012) argues that these partnerships can lead to uncritical positionality being adopted, which in the Irish context has resulted in a capitalist model of education that promotes individual responsibility, particularly on behalf of the teacher, but also on promoting self-regulated learners. The adoption of supposed school autonomy on the basis of saving money is an example of this (McNamara et al 2021). This section has examined the neoliberal influence of supranational organisation on the Irish educational context. In the following section, we will assess how neoliberalism affects the curriculum in terms of the teaching of skills.

2.3.4 Evolution of the Curriculum

The evolution of curricula in the Irish context, including the development of skills frameworks, has been affected by neoliberal elements. There has always been a disconnect and incoherence in the development of curricula in the Irish structure and the overall philosophy of education in the Irish context (Mulcahy 1981). This is important to explore in this research as the way in which curricula are created, distributed and adopted is vital to how teachers teach skills and choose them in the first place. However, Drudy and Lynch (1993) argue that this has increased in more recent times with a human capital-orientated curriculum. However, there was an attempt to overcome the Classical Humanist curricular tradition that had been established by the Education Green Paper (Department of Education, 1992) in the 1990s and the White Paper (Department of Education, 1995) at the end of the 1990s. This move towards a broader education which fostered the needs of student-centred learning through the establishment of evaluation processes and governance of effectiveness was firmly established through the White Paper (Department of Education, 1995) and the Education Act in 1998,

which Stanley (2011) argued pursued a more vocational and corporate model of education that focused on testing, learning outcomes and the narrowing of the curriculum. Many of the curricular documents released by the DE in the last twenty years refer to stakeholders as customers (Gleeson 2023), which reflects neoliberal tendencies. Additional evidence of neoliberal influences on curricula is the way in which curricula reforms are given priority, such as in the case of maths, which offers higher-level students additional points for assessments in SC.

The SC, in 2003, was still viewed as failing the needs of students (NCCA, 2003) with a lack of student-centred learning. Although various studies such as Smyth et al (2019) longitudinal studies, and JC or SC studies reviews (Smyth, McCoy and Banks, 2019) led to a change of the frameworks within JC (NCCA, 2004) and SC (Department of Education, 2015), many of these changes were not substantial and to date have not led to widespread change in students' experience. However, despite the call to embed key skills in learning, Gleeson (2021) argued that this was a result of skills and competencies being seen as useful due to labour market needs, with an evidence-based input-output model being enacted and distributed leadership being viewed as a means to get schools to do this. Interestingly, Ball (2016a) argues that these standards were put in place as quality assurance methods, although these qualities were often borrowed from elsewhere. Mooney Simmie (2012) found, in her analysis of policy documents, that many policy measures reduced teacher power within the classroom by adding bureaucracy to the expectations of the teacher. Multiple agencies involved in curriculum and assessment also added to this bureaucracy. These include the NCCA developing and consulting on new specifications for subjects, the DE carrying out inspections and implementing programmes such as Looking at Our Schools (Department of Education, 2024), and the State Examinations Commission, which oversees state assessments. In addition, McNamara et al (2009) argued that this was set by the influence of the EU, which underlined the importance of evaluation policy enactment in line with corporatist ideals within education. The Programme for Government 2011-2016 and the Statement of Strategy 2019-2021 highlight the emphasis on benchmarking performativity when evaluating curricula (McNamara et al., 2022). The NCCA showcased the component-based nature of the curriculum with the SC Review (NCCA 2019), which viewed the curriculum not as one but as

multiple facets that had to be woven together, much like the JC reform that had been designed nearly a decade earlier (Department of Education, 2015). This reform focuses on skills and competencies, although crucially, this curriculum reform is upper second-level, leading to the LCE. With this being heavily influenced by the OECD's league tables (Gleeson 2021). The next section will explore the development of skills being placed in the Irish Senior Cycle curriculum.

2.3.5 The Development of Skills Within the Irish Senior Cycle Curriculum

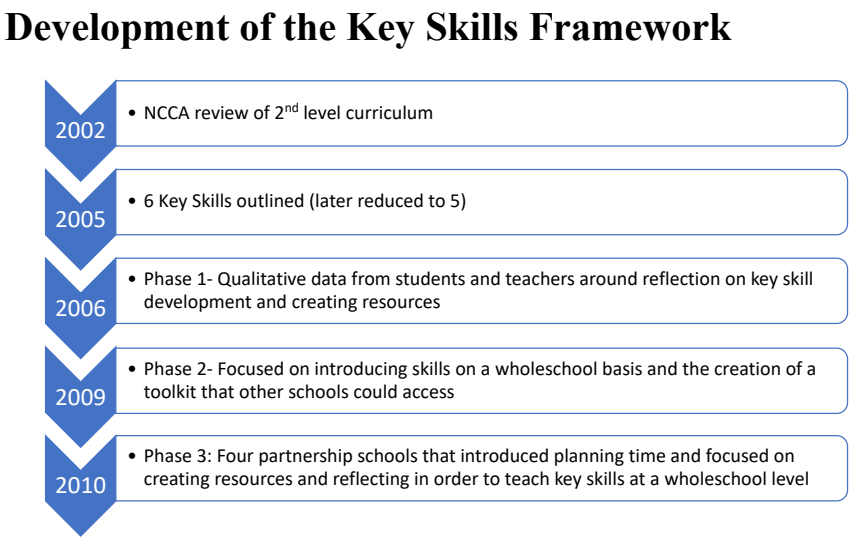

Figure 2: Timeline for the Development of the 2006 Key Skills Framework

The following section will explore how skill development within second-level education has been embedded and implemented in the Irish SC context. Explicit focus will be placed on how these policies were developed and enacted, and how this affected key component of this cycle such as teacher practice, curricula and assessments.

The NCCA sees the role of the SC within Irish second-level schools as providing experiences that 'empower all young people to play a full and active role in their school, society and economy, as

active citizens and as beneficiaries and contributors to social, political and economic life nationally and internationally' (NCCA, 2019, p.29 & p.30). While subject knowledge is important in preparing students for life, skill development has been targeted within the Irish context through a student-centred focus (NCCA, 2009C). A framework of skills and a draft proposal of competency development for SC that is integrated with the curriculum and in the classroom has been published (NCCA, 2009A, p.19; Gordon et al, 2009; NCCA, 2023). This process started in 2002, with the NCCA review of SC through a review of student experiences of all second-level curricula (NCCA, 2002). It led to further consultation with the government and various stakeholders such as teacher unions and IBEC through implementing reviews and collecting views from students, teachers and management within the system. This culminated in a proposal for the introduction of six key skills being applied for the SC, which included learning to learn, communicating, information processing, critical and creative thinking, working with others and being personally effective (NCCA 2005). These were at a later stage, however, reduced to five, with learning to learn being taken out with the view that it was present in the other five competencies (NCCA 2008). These key skills were 'seen as essential in helping young people to cope with the changes brought about by modern life' and aimed to help all citizens to be successful in a knowledge-based society (NCCA, 2010, p.6). Furthermore, there was viewed to be a strong inter-relationship between the key skills, and it was expected that these would be built upon by teachers and students in every subject (NCCA, 2010, p.21).

The first phase of implementation developed through teacher and student interaction and culminated in various resources and reflections on how key skills were being facilitated within the classrooms of partnership schools (NCCA, 2009B, p.6). Phase two centered around developing the use of key skills from a teacher's initiative to a whole school context. According to the report 'a significant element of the review and development of syllabuses at SC is the embedding of key skills in the learning outcomes' within schools at a whole school level (NCCA, 2009B, p.13). A toolkit and resources were also developed within this phase. In phase three of the review, four partnership schools became part of a whole school key skills implementation project. Here, teachers reported that reflection and planning time were needed but that teaching key skills led to a more varied approach to methodologies and a

more student-centred learning environment (NCCA 2010). Unlike other education systems, which explicitly targeted key skills or competencies as stand-alone learning outcomes, it was proposed that these key skills would be embedded within school subjects. As part of this, Pepper observed that these key skills in the Irish system are expected to be assessed discretely using real-life contexts (Pepper, 2011, p.336).

There has been an added emphasis on facilitating teachers to learn continuously in order to develop their knowledge and adapt their practice for the teaching of key skills (NCCA, 2008). The 2009 NCCA report argued that students' educational experiences could be enhanced through the use of assessment approaches, which involve students setting the context for the assessment and self-assessment (NCCA, 2009C). To change practice effectively, the NCCA (2009C) 'Leading and Supporting Change in School' suggested that distributed leadership, time, adequate facilitation and effective planning are key to the effective development of key skills. The 'Interim Report of Review of Senior Cycle Education' (NCCA, 2019, p.9) also put forward that key skill development was supported by teachers because assessment and curricula would be altered away from being focused on attaining high marks in the LCX at the end of the cycle. However, it also noted that parents, students, and teachers felt that while there was an 'increased emphasis on the skills needed in life in the modern world is important… this should not result in eclipsing or downplaying the importance of knowledge' (NCCA, 2019, p.31). This may indicate that while the teaching of skills was viewed as important, the focus on knowledge retention and examination results were of vital importance in this stage of education. This was a key point of this research, as I wanted to explore if this had impacted teachers' perceptions and teaching practices within the classroom.

One of the problems with embedding the key skills framework with the SC, is that the SC and Leaving Certificate Examinations within it have been 'developed at different times over a number of decades and are thus uneven in terms of connecting to a broader overarching narrative of the purpose of the senior cycle education' (NCCA, 2019, p.27). This could influence how implementations such as key skill development are adopted throughout the structure of its syllabuses and examinations.

According to Johnston and colleagues, ‘the Irish system, particularly second-level school education, is characterised by rigid structures and traditional subject-based rote learning’ (Johnston et al, 2015, p.425). Hyland (2011) argues that this rigidity affects the way subjects are studied and how they are learned.

With the introduction of the Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (NCCA, 2023), there has been a proposal to move to competency development, with the teaching of skills being a key aspect of this. The draft publication’s stated aim is to help ‘students strive to develop as many of these attributes as possible, while retaining what makes them uniquely themselves’ (NCCA, 2023, p.2). Whether the time, training, and emphasis given to this by all stakeholders, as has been shown to be essential in previous research around teaching skills in SC, remains to be seen.

2.3.6 Conclusion

This literature review in this chapter has provided a selection of main themes on how neoliberalism has affected society and culture. It has also shown how this has transcended worldwide within education and is evident in the Irish context (Ball, 2016b), especially regarding teacher identity and the development of skills at SC. The first theme covered what neoliberalism means and how governments and supranational organisations are key purveyors of neoliberal tropes such as individualism, consumerism and privatisation as a result of small government social intervention (Lipman, 2013). The US and the UK, in particular, have been movers in this space since the 1970s and have influenced many other nations. (Epstein, 2005a) As a result of key movers in this space, it has also shown how problems from this affect social formation and is evident in tensions within society, which governments and supranational organisations look to balance.

The second theme shows how neoliberalism has generally affected education, with a transactional nature that sees many stakeholders, such as students and parents, assuming the role of the consumer as a result of this neoliberal agenda (Olssen, 2002). It also explored how the discourse has stunted teacher agency and professional standing. The role of supranational organisations such as the OECD and EU underlining this agenda through their publications with the Lisbon Agenda and workforce need publications are key elements of this, especially in relation to linking educational skill

development with the needs of the labour force (European Council, 2000). This has also led me to explore whether skill development within education should be for social capital or holistic development, with lobbyists for companies and organisations affecting the discourse around this, especially through aspects of measurement within education such as the PISA tests, which bring measurability and competition into the area (Grek, 2009, Meyer and Benavot, 2013). This has affected how skills are embedded in Ireland in particular, and the way in which the EU and OECD affected this development was a crucial aspect of this theme. This has affected teacher agency by altering the structure and ideological assumptions of education and fostering a culture based on exam performativity and transactional relationships (OECD, 2020).

The final theme evaluated how neoliberalism has affected education in Ireland. This was first explored regarding how privatisation has grown in this sphere. It was also shown in how the language of commerce has permeated many parts of Irish education and through the fostering of public-private partnerships (Lynch, 2014, Ball 2016). Teacher identity in the Irish context was also explored with stakeholders such as the ESRI and IBEC, which have been shown to have affected that environment, especially in regard to policy development (Printer, 2020). Supranational organisations such as the OECD and EU have also been shown to be key influences on this. This section also evaluated the introduction and embedding of skills frameworks in SC. From the initial scoping of literature on neoliberalism, education and the teaching of skills, it is clear that there is a complex relationship between the skills that teachers teach in SC and how their perception of this is influenced by many facets both in education and society, which this study will explore for the participants involved in this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction:

The aim of this study was to critically explore what skills teachers taught and valued for SC students through using Bernstein's Pedagogic Device as a theoretical framework. Further to this, it sought to ascertain if neoliberalism has had a role to play in teachers' perceptions of teaching these skills in the SC. In addition, I wished to explore if there were certain skills emphasised by participating teachers as more important to teach during the SC as a result. I also aimed to explore, where participants perceived their view on the importance of some skills emerged from and the possible power elements behind this. The research employed the chain referral sampling method within the research, it with the hope that it could help participant teachers explore their practice and perceptions through critical evaluation. This approach aimed to improve their understanding and practice in regard to the teaching of skills in the SC. It was hoped that by extension, this may potentially improve the reflection of other teachers who read or hear about the research and reflect about their practice around this topic also. In order to address these questions, the study aimed to establish a methodological strategy that would enable the research to be enacted in a safe, legitimate and effective manner, while at the same time keeping to my critical theoretical commitments. This chapter will explore how a critical paradigm using Bernstein's Pedagogical Device (PD) helped to set out the research rationale and design of the study. The rationale for this being placed in the methodology chapter rather than in the literature review was that the PD was an aspect of the research theoretical framework being enacted, particularly in the analysis of data. Furthermore, this decision builds upon a corpus of work in critical educational research that mobilises theory as method (cf. Matias, 2021). Therefore, this approach complements a body of critical empirical work that has implemented theory as method witing the field of educational research (Ashwin et al., 2012; McLean et al., 2013, Bertram, 2012. Subsequently, an exploration of Bernstein's Pedagogical Device and implementation was more aptly placed in the methodology chapter.

The next section in this chapter will briefly outline the origins and core aspects of critical theory, which were crucial to the philosophy of the research and contributed directly to the choice of the methodology and methods employed within. These important factors included aspects such as the way I recruited for the focus groups as well as the grouping of participants.

Thereafter, the chapter will explore the step-by-step process I undertook throughout the study, as well as the ethical framework and epistemological stance that informed the research methods and data analysis techniques employed. It will also explore issues relating to the validity, reliability, generalisability and reflexivity of the study.

3.2 Paradigm and assumption

3.2.1 Critical Theory

This research used critical theory as a paradigm with Bernstein's PD as its theoretical framework to explore if neoliberalism had affected participants perceptions and practice when teaching skills to SC students in Ireland. Critical theory was not a singular invention but emerged from a range of prominent philosophical thinkers in the 20th century that were often collectively classified by the name 'The Frankfurt School' (Best et al., 2018, Arato et al., 1978). Critical theory states that people worldwide are held in place by modes of oppression (Breunig 2009), and that a disorientating and complex plethora of lies are being fed to citizens that makes it extremely difficult to challenge those in power or enact change within most contexts (Fook, 2002). Therefore, critical researchers aim to overcome traditional philosophical and societal norms that are accepted as the status quo that have led to inequality and a poorly functioning society (Horkheimer 2002).

A key aspect of critical theory research is helping those who might be in unjust and oppressive situations to explore any oppression that they may be under, even if they are not explicitly conscious of this beforehand (Best et al., 2018, Harvey, 1990) and to try and overcome and protect against these oppressive practices and relations becoming normalised (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011). The aim of this is to bring awareness to any powers or orthodoxies that shape relations between societies,

organisations and people. Particular emphasis was also put on identifying invisible powers that support the dominant status quo and their interests, while at the same time identifying social inequality, oppression and domination through legitimising unfair circumstances and structures. This type of research Lather (1986) and Horkheimer et al (2002) argue is even more important in a world where positivist quantifiable research is argued in many cases as the only epistemology of any value and which in many cases neglects the political and ideological context of the research (Habermas 1972). Furthermore, positivism crucially overlooks the place and viewpoint of the researcher within the research, which critical theorists maintain has a major bearing on findings, with the researcher's reflexivity or 'interpretation of the interpretation' being a key aspect in conducting the research and analysis, while reflecting on the steps taken (Alvesson and Skildberg 2000). This acceptance of the author being a part of this research was an aspect of this study as I designed the research, enacted the steps to gather data and then analysed this. It also meant that I was aware of my biases and crucially from a critical perspective wished to explore the dynamics behind the views of participants and how these were formed from various influences and experiences.

Through critiquing these orthodoxies within research, critical theorists aim to transform all aspects of society and for the improvement of all within it, so that social equality and enlightenment are established within a democratic society (Kincheloe, 2011). This research explored how teachers in the study perceived the teaching of skills to SC students is potentially influenced by neoliberal powers and how neoliberalism affected their perceptions and actions when teaching skills to students during this time. Related to this, education in Ireland has been relatively well researched as a field, with skill development a part of this that has been normalised as a key practice within education (Johnston, 2021). However, the position adopted by a critical researcher is explicitly aimed towards helping to explore normalised accepted behaviours, which may then result in a more egalitarian socially democratic society, with education viewed as being a key part of this goal by facilitating positive transformation (Morrison 1995). The research topic and critical paradigm adopted within this research is particularly apt, with the potential focus on SC reform being somewhat based on how to prepare

young people for future societal and economic needs (Murchan and Johnston, 2021, Dhuinn et al., 2021).

Harvey (2005) contends that the role of education has been distorted by the corporatisation and politicisation within its practice. Furthermore, other critical theorists argue that teaching has come to be an operation that focuses on the transfer of knowledge to students which can be measured (Kincheloe, 2008a, Ward, 2012). This, Giroux (2006) argues, works to define school life only in terms of what can be measured, and this extends to all reforms and growth within the education system. As such, a culture of performativity is driven by educational administration that bases values, skills, and actions on how the needs of the market are being met (Lipman, 2011, Ball, 2001). This is contrary to creating an environment where education is seen as an opportunity to explore how humanity can lessen human suffering and further democratic values, principles that many western countries, including Irish, espouse to action (Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2020). Within a critical paradigm, using Bernstein's PD as a theoretical framework, this research endeavoured to explore how the teachers have practiced the teaching of skills to SC students and, explore whether neoliberal propensities such as privatisation, individualisation and market-orientated policies have had a role in their perception and enaction of this.

3.3 Bernstein's Pedagogical Device

This research used a Bernsteinian lens through the engagement of Bernstein's concept of the Pedagogic Device, which was used as a method to analyse the data collected in the focus groups. Bernstein was a socio-linguist who had a huge effect on education through helping to explore the language of education and the way in which knowledge was framed and distributed (Bernstein, 1990). A key part of this was the development of the PD as a research theoretical framework. The pedagogical device can be used as a model for analysing the processes by which knowledge (discipline or domain specific) is converted through pedagogical decisions into school knowledge (Singh, 2002). Within this research the pedagogic device was used to explore if neoliberalism had affected participants' perceptions and practice when teaching skills to upper second-level students in

Ireland. The research focused on exploring the norms and values held by teachers explicated by pedagogical choices they made when teaching skills at upper second-level. This research comes at a time when Ireland is looking to make changes to upper second-level education (NCCA, 2022) and at a time when the focus on the economy has intensified due to banking collapse and issues concerning Brexit. The neoliberal impact on education as discussed in the literature review, is still being felt and the pedagogic communication of implicit and explicit norms and values by teachers' merits scrutiny. This meant that I felt that exploring participants viewpoints on the distribution, recontextualising and evaluation of knowledge relating to the teaching of skills in SC was crucial.

The pedagogical device is based on principles that govern the pedagogic transformation of knowledge within a specific context (Bernstein, 1990). It encompasses rules and procedures that convert knowledge into pedagogic communication, while also classifying and framing this knowledge (Bernstein, 1975b, Bernstein, 2005). The ordering and disordering of knowledge within different fields occurs in a hierarchical step by step process, with each stage or principle of the pedagogic device dependent on the previous step (Bernstein, 1990). These stages emerge firstly through distributive rules, then moving into the recontextualised rules. After this, evaluative rules are derived from recontextualised rules (Bernstein, 2005).

The distributive rules are constituted through communication through the pedagogical device, which privileges texts and knowledge in the production of the field's knowledge store (Maton and Muller, 2007). In the production field, worthwhile knowledge is created and distributed at a macro level (Singh, 2002). The knowledge structure is dependent on distributive rules, which govern power dynamics between social groups, forms of consciousness, and practices (Young, 2008), with political elements often being an aspect of this (Brown, 2013). Singh (2002) argues that the group that appropriates and controls the pedagogic device, exercises power in relation to the distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation of complex knowledge forms (this means that specific acceptable competences, behaviour and norms are embedded into consciousness and tacitly accepted). Within the education system, the distributive phase is often driven by disciplinary departments within higher education, research institutions, and educational bodies such as the DE, who shape the trajectory of

education beyond the present by linking previously separate disciplines or knowledge areas and framing societal and educational discourses (Morais & Neves, 2000). Singh (2015), argues that pedagogic discourse has become more state driven within education with an emphasis on pedagogic performance that suits governmentality, which can result in different orientations to pedagogical meaning.

The recontextualising rules involve the regulation of specific pedagogical discourses that differ from the original discourse or knowledge. This is achieved through the de-location, relocation, and refocusing of knowledge transformed into a pedagogic discourse (Ekberg, 2021). This phase determines how knowledge is recontextualised and accessed through the selection, production, translation, and distribution of knowledge. It acts on the meaning of the subject, converting it into pedagogic communication through transmission and acquisition. According to Bernstein (2000, p.32) 'the discourse moves from its original site to its new positioning... a transformation takes place'. Recontextualising rules operate through two subfields: through the official recontextualising field and the pedagogic recontextualising field. In the context of Irish second-level education, the official recontextualising field is produced and maintained by organisations such as the NCCA, the DE Inspectorate, and the State Examinations Commission (SEC), while the pedagogic recontextualising field is furthered by teacher associations and unions, who attempt to recontextualise the rules and principles of the field but often struggle for power against the official recontextualising field. Agents within this phase of the pedagogic recontextualising field typically control the rules for setting the principles of the pedagogic discourse, resulting in the division of the field into social order and valued competencies (Wright and Froehlich, 2012). Although, the official recontextualising field may appear to hold more power over the field in certain contexts, particularly in determining expectations regarding what skills should be taught and how, this control is never fully absolute, and the recontextualization of knowledge can vary and is ever changing. Within the recontextualising rules, two principles of discourse operate against each other in determining the nature of discourse. Regulative discourse rules directly influence the social order through established rules around social position or hierarchy, functions and conduct (Nguyen et al., 2021). According to Morais, (2002) this

regulates the dominant discourse and by extension the values in society. The regulative rules shape instructional discourse rules and the resulting pedagogy, which leads to the development of trained capacities and lifestyles, according to Hunter (1994). The instructional pedagogic discourse shapes instructional and regulative actions and pedagogy by creating moral regulations regarding what should be acquired in the classroom, according to Singh (2002). Bernstein (1990) also outlined that instructional rules shape the selection, enaction and criteria of knowledge that stems from the regulative discourse rules.

The third stage is the evaluative rules that encompass specific pedagogic practices and constructs within settings which determine the criteria for valid acquisition of instructional and regulative texts (Bernstein, 1990). Evaluative rules govern pedagogic practices by establishing the standards to be achieved during instruction. The criteria for evaluation involve not only the teacher but also all stakeholders such as governmental departments, supranational organisations and curriculum designers who influence content, transmission, and success criteria. Consequently, knowledge transmission rarely aligns completely with the norms and values set by dominant societal groups in earlier stages. Through the recontextualisation and evaluation decision-making stage, knowledge is altered, and evaluative rules can be either strongly or weakly framed. Weakly framed or implicit evaluative rules may be more challenging for individuals in lower classes, who lack the understanding of weakly framed knowledge in comparison to dominant societal groups (Bernstein, 1975a). This is in comparison to strongly framed rules and knowledge, which is clearer and facilitates students' comprehension of required knowledge and how to achieve it (Sadovnik, 1991). The quality of the framing determines the 'communicative practices of the social relations within the reproduction of discursive resources, that is, between transmitters and acquirers' (Bernstein, 1981, p. 345).

The evaluative rules within the field of reproduction are communicated through specialised interactional practices that serve as modes for the acquisition of knowledge by establishing legitimate relations within the classroom. These relations are based on power dynamics, which establish social norms in which teachers normally hold more power than students, through the categorising of

discourses and contexts that contribute to internalised social and power relations (Wheelahan, 2010). These relations establish principles of control regarding participation and content in the school process (Bernstein, 2000). Crucially, Bernstein (1990) suggested that these struggles over the pedagogic device are attempts to control the production and distribution of different pedagogic models (i.e., the rules for the relation, selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of valid school knowledge). Therefore, the felt real power is in the classroom and the pedagogical decisions teachers make.

The first specialised practice within the evaluative rules is the instructional principle, which regulates the selection criteria and organisation of various modes of communication, as well as the characteristics and actions of the communicant (Bernstein, 1990). The second specialised instructional practice is locational, which regulates the physical location and the form in which it is realised through objects, their attributes, relationships, and the spatial context in which they exist (Bernstein, 1990). These practices are underpinned by recognition rules that are constructed during specialised interactional practices through the classification of privileged practices by stakeholders. These rules can be observed in everyday interactions, as well as through discourses and boundaries established by different stakeholders, defining acceptable rules within specific contexts (Bernstein, 1975b). Another part of evaluative rules are realisation rules. These focus on passive rules that are constructed and deemed legitimate to create and produce meanings within the educational practice context (Asimaki et al., 2022). This enables students to produce legitimate texts within the parameters of the specific pedagogic discourse by making inferences about the selection, recontextualization, and evaluation of pedagogic procedures. Through continuous evaluation, students can perceive and present what is absent and present in pedagogical performance and competencies, creating what is classified and framed as legitimate and internalised. For example, if the teacher has all the answers, it leads students to feel they are knowledge receivers rather than creators. They look to the knowledgeable other for their thinking. And this reduces their epistemic agency in the learning process. However, the voice of different agents, which can differ, leads to contradictions and tensions, resulting in continuous change within the classroom.

The pedagogic device is enacted by agents of change operating within institutions in pedagogic fields where there is a competition to establish power and authority over accepted knowledge and norms (Bernstein, 2005). These fields, according to Bernstein, represent accumulated labour that enables individuals to generate profits in specific fields, leading to social or economic gains, among other things (Bernstein, 2001). This transformational process is acquired through pedagogical socialisation. Agents of change may challenge or maintain the principles of knowledge by shaping the distribution of worth placed on resources within the field, thus modifying the structure of knowledge and the composition of the field, which ultimately may change both education and society (Singh, 2002). These agents can challenge or maintain the principles of the device, modify the structure of knowledge, and shape the distribution of resources and power within the field of education (Singh et al., 2018). For example, this can affect the way in which some skills can be heightened in value by different agents which in turn can influence how these are prioritised within education.

The classification and definition of knowledge depends on the specific field in which it was created. Different fields maintain varying boundary strengths and degrees of insulation from one another, depending on their power and the significance attributed to their knowledge classification (Wheelahan, 2010, Lilliedahl, 2022). Bernstein (2009) argues that these boundaries can act as a social control over who is able to acquire or access knowledge within the boundaries of different fields of knowledge. These boundaries, as argued by Bernstein, give rise to singular forms of specialised knowledge (e.g., biology) and regions of knowledge that encompass fields of practice with less specialised language and entry requirements (Bernstein, 1975b, Beck and Young, 2005, Ivinson and Singh, 2018). This can lead to two types of knowledge discourse. The singular forms of knowledge mostly culminate from specialised fields and are associated with vertical discourse. This type of knowledge consists of interrelated relatively abstract ideas, which produces more powerful and esoteric knowledge (Katartzi and Hayward, 2020). This can have a hierarchical knowledge structure that has strong explicit grammar and is context independent (Bernstein, 1999). An example of this singular knowledge is physics, which is hierarchical as it structured along principles that unite disparate things and ideas. Vertical discourse can also have horizontal knowledge structures, that form

culturally specialised knowledge as well as criteria for the production and circulation of texts (Bernstein, 1999). Examples of this include areas such as social science and the humanities that have no unifying principles but have competing schools of thought. However, horizontal discourse is usually aligned with everyday tacit knowledge that can be associated with multiple fields but rarely have systematic principles (Bernstein, 1999). This means that this discourse is often perceived as common sense with no epistemic founding and little disciplinary history (Bertram, 2019).

In the past, individuals would typically align themselves with either specialised disciplines or fields of knowledge. However, Bernstein (2003) argued that this has changed with a greater emphasis being placed on creating human capital, which promotes the learning of generic modes, competencies and skills for increased flexibility and transferability, particularly in life and work. The aim of this is to achieve uniformity in education, with rules and principles linked to the global knowledge economy driving a dominant ideology of education in many countries (Wright and Froehlich, 2012). According to Bernstein (2003), identity and contextual factors are now also oriented towards markets rather than the specific field of practice, knowledge, or occupations, as these tend to change while markets remain relatively stable. This, in turn, leads to the formation of identities based on market expectations, where orientations and relationships are constructed and distributed according to market needs and values. This was also observed by Hughson and Wood (2022) who felt that disciplinary knowledge in education had turned its focus to market relevance, which is in part driven by organisations such as the OECD.

Recognising the framing and classification of knowledge, as well as understanding how the distributive and recontextualising fields have shaped it, is crucial (Young, 2008). The framing of knowledge is a crucial aspect in relation to student learning. It refers to the locus of control in selecting, evaluating, and accessing particular knowledge within society, especially within schools where framing can be weak or strong (Singh, 2002). Strong framing is primarily associated with didactic teaching within education systems, which Walford (1986) argues also is linked to a high degree of summative assessment, while weak framing, which Bernstein argues promotes successful learning, is mainly associated with progressive pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990). Various studies have

outlined the strong framing present in the Irish second-level education system (Coolahan, 2003; Lynch et al., 2013; Smyth & Banks, 2012). In this hierarchical structure, teachers in the classroom have limited power but face a high level of scrutiny compared to those in the distributive and recontextualising stages. This is a result of the establishment of a regulative and dominant discourse within the hierarchical structure which frames what is considered good practice or valuable knowledge. Skerritt (2017) argued that this apparent in the Irish SC, and is directly linked to the LCE. However, individuals still interpret knowledge and practice differently, and the ability to change discourse and practice globally is unequal (Bernstein, 2000). This research explored how teachers perceived the teaching of skills to SC students potentially is influenced by neoliberal powers and how this affected their perceptions and actions when teaching skills to students during this time. The Bernsteinian lens adopted within this research is explicitly aimed towards helping to explore normalised accepted practice in relation to teaching skills at SC, which has up to now been unexplored.

3.4 Ontological and Epistemological Viewpoints

The ontology of the pedagogic device refers to the nature of its knowledge existence and the fundamental characteristics that shape its functioning and development. The pedagogic device is socially constructed, meaning it is shaped by social processes, power dynamics, and cultural norms (Bernstein, 1990). It is not a natural or fixed entity but rather is a product of human interactions within education systems. However, each pedagogic context has its own rules that regulate pedagogic transmission and is in some way independent of the reproductive process of educational and social inequalities as these cannot be copied or reproduced verbatim. The hierarchy of rules within the pedagogical device reflects power relations, although these may be implicit which makes them difficult to distinguish (Bernstein, 1990).

The pedagogic device involves the classification of knowledge into different fields, which can vary in their make-up and entry requirements. Different fields have varying degrees of insulation and boundaries, which influence the accessibility of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). Luckett and Blackie (2022, p.1019) describe them as ‘a set of interrelated and legitimated concepts that, at least partially,

describe causal mechanisms operating at a specific stratum of ontological reality (chemistry and ecology for example interrogate different strata of reality)'. The pedagogic device is a process of transformation that converts knowledge into pedagogic communication. This process includes the ordering and disordering of principles, the recontextualization of knowledge and policy, and the establishment of evaluative rules that govern pedagogical practices (Singh et al., 2018). Within education Bernstein (1990) argued that curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation were the message systems that structure the processes of school knowledge, transmission and practice. This means that curricula are what is viewed as valid knowledge, while pedagogy is the valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation is the valid realisation of the knowledge of what is taught. Interestingly, Bernstein (2000) argued that curriculum knowledge is split between two models of teaching that are based primarily on competence development or performance, with emphasis on developing competence of skills and relational dynamics being the norm in early and further education while performance in the testing of curriculum knowledge is linked to second-level education (Bibila, 2020). Knowledge that is produced, recontextualised and explored according to the steps of the pedagogic device has both material and expressive qualities, that through a critical lens may show neoliberal ideals and tendencies. This can centre around the production and distribution of pedagogic resources, such as textbooks, access to extra tuition such as grinds, as well as the communication of expressive discourses that shape practices (Katartzi and Hayward, 2020). It can also be influenced by social, cultural, and economic contexts. Crucially in terms of this research, it is important to note that these dimensions are interrelated and shape each other within educational contexts. This means that different contexts affect education practice such as social, cultural and economic dynamics, which be viewed in this research through Bernstein's PD in regard to the teaching of skills in SC and how this may be affected by neoliberal interests.

Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge and the way in which this is informed and interpreted by different stakeholders (Linklater, 1996). The epistemology of Bernstein's pedagogic device involves the ways in which knowledge is acquired, classified, recontextualised, and explored within the pedagogical process (Singh, 2002). Within this, knowledge is constructed through social

relations as well as through regulative and hierarchical rules that affect the sequencing, pacing and evaluation methods within the education (Bernstein, 2000). Bernstein's pedagogic device observes that knowledge is socially constructed through social interactions, cultural practices, and power relations. It acknowledges that knowledge is not an objective, universal entity but rather is shaped by social processes and contexts. Bernstein (2000) argues that pedagogic practice is 'a fundamental social context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place'. The classification and definition of knowledge within the pedagogic device is contextually dependent (Bourne, 2000). Therefore, the specific field in which knowledge is created determines its classification and boundaries. Different fields maintain varying degrees of insulation from each other, which impacts the accessibility and transferability of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). From an epistemological perspective in this research the pedagogic device was used to explore the transformation of knowledge from its original form to pedagogic communication. This transformation involves the recontextualization of knowledge, where it is adapted and transformed for educational purposes. According to Bourne (2000), this has led to pedagogical regimes or practices being established which govern how students and educators interact based on the perceived merit of knowledge. However, there is a constant epistemic struggle for dominance between agents to alter these regimes. Bernstein (2000, xxi) echoed this when he argued, 'this distribution of different knowledges and possibilities is not based on neutral differences in knowledge but on a distribution of knowledge which carries unequal value, power and potential'. This research endeavoured to situate and outline the knowledge around practice and power structures to try and better understand it (Horkheimer, 1974). It aimed to overcome the presupposed objective reality argued by other non-critical paradigms which produce consumable simplified subject matter, especially within education (Reinharz, 1991).

The epistemology of the pedagogic device acknowledges the influence of power dynamics on knowledge production, distribution, and acquisition. Power relations within education systems can impact the accessibility of knowledge, the selection of content, and the criteria for evaluation. Different social groups and institutions may have varying degrees of control over knowledge, which according to Bourne (2000) can be asymmetrical. According to Lilledahl (2022, p.165) curriculum

enactment and selection 'implies that the normative debate over how curriculum should meet the challenges of the future is linked to the epistemological question of the validity of knowledge, in which neoliberalism plays a key role in this selection'. This distribution of power and the 'principles of control translate into classification and framing values which select recognition and realisation rules to create contextually appropriate text' (Bernstein, 2000, p.18). Within this research, I explored teachers' epistemological viewpoints to try and comprehend what way they engage with skills development in their SC classroom and the power structures and experiences that have brought them to have these viewpoints about skills.

3.4.1 Research Design

Qualitative research methods were employed to explore the experiences of participants through the use of focus groups. This section will explore the suitability of this chosen method to help action the research aims, and why focus groups were chosen.

I made the decision to use a qualitative research design, which was informed by a review of research literature and an exploration of methodological tools available. While there have been explorations of teachers' perceptions of teaching skills to second-level students in Ireland, no studies have as yet explored teacher's perceptions of teaching skills in the SC through a critical paradigm using the Bernsteinian PD (Looney and Klenowski, 2008, Dempsey, 2016, Printer, 2020). Research had also not explored, through qualitative research, whether teachers feel that neoliberalism has influenced their perceptions and practices when teaching skills to SC students in the Irish context.

As a result of the literature review, I observed potential gaps in prior research and therefore explored key tenets of this research question including the development of the skills agenda and how some supranational organisations were helping to spread and support this educational focus (Ahonen and Kinnunen, 2015, Ball, 2016a, Delaune, 2019, Giroux, 2016). I endeavoured to explore how these elements may have manifested themselves within educational curricula, discourses and practices to influence teachers, which in this particular study was looked at in detail within the Irish context in teaching skills to SC students. The lack of research on teachers' perceptions of practices and beliefs

around their teaching of skills helped me to choose qualitative methods to try and gain a rich perspective and understanding of their perceptions in this area. Neoliberalism was not mentioned in the research questions as this was a design decision. I shared the research questions with the focus groups and wanted to allow their thinking on neoliberalism to be at the forefront of the discussion, although neoliberalism was mentioned from the start in the title of the research.

I wished to explore in depth, teachers' perceptions through the thematic analysis of the discussion within focus groups. I at first felt individual interviews would be an ideal method for this research, however on reflection it was felt that this method was not the best fit for the research questions being explored fully in comparison to focus groups (Adams and Cox, 2008). Even though individual interviews may produce more succinct individualistic data for research than focus groups, this study incorporated the use of focus groups which would rely more on group dialogue amongst participants. The strength of this focus group method, as will be outlined further below, is that through group discussion, participants could explore disparate views and experiences while at the same time challenging previously held assumptions (Bloor, 2001). However, I was conscious of how difficult the use of focus groups was, although it is a highly effective and efficient method if run well, it requires a complex set of skills. I conducted these focus groups over one to one and a half hours. This length was chosen to allow for uninterrupted discussion as well as not being too long that participants tired and so could not give full attention and input because of fatigue.

3.5 Sample

I at first considered specific purposive non-probability sampling, consisting of second-level teachers within the Irish context who had taught students at SC level in the past. The sample of teachers were to be stratified or chosen based on sub-populations in regards to the type of school in which they taught. I based this on the proportional allocation of teachers employed in that type of school in the Irish context. This would have been founded on the percentage of teachers teaching in those school types for the 2020-2021 school year. However, this sampling was decided against for several reasons. Firstly, through further reading and consultation with my research supervisor, I realised that the

stratification would be difficult to recruit for. Furthermore, I had thought prior to this, that this sampling would lead to a sample saturation when on reflection it could not, as a result of a small number of participants in the focus groups when compared to the large number of teachers employed at second level.

I therefore decided to use nonprobability convenience sampling where existing participants recruited other participants that they knew, which is otherwise known as snowball or chain referral method (Coleman 1958). This 'yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share and know of others whose characteristics are of research interest' (Goodman, 2011, p.141). However, it could be argued that this would lead to bias and would be against the ethics of some research paradigms. I believed given that this research used a critical lens and qualitative methodology, that potential bias in the selection of participants was not an issue, as this research did not claim to be representative of every SC teacher in Ireland. Its aim being primarily to help participants further understand and improve their practice, which may by extension help others who read the study. The initial sample group consisted of four teachers who have taught at SC level and who practiced in four different counties. I chose four different counties not as a means to claim sample representation or to be able to infer results based on saturation but to potentially increase the richness of experiences and data based on potential locational differences between the participants. The original four candidates in the first wave of referrals were then asked to recruit other teachers from their social networks who they knew were qualified teachers and who had taught their subject to SC level (Gile and Handcock, 2010). There were seven waves of referral, where the next candidate would recruit one more that they knew and so on. When it occurred that a candidate withdrew from the research, the original candidate that had recruited the person that withdrew was asked to find another. If this was not feasible, then the last candidate added from another group who had not referred anyone for the study was asked to find someone who would be available and was a qualified teacher who was registered with the Teaching Council and had taught the SC.

The advantages of using this technique within the research framework was that within the focus groups, the familiarity of some participants may have fostered a higher degree of comfort,

understanding and trust to allow participants to construct new meaning around the research area (Crouse and Lowe, 2018). I made sure that participants were happy to go into the same focus group as the person who referred them when setting the date and time of the session. Another advantage of this was that there was a higher likelihood of participants knowing the person they were referring for a period of time, and therefore would only refer qualified second-level teachers. However, as Goodman (2011) argues, voluntary respondents cannot be taken at face value, so I made the decision to also look for the Teaching Council number of participants to double check their teaching qualification. This was crucial to the integrity of the research, especially given the teacher recruitment crisis at present (O'Doherty and Harford, 2018), where some teachers in schools are not qualified teachers, but rather have further education Teacher Council numbers or are finishing off their teaching qualifications and covering SC classes due to a lack of suitable available candidates.

One of the weaknesses argued about this method of sampling is that it holds little value in terms of inferring formal centralised results and can't be representative of a general sample population (Heckathorn and Cameron, 2017, Erickson, 1979) which in this case is based on the perceptions of teachers who have taught the SC curriculum in their subject. However, as I used a critical paradigm, this ability to infer generalisable meaning and outcomes is not a priority and ignores the power structures that come from positivist generalisable knowledge that sometimes ignores interests and influences on meaning creation (Kincheloe, 2008a). Rather this sampling aimed to help the teachers within the research, through a critical exploration of their perceptions, to improve their understanding and practice in regard to the teaching of skills in the SC. It was hoped that by extension, this may potentially improve the reflection of other teachers who read or hear about the research and reflect about their practice around this topic also.

3.6 Methods

3.6.1 Data Collection

Denzin (2017) proposes that there has never been such a need for critical qualitative inquiry in a culture of global neoliberalism. As such, this research adopted thematic analysis through Bernstein's PD lens as a means to explore this. The data for analysis came from qualitative data that I gathered as

a result of running focus groups with teachers, who have taught the SC in order to explore their values and practice as well as perceptions of neoliberal influences around the teaching of skills. As stated above, each focus group was composed of four teachers and there were four groups in total. I envisioned that the chances of the geographical divide was high amongst participants in the research which meant that the focus groups ran online using the Microsoft Teams platform. This had a record option which I used, that enabled me to transcribe the conversation easily afterwards. Permission to do this was obtained from the participants when they signed up for the focus groups. I welcomed everyone to the focus group at the start of the meeting and outlined the topic to be discussed. Thereafter, guidelines about the structure of the conversation were explored, with the need for having one voice speaking at a time and respecting each other outlined. After this I opened the discussion with a question and guided the conversation based on how it was flowing using prompts and open questions that I deemed appropriate to explore the research aims while at the same time taking field notes and making sure that the recording was working.

3.6.1.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups were selected within this research as a qualitative data source. Focus groups are group interviews among a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and explore their views and personal experiences on a topic of research (Nyumba 2018, Powell, 1996). I wished to provide a setting in which teachers could discuss the research area through prompts and questions from myself, who was facilitating the group discussion. This was enacted through compiling a list of questions in advance of the focus groups, and actively listening to the participants to guide the conversation so that the research questions were being examined, or to explore further an aspect which I had not thought of prior to compiling the questions. I was also aware of my own body language and tone so as to make the environment a welcoming one, as well as making sure anyone who wanted to voice their view had the opportunity to do so. One of the aims of this process was that the focus group discussion would help participants explore their views and feelings around the teaching of skills to students in the SC, while also exploring whether their perceptions of the skills and their importance was influenced by neoliberal ideals or powers.

With my adoption of a Bernsteinian PD lens, the use of focus groups allowed me to facilitate a safe social environment where participants could articulate and construct meaning and a new appreciation of reality in a more efficient manner than in individual interviews. Conducting interviews would take much longer. Focus groups were used because of their potential to help more inhibited group members to add their experience and beliefs (Morgan, 1998). During focus group conversations, less forward participants become more comfortable as a result of others sharing their experiences, which semi-structured focus groups potentially encourage compared to more structured research methods (Fern, 1982, Carey and Asbury, 2016). As well as this, group participants may develop particular perspectives as a consequence of talking with other people who have similar experiences (Sutton and Austin, 2015, Kitzinger, 1995). This shared meaning making and the potential chance it had to emancipate new ideas among the participants was important to me as critical research aims to facilitate experiential insights within groups and challenge accepted norms and orthodoxies which hold power (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010). This was important in the choice of focus groups for me, as Bernstein's (2000) PD rejects the rational objectivism and accepted reality of beliefs that other research paradigms adopt, through exploring the discourses and messaging systems that affect the distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation of knowledge. In the case of this research, this would have centred around exploring the subjective and contextual nature of skills, which are open to interpretation in their essence and the way in which they are taught in SC. I decided that utilizing a case study approach would not promote the feeling of safety as described above, which felt could be increased by using teachers from different settings. Therefore, preserving the privacy necessary for participants to speak freely without the presence of colleagues was important so that participants felt comfortable in sharing their views openly.

I also hoped that by recording the focus groups I would be able to observe themes and distinct discourse amongst participants that would not be observed in an individual interview. As well as this, the flexible nature of focus groups afforded a greater chance of relevant themes and interests being observed from group discussion (Stahl et al., 2011). This it was hoped would occur as a result of participant dialogue, especially if I had overlooked or not thought of a theme or topic in the lead up to

the focus groups when the potential questions and prompts were being drawn up. This sense of partnership is particularly important in critical research that uses focus groups, as this method moves away from having me as the researcher as the centre of power within the study, by democratising the focus and direction that the focus group could take through enhancing collaborative construction and increasing the chances of shared understanding (Stahl et al., 2011).

The focus on helping to explore shared meaning was crucial, as critical focus groups place the attention of the group on participants not the interviewer (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). As a result, I chose to use a semi-structured method which aimed to pose questions (Appendix A) which guided participants to engage with the research questions through evaluating meaning and practice around experiences shared among the groups' participants. This method was also flexible in guiding the dialogue, to help participants question their own assumptions, accepted norms and practices within their classroom, even if at times it was not fully apparent if participants were directly engaging with the research questions. This was important for me as critical research aims to advance participants' understanding of hegemonies and interests that may be affecting their life and viewpoints. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) posits that focus groups are useful in helping the researcher explore previously tacit or uncodified knowledge and this exploration might not always be linear in nature.

I felt that the focus groups had the most chance of being effective, if I assumed the position of moderator within the focus group. This decision was based on the view that I would know the research questions and aims better than someone else who could potentially moderate. This would enable me to focus the discussion on topics or themes that related to the research questions, even if at times I let the focus groups engage with themes only loosely apparent in the research aims. Furthermore, with the adoption of a critical paradigm and a Bernsteinian PD lens, it was felt that my knowledge of skill development and neoliberalism meant that I would be able to pick up on tacit themes and perspectives in real time and thus could help participants explore their beliefs or experiences further, which would be most efficient and practical considering the research structure. However, as a critical paradigm was adopted I knew that this would not be unproblematic, as while the research assumed a position of reflexivity there were still elements of unconscious bias that had

helped me to form my perspectives and thus may have coloured my perceptions and decisions (Kruegar and Casey 2000). Despite this, I was felt that even if this was the case, this type of research could still enhance the understanding of the participants' perspectives around the research questions.

The focus groups were conducted online. I would have preferred to conduct the focus group in a face-to-face setting. However, with large geographical distances between participants, it was felt that it would have been unfeasible to ask participants to commit to this when signing up for the research. As a result, I decided that seeing as the focus group would be running on Microsoft Teams that the number of participants who would be able to engage within the focus group would be lessened from the original plan of six to four. This was because research has shown that focus groups work most effectively in smaller groups in an online setting when compared to face-to-face focus groups, as nonvisual cues and slightly delayed reactions make conversation harder and less natural amongst participants (Lobe, 2017). One of the advantages of these smaller groups was that it was easier to empower all voices in the groups to add to the discussion. Therefore, unlike the recommended 6-8 participants for face-to-face focus groups, I decided to limit the number of participants to 4 per group.

3.6.2 Data analysis

The data analysis within this study used thematic analysis to explore the data from the focus groups through a Bernsteinian PD lens. For the thematic analysis element, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step reflexive thematic analysis method. The reason that this method was chosen was that it was compatible with critical qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In addition, it is supportive of reflexive thematic analysis, which was particularly important in this study which placed me as a participant in gathering data within the study rather than outside it, which some thematic analysis model's support (Boyatzis, 1998, Braun and Clarke, 2021a). With the acceptance of myself being a key part of this study, reflexivity on decisions relating to the research design, rationale, epistemological and ontological decisions were acknowledged and reflected upon throughout the process using a reflective diary and dialogue with my research supervisor. However, in many studies

using reflexive thematic analysis, the journal data from the reflective data were not intended to be data shared in the thesis, and in this remains consistent in the present thesis.

I used an inductive approach in the analysis of the data to address the research questions. This involved deriving themes that were linked to the research questions from the participants' viewpoints in the focus groups, rather than relying on predetermined themes already chosen before the analysis of the data, as deductive analysis dictates (Morgan et al., 1998). This helped me to approach the data analysis with a more open mind rather than if I had already identified themes before the study and fitted the data to suit these, which Braun and Clarke (2021b) also supports. It also supported the thematic evaluation of the data using a Bernsteinian PD lens, which explored the distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules that participants felt affected their values and practice when teaching skills in SC, which in turn led to themes being identified through the inductive approach as described above.

3.6.2.1 Braun and Clarke's Reflective Thematic Analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis model to analyse the data. This thematic analysis is conducted over six phases, which are:

- Familiarisation of the data set
- Coding
- Generating initial themes
- Developing and reviewing themes
- Refining, defining and naming themes
- Writing up

Firstly, this was enacted by me immersing myself in the data through the reading and revision of the data sets gathered in the transcription process, which was made easier as a result of the focus groups

being recorded on Microsoft Teams. After this, further immersion was implemented through re-reading and through taking brief notes on insights and patterns observed in the data.

On the second step of the framework, I began by uploading the focus group transcripts onto the MAXQDA platform. Here I systematically worked through the data to identify semantic coding which was apparent through the explicit meaning of the participants views, and latent coding which was identified through the tacit and implicit observations of the participants views, which Byrne (2022) argues often solicits hidden meaning and assumptions held by participants. This meant that the data began to be organised in a meaningful way. This resulted in 95 codes with 1137 coding segments from the four focus groups as can be viewed in figure 3.

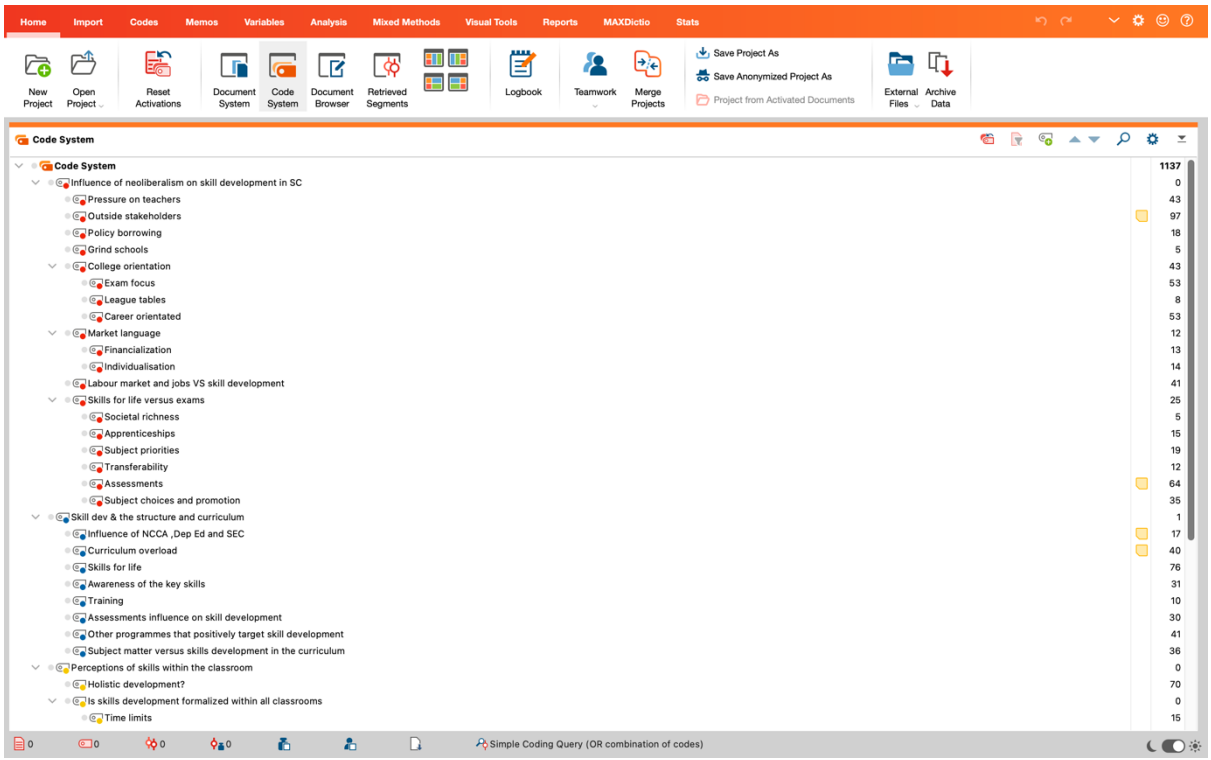

Figure 3- Developing codes and themes on MaxQda

Thirdly, I generated and constructed initial themes by identifying patterns of participants' perceptions, especially regarding how these perceptions linked to Bernstein's PD in terms of how participants showed how they felt that the teaching of skills was being affected by distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules. As part of this I used an A3 sized blank notebook to configure a visual thematic

map to try and view how these codes could be merged and identified as overall themes. At this stage, 9 themes were identified and subthemes relating to these were also explored, with three themes being identified for each research question.

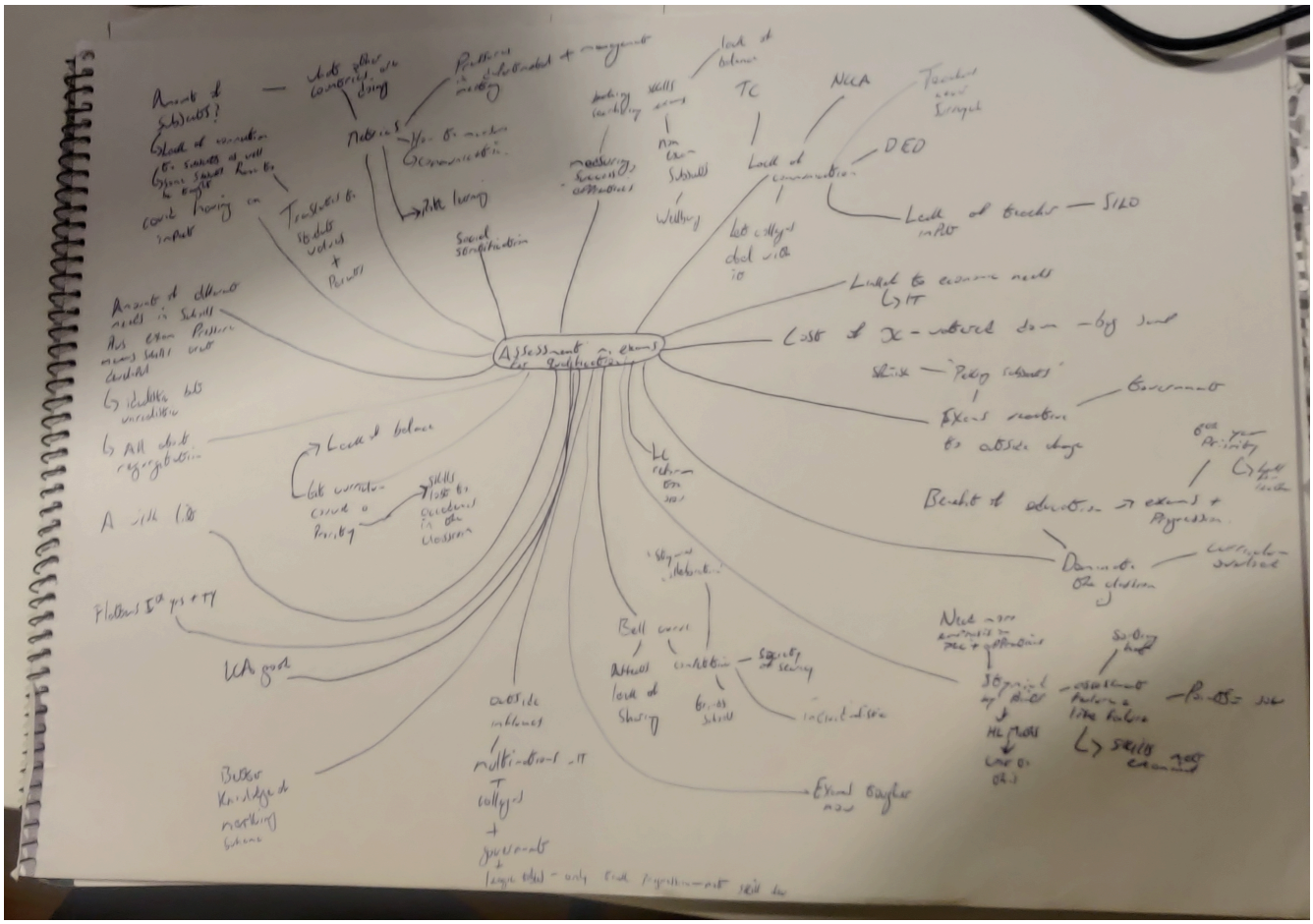

Figure 4: A3 notebook used for visual thematic analysis.

For the fourth step I reviewed and developed the initial themes. This was enacted through reflecting on whether the themes fitted the coded extracts when reviewing the whole text. Here, a number of themes changed names, merged and separated, which Braun and Clarke (2021b) suggests is a normal aspect of the process. At this stage many of the codes were given several labels that could have fitted them into multiple themes, which made the process time consuming as much reflection was needed when deciding which was the most succinct label. Also, at this stage I made sure to reflect on whether the themes and codes were linked in any way to the research questions and what this may have been signifying using Bernstein's PD. At this stage, I was most conscious of exploring how different

influences or fields of knowledge were affecting the participants' perceptions of the teaching of skills through different agents, which may have a neoliberal aim.

Step five continued the process of refining, defining and naming themes. I started to reflect on what the themes were signifying. I looked in more depth at the nuances of the data through Bernstein's PD to see if there were any new identifiable aspects to each theme that could add to an overarching story of the data. While doing this, I was consciously reflecting on how these themes may be evidencing how neoliberalism was affecting the distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules that participants observed in relation to the teaching of skills in the Irish SC context.

For the final step, I used the themes and subthemes identified to write up the thesis. The codes that were identified as exemplifying the themes were used to add thick description to the research. Even at this stage I reflected constantly on my reflexivity and positionality to observe whether the meaning behind the themes was being biased as little as possible. Liaising with my research supervisor at each stage, reflexive journaling and keeping a reflective notes copy was extremely important in this step. A crucial aspect of this step was to evaluate overall how my data and themes reflected participants' showing that neoliberalism affected the teaching of skills in SC and, crucially, how, through Berstein's PD lens, this was evident in the rules within this field that affected their perception of accepted practice.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Critical theory research requires reflection not only on the production of power, values and discourse but also on the philosophical assumptions that are important for me as a researcher and the theoretical framework which I use (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011). As such, my ethical position was to the forefront of my mind throughout the research process in order that the information gathered and analysed was not completely biased by my assumptions. I used a reflective journal throughout the research to help me remain aware of my place within the research. I also kept my supervisors updated on each step of the process and any unforeseen developments. Any information related to the research

was stored on an encrypted laptop that was locked in a room when not in use and all information was uploaded to the universities cloud as soon as was possible.

There were links between participants as 'snowball sampling' relies on this, which may be viewed as a bias when evaluating ethical considerations. However, any alternative selection method would have been biased in some aspect of its makeup as no sampling avoids bias completely (Collier, 1995, Ritchie et al., 2013). Likewise, the sample size of the overall study was small. Participants were only recruited to the research if they showed an interest in becoming a part of the process. Firstly, the prosed study was reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Board after going through a process where the nature of the study was proposed and examined by scholars in the University who sit on the board. Qualified teachers who wished to participate in the research were sent the consent and information sheet, which explained the research aims and the eligibility criteria for participation. This information was shared by contacting qualified teachers who I knew, who shared the information and consent forms in the school where they worked. These teachers were asked to send me an email that shared the details of the interested parties'.

Participants within the study were then informed about the research and afterwards had to give informed consent to participate in the focus groups by signing an information and consent form approved by Maynooth University Research Ethics Board and adapted to my study. After this step, I formed the focus groups. Participants were informed that they could leave the research at any time, and if they did that, data relating to them would be destroyed after the research was complete.

Confidentiality was also a key aspect to the study, as required by the Research Ethics Committee of the University. To protect the data of participants, individual pseudonyms were assigned from the first transcription step of the focus group data. This protected the anonymity of the participants (Saunders et al., 2015).

3.7.1 Ethical challenges

Focus groups presented a number of ethical challenges, including obtaining consent, ensuring that consent is revocable, and issues of confidentiality and anonymity. In qualitative research, getting consent from participants is essential, and there are some particular challenges in getting this for focus

groups. One challenge in obtaining consent for focus groups lies in giving a clear picture of what discussion will take place in the group. It is difficult to legislate for the unpredictability of the discussion and interaction that has yet to occur (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). Consent can be seen in terms of letting the participant know what topics will be discussed and questions that can be asked, which makes it hard to achieve with others leading the discussion at times. It was important to remain sensitive and open to the possibility that participants may wish to withdraw their consent for any reason and at any time (BERA, 2018). This is less straightforward in focus groups than in one-to-one interviews (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). According to Sim (2010), consent is seen to have four essential elements:

- Disclosure – the participants were given an information sheet on my research (See Appendix 3).
- Comprehension- all participants were practising teachers, so they were in a position to know what was being asked of them.
- Competence – they were all in a position to give consent.
- Voluntariness – I provided no inducement or coercion.

While the information sheet sought to be as comprehensive as possible about the research and the possible topics for discussion, as stated, it was not possible to fully inform the participants of the content of the discussion.

Confidentiality and anonymity are potentially problematic because I, as the researcher, have limited control over what participants may communicate outside the group. Sim and Waterfield (2019) advise that if the focus group questions or discussion encourages oversharing by some participants, this issue may be even more problematic. I sought to overcome this by informing the participants that anything discussed in the group should not be repeated outside the group. The topics that came up were not sensitive in this study.

Appendix 2 provides information on the interview protocol used for the focus groups, with the structure of the focus group questions and thematic analysis steps taken cited below.

Facilitator introduction

- Thanks everyone for participating.

- Outline the time that the focus group may take (between 60 – 80 minutes)
- Agrees to ground rules in collaboration with participants
- Ensure that the limits of confidentiality are outlined
- Emphasise the importance of talking one at a time
- Respecting other's views is discussed, and I remind participants that all opinions are welcome and there may be diversity of views in the groups, and that is to be welcomed
- Share information on the role of the facilitator: for example, to elicit views, ensure the smooth running of the sessions and report back findings to inform my research

Step: In accordance with Braun and Clarke (2021b)	Process
Become familiar with the data	Immersion of data through reading and making brief notes about ideas and insights
Generate initial codes	Identify segment of interests from the data and code these at a level that may be on an implicit and implicit
Search for themes	Compile codes to generate initial themes through an active process of review
Review themes	Develop viable initial themes and revise the meaning of others which may not match the initial codes to already identified themes
Define themes	Refining and further defining of themes identified with the naming of themes and the build of an understanding of how the theme knits together an aspect here

Write-up	Weaving together of insight with data to produce a coherent story about how the dataset addresses the research questions

3.8 Quality Criteria

This section reflects the way in which I aimed to conduct the research to a high quality by focusing on reflexivity, credibility, confirmability and transferability through the research design and enactment.

3.8.1 Reflexivity

As a result of the use of critical theory as a paradigm within this qualitative study, my position as the researcher directly within the research affected the methodical framework and data collection methods. According to (Roulston and Shelton, 2015), this meant that I, as the researcher, should make my biases, interests and motivations explicit in each stage of the research. Furthermore, it requires that I on an ongoing basis, critically critiques all actions and decisions within the research so as to become more aware of how they are shaping the research process and potential findings (May and Perry, 2022, Suter, 2011). It also helps to establish good practice in the research, while enabling those assessing or reading the research to adjudicate whether it is biased or based on good practice, and by doing so ultimately aims to promote transformative life experiences (Denzin, 2017).

Two aspects of reflexivity were particularly focused on in this research. One was the personal reflexivity whereby I constantly reflected on my values, prior life experiences, perceived social placement and political allegiances. These beliefs were paramount for me to examine and to discuss with my supervisor in order to chart the correct path for each step of the research. Brookfield (2000) advises that researchers are at any time only dimly aware of these beliefs and must continually work to observe and overcome them. Within this research bringing to bear my educational past and working roles, as well as the experience of reading key literature on the research topic, played an important

role in helping to build a greater understanding of the discourses and themes that were identified in the research,' which helped me to ultimately reflect on my prior assumptions to understand the research paradigms and instruments available. This helped me understand that while some researchers espouse the need for positivist quantitative research in education (Hernández, 2015, Ryan, 2015), this research was suited to critical qualitative research using Bernstein's PD. This acted as a safety net from neglecting to see what assumptions might have coloured the research if reflexivity was not focused upon. This also led to me being more cognisant and understanding of all elements within the research, which was particularly important in being able to run the focus groups, and thereafter to critically analyse the themes within them through Bernstein's PD.

All elements of the research required self-reflection and understanding so as not to bias the next step of the research or influence the participants within the focus groups. My previous training in Guidance Counselling proved valuable here, in having some self-awareness in how not to be overbearing towards the focus groups through verbal and non-verbal communication. This was targeted through the use of the SOLER counselling approach whereby I was aware of my body language and communication throughout (Egan, 2013). Although, this was at times difficult to enact as I had some pre-established viewpoints on what the research may find in the perceptions of the teachers within it. However, I was careful to be aware of these thoughts or perceptions, especially when at times participants held countering views to my own. Having two research supervisors worked especially well in this regard, as their oversight of the research helped to check any potential reflexivity blind spots. My explicit awareness of discomfort and vulnerable feelings when this happened, engendered a feeling of responsibility that participants were heard in an equitable manner and the research was conducted with the utmost integrity, while at the same time being cognisant that these feelings were natural in the context of the role of the researcher in critical theory.

3.8.2 Positionality

The positionality of my position as the researcher is an important consideration within this research as it influences how the research is designed, enacted and concluded (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). As this research was qualitative research, its nature placed my beliefs and experiences as a key aspect that

may affect the research process (Ormston et al., 2014). However, these aspects were not necessarily a hindrance or flaw to the research but added to its complexity and richness by helping the participants and me explore the research questions to better understand our own practice and that of others. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) argue that the researcher is a research instrument during data collection and analysis within research. Therefore, my personal and professional life has affected my position in the research. My family makeup meant that I had observed how the differences in the way in which my family was taught skills within education, within voluntary schools that were examination focused, and on the other hand, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) that was focused more on practical subjects and skills. I believed that the emphasis put on certain skills, such as examination skills and communication skills, had affected the quality of their lives, both in being able to access further educational or job opportunities and also to manoeuvre and overcome everyday issues in daily life. Furthermore, I had reflected on my own educational journey which had a huge influence on my life, where I had chosen a university course that did not suit my academic skillset, mainly due to a lack of personal reflection skills, and had also not developed the skills to transition to a new environment despite achieving excellent examination results. This I felt potentially indicated how the education system was not teaching skills to students that were needed beyond the classroom.

My professional experiences also had a role in the way in which I approached and designed the research. I have worked as a teacher, Guidance Counsellor and Deputy Principal in voluntary, community and ETB settings. This meant that I positioned myself as both an insider and an outsider (Bourke, 2014). As an insider within education sharing commonalities with teachers around expectations and practices when teaching skills in SC, and as an outsider as I currently work as a Deputy Principal which is a leadership role completely different than teaching and was interacting with the participants in the role of a researcher. From my range of roles, which included experiences in different schools, I observed that there was little joined-up thought in how skills were taught in post-primary schools were I worked. As a result of this research using a critical paradigm, I was cognisant that these experiences and perceptions would in some way shape the research and this would be vital in acknowledging these assumptions and understanding from a critical viewpoint so

that the role of different interests and powers were fully explored. As described fully below I was aware that my role could potentially influence the argument and so remained reflective of this at all points of the research process through the design, implementation and analysis phases.

3.9 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research has been to the fore of my mind throughout the research process. The next number of subsections will explore how the I dealt with the various aspects of establishing trustworthiness within the study.

3.9.1 Credibility

Constant monitoring of my thought patterns or biases were observed in reflective field notes and personal journaling throughout the research. I also engaged in a substantial and repeatable type of research. This was enacted through engaging in several focus groups with primarily the same questions as the focus groups were semi-structured in their use of questions that were drawn up prior to the focus groups (Appendix 2). As a result, this method facilitated the build-up and clarification of themes, perspectives and views which added to the credibility of this research. Furthermore, this research through the methods employed, explored transcripts of the focus groups and showcased these descriptions within the analysis and finding sections which helped readers understand the research process, steps and themes within it. As well as this, having multiple focus groups with practitioners from different settings and schools added to its credibility by increasing the scale and depth of views within the research, in comparison to having only one focus group or one school of teachers engaging in a case study. I also used previous literature to help structure research steps and questions within the focus groups. I took care to incorporate instances of data variability that occurred within the discussion and findings sections. This was especially important in this research as the credibility of the findings, according to critical qualitative research, must take account of the alternative views of practitioners in the group who did not agree with the consensus of others (Watts and Jofili, 1998, Morse, 2015). This helped to add to the credibility of the research and in particular its findings, which came from the focus groups in this research. I made use of participant checks by providing

participants of the focus groups with transcribed interviews so that they could check the accuracy of the transcription and note any instances where this was not accurate.

3.9.2 Dependability

Dependability was another key aspect in the trustworthiness of this research (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Therefore, I took great care in documenting the research process in a clear and legible manner, so that each action and finding could be traced afterwards. This collection and maintenance of data was consistent over the whole of the research process so that any tracking of the procedures or processes could be easily done. This demonstrated how I explored whether the research questions were being addressed, so that findings could occur in each step of the research process. This consideration was crucial in regards to my choice of research design and data collection. It also led to an audit trail whereby the research notes and transcripts were preserved for further review in accordance to MU policy in case there is a future challenge, which also heightened the dependability of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, De Kleijn and Van Leeuwen, 2018).

3.9.3 Confirmability

Confirmability is dependent on the researcher being able to show that the findings and analysis of data and results, clearly match the data gathered in the research study (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2018). Objectivity in relation to this can never be fully confirmed in qualitative research (Kyngäs et al., 2020), and I have acknowledged this within this study. Despite this, I have demonstrated through the research findings, that they were grounded in the research conducted and data gathered, rather than being based solely influenced in personal bias. This was addressed through exploring and outlining any biases through reflexivity, and these were consistently challenged through reflective journaling and discussion with my supervisor so as not to prejudice the research. In turn, the decisions around the research structure, data and findings could be observed in a clear and logical manner that could be reviewed by outside observers to explore the confirmability of the study. Paired with ongoing critical

reflection within this research, the confirmability of this research and its findings were heightened as they could be easily re-reviewed on multiple occasions.

3.9.4 Transferability

Transferability describes how the research findings, can be used by other researchers from having a generalisable sample of participants which captures a range of experiences (O'Reilly and Parker, 2013). Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research does not structure its design to find numerical data that could be easily compared to other studies (Suter, 2011). Rather its transferability is based on establishing rich contextual findings that can be compared to other comparable research or contexts. However this is circumstantial as qualitative research does not produce the truth per se, but may provide information in the research area that may be useful to others but is not generalisable (Padgett, 2016). It also affords the reader the ability to critically examine the research through the rich data with thick descriptions of this used in the findings and discussion.

In this research, the investigation into teachers' perceptions of neoliberal influences on the teaching of skills in Ireland is based on a small study with focus groups being the method of data collection. A similar topic could be run by another researcher in a totally different way using a different paradigm, method or context for example. Thus, the thick description within this research was critical I felt, in order so that the findings from the research could be useful to others by being able to see the research participants' understanding and experiences in a clear manner. As such the sample strategy, contextual complexity, data gathering, and findings were described in detail throughout to allow future researchers or readers to gain an understanding of important factors in the design and findings of the thesis. This may also help them plan or chart future research on a comparable subject or context. Considering that I adopted a critical paradigm this was extremely important, as critical research aims to help with emancipation and improvement from conducting research (Strydom, 2011).

Limitations

The limitations of this research were:

- Non-probability convenience sampling
- Small sample size
- Lack of generalisability
- Reliance of one data collection method
- Single coder for the data collected

Limitations within research are elements of design or methodology that have impacted on the findings to the study (Murray, 2016). I, the researcher, have chosen to acknowledge and accept these elements as part of limiting the scope of the research question. By evaluating these elements, I exposed any weakness that the study may have in its design (Rossman & Rallis 2017). As with all studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. I decided to use nonprobability convenience sampling where existing participants recruited other participants that they knew, which is otherwise known as snowball or chain referral method (Parker et al., 2019). One of the weaknesses argued about this method of sampling is that it holds little value in terms of inferring formal centralised results and can't be representative of a general sample population (Heckathorn and Cameron, 2017, Erickson, 1979). As well as this, it could be argued that there was inherent bias in the selection of focus group participants. However, through my network of colleagues, who were in school management, I distributed my research information and consent sheet to schools in which I did not know any of the potential participant teachers, and which I had not worked in before. This resulted in the first four participants being recruited, which began the chain referral method of recruitment. Therefore, this lessened the potential for bias in selecting the focus group participants, especially as they were from many different areas and settings to which I had no link. Likewise, the sample size of the overall study was small in comparison to the number of educators in the country, and therefore it could be argued that this

limitation could have an impact on the findings of the research. However, this study was negated due to a limited timescale, which affected how I designed the study. Also, the research was part of a programme where the thesis length in terms of wordcount was also limited.

Most importantly, as I used a critical paradigm, this ability to infer generalisable meaning and outcomes is not a priority, as generalization ignores the power structures that other research approaches such as positivism espouse (Kincheloe, 2008a).

Another potential limitation is the use of focus groups as a data collection method. This depended on all participants being honest in their experiences and perceptions when addressing the focus group questions. This was extremely important for the quality of the findings as I aimed to facilitate exploration of experiences, perceptions and power dynamics that have helped teachers formulate and implement views and practices when teaching skills. However, from a critical lens, honesty or lack thereof is a possible opportunity to learn about participants' experiences and to help them to reflect on the notion of power around their beliefs and practice. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these focus groups were conducted online which may have led to body language cues and flow being affected. However, this wasn't observed by myself at the time they were being conducted or when the data was being reviewed or transcribed.

This research was enacted by one researcher which could be viewed as a limitation. However, there was constant monitoring of my thought patterns or biases within reflective field notes and personal journaling throughout the research, as well as checking in with my research supervisor about each step taken in the research. I individually enacted the coding. However, I tried to overcome this limitation by making use of participant checks, by providing participants of the focus groups with transcribed interviews so that they could check the accuracy of the transcription and note any instances where this was not accurate. This was important as it was crucial that the focus group transcripts reflected what the participants had meant when communicating with each other, as this would be used in the data analysis.

I also tried to lessen the chance of the Hawthorne effect or limitation, whereby teachers would identify what they felt was my purpose and thus change their views when speaking about the

questions within the focus groups (Leonard and Roberts, 2016). To offset this, I attempted to make everyone comfortable and feel respected in the focus groups and tried not to lead, particularly towards answers or conclusions as a result of leading questions or non-verbal communication.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the many methodological decisions, components and structures adopted as part of this research, to study teachers' perceptions of teaching skills in the Irish context and whether neoliberalism has affected this. In particular, the use of Bernstein's PD was discussed, especially in regards to how this can be used to explore the ordering and disordering of knowledge through pedagogic communication. The chapter has also explored the make-up of the sample of teachers involved in this research and how they were selected. Furthermore, the design of the research, the data collection methods employed, and the data analysis method used have been explored in detail. Likewise, the ethical considerations dealt with by me in the process of the research and the issues of trustworthiness have also been assessed. The limitations of the study have also been explored. The identification and justification, and crucially the potential impact of all of these components have been outlined throughout the chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data analysed through a Bernsteinian Pedagogic Device lens from post primary teachers. Through engaging with participants, the research wished to explore:

1. Are there certain "skills" valued by the participants at senior cycle?
2. What were the participant's views on the teaching of "skills" in senior cycle education?
3. Where did their views on the importance of certain skills emerge from?

Kincheloe (2008b) argues that the understanding of the environment within which the research is based has been affected by the lived experiences of those within it, who are influenced by those in power. Therefore, using Bernstein's PD lens for data analysis, I wished to engage participants in examining where their values, views and biases emerged from and how this has influenced their pedagogical practice. By doing so the research looked to explore how specialised knowledge in relation to the teaching of skills in SC was ordered and disordered through the distribution, re-contextualisation and evaluation of knowledge by agents in various fields that had their own interests and agendas. This study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to address the data from the four focus groups. From this, the findings related to addressing the research questions were organised into three themes which were further broken down into subthemes. These subthemes presented specific key aspects that were directly linked to the overall theme. As part of this quotes were used to show the experiences and perceptions of the participants in relation to these themes. Each of the themes addresses elements of the research questions, with the first theme of 'Recourse to Rationalities on the Values of Teaching Skills in SC' reflected how the participants felt the way in which certain skills were valued in SC and why these skills in particular were rationalised by students, parents and teachers as more valuable than others for students in SC. In this context, "values" describes how participants demonstrate their principles and beliefs through their behaviour and

decision-making (Crossan et al, 2013). These values also influence the value or worth that they put on skills due to their ability, usefulness or importance on some aspect of life (McClelland, 1985). The second theme of 'Qualification Framing Skill Development in SC' explored how assessments and qualifications within the SC were affecting the teaching of skills in SC. Meanwhile, the third theme of 'Marketisation and Intense Privatisation Driving Skill Development' showed how participants felt that views of students, teachers and parents on the importance of certain skills were emerging from the importance being placed on developing skills for third-level entry, the labour market and for future career progression. Each of the themes illustrated how neoliberal interests had influenced the values and practices that the participants had enacted or observed in their schools.

A Shift from Recourse to Rationalities on the Values of Teaching Skills in Senior Cycle

This theme will explore how teachers' teaching skills in SC have had their values and practice affected to emphasise thinking logically over engaging holistically with their students, to emphasise rationality over recourse. This means that there is a priority given to logical, individualistic and business-focused skills, rather than valuing skills that students need for their holistic development. Schwartz (1992) argues values are standards and beliefs that transcend specific actions and situations and are crucially ordered by priorities and importance. There was a variance in why teachers felt responsibility to teach skills in the classroom, what skills they valued to teach and what way they were teaching these skills in the class. As a result of this, participants' experiences and beliefs were shown to be crucial in ascertaining what skills they wished to teach and develop with their students and how they perceived this was enacted. From a Bernsteinian PD viewpoint, exploring how influences have constructed these values and views was a crucial part of this theme, as these often have their own agenda. As a result, in the themes below I analysed the perspectives of participants through a Bernsteinian PD lens to explore if neoliberal powers have had an impact on the construction of participant's perspectives, and how these influenced their views on their role in the teaching of skills in SC.

4.1.1 Are Teachers' Values Based on Performativity?

Bernstein (1975) argued that the framing of knowledge is the degree to which the teacher and pupil possess control over the selection, sequencing and evaluation of the knowledge that is being transmitted by the pedagogical relationship. Participants' framing of knowledge and skills in the SC was shown to be mainly based on practitioners' ability to assist student exam performance in comparison to other students, as participant 4 voiced, '*like the bell curve makes people be competitive because even if you're deserving of a certain result only a certain amount of people can get it'*. This was evident in this study with most participants valuing practice based on student exam performance rather than skill development. Participant 14 highlighted this when they put forward that '*the balance to teach skills can't particularly happen because it's assessment focused'.* This point was echoed by participant 15 *'you are geared towards your points and it's all points based… It's not not geared toward real life experience or anything like that, so in my opinion, anyway, the balance isn't really there to introduce these keys skills'.* Ball (2003) outlined this performativity as a neoliberal asset, that underlines performance in exams as a source of value in society, through introducing a culture of regulation, judgement and competition.

Participant 11 also captured the values that were framed by performativity, especially in relation to exam preparation through the way they put this preparation as the number one priority during SC, '*you probably are teaching the syllabus, you're teaching the content first, and you're making sure that they're prepared for their exam first and foremost'*. This performativity focus was also highlighted by the pressure participants felt to get results even in comparison to teachers in their own school, which participant 2 espoused when they said:

> '*but there is pressure, and like the pressure is not just for the students but there's pressure, because of them league tables, because you know we have department meetings at the end of every year. Like right, why did you only get this many A's this year?'*

These comments showcased the pressure participants felt in terms of performativity in all aspects of the SC. Analysing this through Bernstein's PD it was clear that there had been an accepted pressure on teachers in the form of surveillance of practice and results, and the associated mechanisms that were formed through evaluative rules, which set out instructional principles around the criteria of

suitable knowledge. However, in the discourse maintained by the official recontextualising field on the importance of the exam structure when teaching the SC, and the performativity expectations around this. In addition, the stress of respondents to cover the curricular content also shows a lack of trust in the makeup of the SC system, which may show a potential or desire for resistance to the systematic discourse established by distributive and recontextualising rules and associated agents. As can be seen in participant 2's viewpoint above, we observe that the educational experience that they deem important is not of value compared to the preparation for the summative externally assessed examinations. The evaluation of success was striking, as it showed that participants said they felt in control of what was being taught in their classroom. The presence of surveillance within the school based on exam results for most participants framed legitimate practice or success, which shows that even though they felt in control, evaluative rules are sometimes hidden yet highly influential.

The reason that many of the participants felt their priorities within the classroom were based on student performance in exams over the teaching of skills was because they were focused mostly on the value for students that could be gained through being accepted into third-level education as a result of the exams. Participant 9 showcased this when ethey put forward '*it's a mechanism…it's a mechanism to get into college to study the career they want to go'*, while participant 16 argued that this value on performativity was rational as '*and I think most of us would say that a good leaving cert, a start to get into college is probably the best route of, you know, getting an opportunity to have a good life*'. These examples show evidence of the construction of particular subjectivities, in terms of an acceptance of middle-class privilege and narrow performative childhoods, adolescence and adulthood pathways to perceived success. Performativity was linked to this, as the value of the teacher was predicated on being the person who interacts with the syllabus in the most effective manner and helps the students gain the best results. This aspect explored through a Bernsteinian lens could point to distributive knowledge and rules classifying students as consumers whose needs are paramount for successful results, which is then recontextualised through regulative and instructional discourse to shape rules for teachers' pedagogical practice, which leads to the development of trained capacities and lifestyles. Interestingly, many participants felt that the value of skills wasn't measured in exams,

which meant that skills were less important than overall results and the knowledge needed to achieve these. Thus, teachers' values and practice were examination-orientated with content retrieval and repetition focused upon by most participants. Participant 12 underlined this when they put forward the viewpoint that this period of teaching was '*heavily weighted towards, you know, rote learning and regurgitating for a written exam …* [skills] *are not really being tested or anything else like'*. This focus, many participants argued, resulted in the instrumentalisation of the role of the teacher as a worker who followed a tick-the-box recipe for success that was set out in the syllabus by the DE and NCCA. This lessened the value of teacher's professional judgement. Participant 4 voiced this when they said:

> '*so if you look at your syllabus, you've got literally tick box of this is what we have to cover. So then it takes away that chance to be able to develop the skills because you're under, you know the pressure to get the course covered, that doesn't really deal with the same life skills they could see now coming in at Junior Cycle'*

This was also argued by participant 1 who echoed this when they described the instrumentalisation of practice as, '*just learn it, learn it and there's the exam question. Learn it again, and you do know the definition?'.* Here, we see evidence of how the curriculum and assessment process is de-professionalising the teacher and reducing them to delivering a curriculum much the same as one would deliver milk (Priestley et al., 2015). Viewed through the lens of Bernstein's PD it also shows realisation rules in action in SC which normalise the instrumentalisation of the role of the teacher through the accepted norms and discourses around curriculum delivery.

This has added to the feeling of performative accountability for many participants where teachers are accountable to stakeholders such as parents for the value placed on schooling in society, which participants felt affected their values as a teacher. This may explain why, in most instances, participants saw the value of SC education as based on exam results. This then leads them to teach to the test. Participant 9 voiced this when they suggested that some parents seek entry to schools based on the school's prior exam performances. This is an example of how they attribute value to a school:

> *'see the leaving cert in its present form is completely results focused and parents, when they're choosing their school at the minute whether you like it or not? To a large extent look at the results of that school and they vote with their feet. And they send their kids to the school that are gaining higher leaving certs. Because it's that, it's that points focused'.*

Many of the participants agreeing parents' expectations affect the practice and values of schools, especially as the quote above exemplified, where there is competition to get students to enrol. This could be argued to be a neoliberal trope in order to get schools to improve perceived practice based on results in SC, which using Bernstein's PD uses locational evaluative principles to put pressure on schools to conform to performativity principles or be overtaken by other schools who uphold performativity within the same geographical location.

Participants felt that some teachers' practice has come to value quantitatively measurable outcomes over skill development, which was evident in the focus on gaining schools adequate placings in league tables that are based on terminal assessment results. This showed how the focus on measurable achievements in a standardised exam has become vitally important to some schools' and teachers' values in this cycle of education, which Biesta (2014) similarly argued. Participant 4 represented this viewpoint when they said:

> *'at the moment because it's based purely on points like a quantitative stuff. That's why you're valuing it where you can't measure you know the experience or the different key skills. And look, the league tables are all the exact same that they're all going, well what can we measure and what can we put into you know, a table that looks fancy, that we can report on it'.*

The value put on quantitative measurement was also evident in the way in which some participants spoke about how some subjects such as maths were elevated in status as a result of having bonus point awarded at higher level in the LCX[8], which participant 10 argued when they said '*you know, and it puts, the kind of a, you know superiority on maths, you know, because of the bonus points it gives* [maths teachers] *status. So like that's coming from external forces and outside forces*'. Using

[8] This was released Circular Number 0058/2011 by the Department of Education which stated that an additional 25 bonus CAO points will be available to candidates who scored 40% or higher in Higher Level Mathematics in the Leaving Certificate examination.

Bernstein's PD lens this additional value has been established through distributive rules and dialogue from universities through admission requirements and through government edicts on the importance of maths for the labour market, which could point to neoliberal dialogue being reproduced within official recontextualising field by the recontextualising of maths as a superior discipline to others (Lynch and McGarr 2016). Interestingly many participants rejected the quantitative value assigned to some subjects over others in SC, with the cost to students and teachers being underlined by the neglect of skill development at SC, as participant 3 explained:

> *'you know these kids, they want to do the higher-level maths, because they're getting the extra points. And a lot of times the teacher, the maths teachers are dragging them along… they're missing out on other things. Where the pressure might be off if they decided to do ordinary level maths and they could spend more time maybe and enjoy other subjects, but they're so intent on doing higher level maths at any cost. And it is at a cost. A lot of these kids will take it and they will pay the price and the teachers' pay the price for it as well. So yeah, I would just, particularly in relation to what you're talking about there, key skills. I just wonder what keys skills are being you know, learned in the higher-level maths class in particular'.*

However, this comment is a good example of the paradox within my participant's rejection of the evaluative rules within the SC that focuses on performativity, in terms of teachers' ability to assist students gain points in the SC LCE. As can be clearly seen, participant 3 views the SC landscape as a marketised flow with 'costs', suggesting that teachers' could invest their time in other areas. Other participants viewed the performativity associated with the SC as a mechanised rat race with a time limit which meant that skills were not valued in comparison with the CAO system. Participant 10 argued these values were being affected by the CAO systems, whose purpose was to sort people into college course based on their LCE exam results at the end of the cycle, *'the whole system, the whole points race. That whole rat race. That's dictated, kinda starts with the CAO and college places and trickles its way down'*. This exemplifies how a policy decision which sets distributive rules and dialogue can have a significant impact on the educational experiences and values of both students and teachers at senior cycle. This focus on Central Applications Office points by actors involved in education is impacting on what teacher's value about this educational experience.

4.1.2 Are Participants Values Based Around Labour Market Needs?

Participants in this study showed that their values for teaching in this cycle of education were based upon helping students gain access to third-level education and by extension, entry to the labour force. Much of the participants emphasis on entry to the labour force was affected by forces at a national level (e.g. NCCA), acting as an ORF, and at a local level (e.g. subject teacher associations) acting as a PRF. These create pedagogic discourse and educational structures, which emphasised success as being linked to student labour market entry via third-level education. This was apparent where many of the participants pointed out that third-level entry for many teachers, students and parents was the main criteria of SC success, with alternate routes such as apprenticeship not being viewed as worthwhile. Participant 1 argued this when they said, *'there is a culture that if you don't go to university or apply for CAO, then you haven't reached your potential, you haven't achieved'.* Although a small number of participants felt that this perception was changing, but paradoxically only because labour market values were influencing the values of some teachers, students and parents. Participant 4 expressed this when they said:

> *'so like there's an apprenticeship pack coming on the CAO this year. To counteract that, so I think hopefully, slowly but surely that kind of culture would change because of the effect of you know so many years of that not being valued, and then there being a shortage* [skilled tradespeople] *that now value, we value it because we need it'.*

This shows how these labour market values transcend the education system on a national level. Through a Bernsteinian lens, the recontextualisation of knowledge and practice to suit the distributive rules of the labour market are shown by the link with specific labour market needs that are justified by educational bodies or agents such as the DE and Irish third-level institutes. These values have a noteworthy sway on how teachers recontextualise the knowledge they teach and the skills they teach within their classes by setting distributive rules that underline the importance of the labour market This link to the labour market was similarly perceived by many participants to be driven by being able to sit the LCE above all other SC programmes. The link was exemplified by participant 14 when they spoke about the anxiety teachers had around the LCX being potentially cancelled during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it was felt that this would affect readiness for the labour market, which underlined the

values of teachers in regard to assisting students access third-level in order to meet labour market needs:

> *'it becomes all about the exams or cancel the exams or anything. Teachers think of student's stress or whatever it's like "Oh well, if they don't sit an exam, they won't be able for the tech industry", or "if they don't make them sit their leaving cert, then how will we know they're able for third-level". It's never, it's outside influences rather than these kids can't do an exam this year like they missed loads'.*

Participant 9 and others also argued that companies affect the values of those within education by articulating the profile of worker they wish to employ after SC and third-level education, *'well the multinationals all the CEOs of companies are telling us what type of what type of person they want coming out'*. Although interestingly many of the teachers in the study didn't always agree with this, there were still many of the participants who conformed to the idea that '*saying when society itches schools must scratch. And that's the culture*', which participant 1 exemplified within the previous quotation. This shows how many of the participants accepted the power of powerful agents such as multinationals to set distributive rules around the orientations and identity of SC education based on labour market needs. Bernstein (2001) described this as the process of acquiring information, which is valuable for capital accumulation through pedagogic teaching and social norms. This is particularly evident in the messaging systems outlined above.

Linking to this, participants felt that school visits and partnerships had an influence not just on students and parents but on teachers' values and perspectives which many said translated in the way they spoke to students around careers and recontextualised their process of teaching subject matter and skills in SC. This was illustrated by participant 14 who spoke about giving advice to students about careers and companies which they highly regarded, even though they admitted to knowing little about the company or career, '*I do often say like, when the traditional lads are saying ah trade. But like might break me back working as a labourer. I'm like, well, what about Google? But sure, like I've never been employed by Google, I don't know it's good. I don't know it's better than being on a site, but I have been influenced like. There will often be discussions like these'*. This highlights how partnerships and promotion by companies has an effect on the evaluative rules and dialogue within the classroom on career opportunities through the pervasion of these marketised logics manifesting in

teacher discourse and in the field of the classroom. Likewise, participant 16 felt that partnerships with schools by organisations and companies through school visits and sponsorship multiplied this effect on teachers' values and in the classroom:

> *'just on a very basic level where it does affect your classroom that you know you got a certain type of book or we had a great talk from Google or AIG or you got a free tour in a college. The colleges are big, we would have a lot of links with [University] there because again, more so because they're our next-door neighbours in the area we live. So I suppose, yeah, they do have an effect on ya in that sense. They are having effect on your classroom because they're inviting for zooms or inviting me for coffee mornings or whatever it is obviously to have their own private interests which does have an effect on the way you teach or the way you chose the material used for students'.*

Similarly, participant 2 argued that governments were being affected by labour market needs which affected the makeup of education through the spreading of distributive rules which showed worthwhile knowledge and practices in terms of skills for the labour market:

> *'These people [multinational businesses] are, you know, pressurising TDs and government. And then the government wants to add a new subject to the curriculum or incorporate new hours for subjects or you know, whatever it is, so I think it's very much kind of from the top, the government, really. You know with them focusing on the curriculum there'.*

These quotes raise how participants felt that increased proximity and interaction with stakeholders such as third-level institutions and businesses effects teachers' perceptions and values at a local and national level which also influences the views they have within the classroom. Looking at this through Bernstein's PD, this official recontextualising field could also have added to why many of the participants seemed to view the SC as a performative model of education, whereby strong classification of subject matter through strong boundaries and framing led to a fear of what Bernstein (2000) calls a performance deficit model that arranges educational outcomes around measurable performance.

4.1.3 Individualistic Values

The majority of participants in the focus groups felt that individualistic values, and by extension skills linked to this, were rationalised for teachers in the SC, not just for educational progress but for life and work too. Bernstein (2003, 1957) argued that invisible pedagogies such as skills or values are taught that are not part of the evaluative text, but instead is tacit knowledge, put forward to the student

through weak classification and framing of knowledge. Within the SC the forwarding of individualism and the skills associated with this, was a theme identified in this research. Individualism according to Adams et al. (2019) centres on reducing collective phenomena to the aggregate of individual experience and wishes, even when this goes against the collective good of society. Participant 5 expressed the value placed on individualistic skills such as personal goal setting and the need to focus on education in an individualistic way in order to reach targets, when they questioned a student's decision making, as they hadn't given up their hobbies when they were aiming for a high points course:

> *'he's hopefully hoping to get 500 plus points to get physiotherapy a lot plus, a lot plus onto the 500. But he's playing football, Gaelic football, rugby, all of the games are ruining some of the students. You know, this chap is training, has to train because he's played at a high enough level. He has to train three nights a week and play a game every Saturday or Sunday I think, so it's impossible, decision making. They need to be able to do make decision making at all the different stages and about different things as well. And it's hard, I suppose that can be taught to a certain extent, but it's a big skill and it's a skill they need'.*

The discourse here of the games 'ruining' the student's chances shows the impact of the LCX on what is valued in education. This captured how for many participants, individualistic educational goals took precedence over other areas such as hobbies or areas where social development would likely form and that teenagers should be able to accept this as a sacrifice when preparing for the LCX, which echoes Todd's (2022) argument that education in many western countries is strongly instrumentalist through the mechanistic orientation of their systems and procedures. This individualism was also underlined as important factor in how participants viewed the SC and LCE as an individualistic period of education, which was influenced by the SC and LCE makeup in the way subjects and exams needed to be studied individually. Participant 2 put forward this when they said the '*Leaving Cert is a sort of very individual thing. Like there's no project work, there's no group, there is probably project-work but it is all individual based … I have to get my points and I have just look after myself*', which may have been why teachers valued this in their practice within their classroom, while others spoke about why they valued self-management skills and individualism so that deadlines could be met in education and future employment. For example, being on time wasn't viewed as being useful for life, but rather useful for not getting docked pay at work. Participant 6 illustrated this when they said, '*it's*

nothing to do with, you know, coming late to my class, it's training for you know the working world'. Participant 9 also argued this when they said, '*this is training for work at the end of the day, if we're not teaching them for that then what are we at?*'. The discourse of training rather than education indicates a strong neoliberal influence on participants views of the purpose of education at SC. Many of the participants felt that skills were not part of the specified structure of the SC and they were only part of the JC curriculum. For some participants the sense of responsibility to teach skills was linked to their individual values on preparing students' skillsets for the work force, which by extension also showcased a neoliberal understanding of skills by participants linking them to being on time, having materials and so on, which participant 5 put forward:

> *'Trying to model what you would expect. A lot of my experiences are with students who maybe don't have that much at all so… so I will always add on. Like you know that wouldn't be accepted if I was in the workforce or, you know, make a bit of a joke like, oh I could be sacked now for behaving like or forgetting this or. Trying to link it to why it's important or like explicitly saying you can't do that because this is the effect it would have on employment'.*

This quote highlights that some participant teachers had developed a neoliberal subjectivity on skills which in turn manifested in their valuing of certain 'workplace' skills as important for their students. This raises the complicity of teachers in the larger system of modern education, perpetuating neoliberal individualistic values and beliefs in their practices and for their students. Viewed through Bernstein's PD, this also illustrates how the evaluative rules and discourse by many of the participants regarding individualism have been adopted in the classroom are symptomatic of their embrace of neoliberal values and beliefs.

Developing individual accountability in students was also felt by participants to be of value for assisting students to accept failure, with many of the participants raising that this is being stifled by the focus on exam results over skills such as resilience which could help students in later life. Many of the teachers were afraid to further skills such as resilience through constructive criticism for fear of reprisal. This is interesting as much neoliberal theory positions the student as a consumer within education as someone who should be treated with great care in interactions (Saunders, 2010), with this element present according to some participants. Participant 9 typified this viewpoint when stating:

> *'kids they're nearly being mollycoddled too much now and it has the opposite effect. And you can't nearly say to someone you failed, or that's not good. Because you might hurt them as*

> *such, hurt her feelings… there's this sort of wrapping up, in cotton wool. That we're nearly afraid to criticise. Well not criticise, would be constructively critical'.*

Participant 16 also echoed this when they said, *'it's up to us as teachers' to get them through with exams and skills they need for the senior cycle, we're the culpable ones if they don't for every single student, even if they don't learn some of the skills they might need later'*. Evaluating these views through a Bernsteinian PD? lens, it could point to participants viewing their role as agents of the pedagogical device at a micro level being a tenuous position, due to the societal expectations of educating children who don't fail but always succeed. Participant 9 also echoed the need for assisting students to develop individual accountability when they talked about helping students' to become adaptable to live in the real world:

> *'surviving in the tough world outside of school where you have to get on and be independent, but also have the social skills to be able to interact with other people and be although you're independent, you still have good social skills, good life skills in terms of managing yourself, being organised. You know, doing what you have to do with in whatever area you're working into to be competent. And to be proficient and to be the best you can be. So, you know, as a teacher, you're looking to give them the skills to equip themselves to be the best they can be when they leave school and to be independent and survive in in the big bad world'.*

Interestingly this and many of the comments around the teaching of skills at SC focused on teaching individual accountability for the 'real world' which it was felt education and in particular the SC had little link to. This could signify that the discourse and policies distributed and recontextualised by stakeholders such as the NCCA, DE and third-level institutions have little bearing on the teaching of skills in the classroom as they are not valued as important by many teachers.

The value teachers put on decision-making skills for everyday life situations was also linked to many of the participant's viewpoints. Many believed that due to the changes in family dynamics in recent years, there had been a lack of emphasis on individual development of transferable relational skills. This was linked with a lack self-awareness individually, in having these skills to interact with others. For example, participant 10 argued that these skills were underdeveloped because there was little emphasis on relational skills in normal life, where everything was systemised, such as play dates:

> *'family life has changed so much from the time I started teaching to now. Certain things that you'd expect students to be able to do or to have had experience, doesn't happen. Like little things, especially say for kids coming in at the first year. To run into the shop and buy something. So all the skills you're using there, like do we have enough money leftover? You*

> *know to get this or speaking to somebody they don't, haven't had the opportunity to do those little things because society has changed. You don't go outside and play on your street anymore. You know you have organised play dates… And then you know most families now, their parents are both working so they don't have the evening time to maybe make space for those skills that would have happened years ago. And so, I suppose like for a lot of kids school is the only place they'll get a chance to learn a lot of these key skills and to be able to transfer them from one context to another'.*

Participant 12 also felt that adaptivity skills were not being developed outside of school as parents were often working and had little time to focus upon this, but crucially teachers '*may have to re-evaluate skills teaching*' as a result. This was a key thread throughout the data where participants felt that societal changes, such as increased individualism, hadn't been acknowledged by stakeholders linked to the SC and LCE. These quotes show how participants may potentially have extended the viewpoint of individuality to the family unit which means that some skills are not developed outside the school environment as they might have been previously and that this is an accepted facet of everyday life. This quote is indicative of the way in which participants felt that skills traditionally instilled within family life in the past, have been outsourced to educators to develop in students, which Harvey (2005) also raises This also showed a perceived absence of boundaries for the education system to resist societal changes that affect classroom practice and teacher agency. It also raises how neoliberal norms such as outsourcing can be extremely strong and influential, even when enacted in a tacit manner. Through Bernstein's PD, it also shows how social changes, accepted through distributive rules and discourses can be recontextualised by teachers, and as a result distinctly affect the practice of teaching skills.

4.2 Qualifications Framing Skill Development in SC

This section will explore the participating teachers' views on the teaching of skills during the SC and the influence that the LCE qualifications have over their perceptions and practices. Within the SC, a lack of a conceptual understanding of what was meant by the term skill and how skills can be developed was evident among the majority of participants. Along with this, other programmes such as the Junior Cert, Transition Year and Leaving Cert Applied were viewed as different by participants due to the qualifications awarded as a result of their assessments, which are at a lesser level on the National Framework of Qualification than the LCE. According to these participants, teachers were

influenced by the exams and by extension qualifications[9] that are part of this educational period rather than skill development. Bernstein (1975a) argued that many educational environments that have strong framing and classification of knowledge through subject matter and examinations adopt external standards as their priority. This theme will analyse how this focus on qualifications impacts on the way in which teachers teach skills in their classroom and the manner in which these qualifications impact on exam preparation and attainment. This theme will be explored using Bernstein's PD lens with reference being made to how neoliberal elements may have been outlined through the focus group discussions.

4.2.1 Assessment for Qualification

Participants felt that the focus on assessment for qualification[10] in the SC, had a bearing on how skills were perceived, framed and taught in the classroom[11]. According to participants, the emphasis on these assessments for qualifications over skills was influenced by multiple factors. One of the main reasons participants felt that there was more of a focus on assessments in SC, was that certification was viewed as the main criteria of success by most stakeholders such as school management, students and parents. Looking at the data through Bernstein's PD it was clear that participants perceived strong classification and boundaries between subjects which led to a strong divide between subjects, and by default meant that the teaching of skills were marginalised due to the emphasis on learning explicit subject matter. Participant 4 conveyed this by stating there is *'such an emphasis solely on the results at the end, which actually isn't to do with any key skills it's about subjects'*. This was echoed by many participants, including participant 10 who posited 'I think we forget about skills, sure it's all about subjects, qualifications and results'. Viewed through a neoliberal lens, this may be down to education being perceived as an outcome driven technical rationality, that assesses whether students achieve,

[9] Qualifications are defined as grades received at the end of the SC through the LCX. These can constitute grades and the points that the CAO system equates to this O'DONOGHUE, T., GLEESON, J. & MCCORMACK, O. 2017. National newspaper-reporting on state examinations: An historical exposition of the exceptional case of the Irish Leaving Certificate. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education*, 134-149.

[10] Qualification in this research refers to the level 5 course completion upon gaining a pass grade in at least 6 subjects in the LCX and the CAO points that go with this.

[11] Assessment in this research refers to the final exit award/ qualification of the SC which the LC exams examine. Rather than everyday summative and formative assessment.

based on the outcome of assessments on domain specific subject matter taught in SC. From a neoliberal viewpoint the promotion of educational success based on high stakes testing is an ideal which affects how teachers teach skills and what skills they focus on to suit neoliberal interests, with participant 2 noting this, *'I suppose neoliberalism it kind of promotes that high stakes you know teaching and exams and it kind of promotes, you know, just measures performance and one exam. Rather than as we're saying they're promoting the skills. Rather it's promoting the performance rather than the skills'*. This in turn from a neoliberal perspective could constrain teachers' critical decision making in the classroom through the focus on testing and measurement, as well as highlighting qualification as the main value within education (Giroux 2019; Grady, Marquez, and McLaren 2012; Lipman 2009). As a result, this heightens the pressure on teachers to help students achieve these results, while as the participants above outlined, taking away emphasis on skill development.

Participants also felt that skills were not viewed as an important facet of the SC in comparison to the exit qualification to third level in SC in Ireland. The LCX is a high stakes examination that determines entry into third-level education through a points system and is considered high stakes by all stakeholders in education which include students, teachers, parents, third-level institutions, business organisations and the general public (Smyth & Banks, 2012). Participants referred to this qualification role of the final two years of education throughout their focus groups, with many feeling that this focus on qualification through acquisition of points to transition into third level mitigated against skill development which put the focus on rote learning of subject content. Participant 10 stated, *'the exam is purely content driven and so much of it is down to rote learning... and that's reflected in the classroom just because they're not being assessed on skills'*. This focus on rote learning in the curriculum is reflected in how participants perceived aspects that may easily target the teaching of skills, such as project work, as being a minor part of the LCE and therefore unimportant. Participant 12 argued:

> *'the exam is purely content driven and so much of it is down to rote learning. It's still heavily weighted towards, you know, rote learning and regurgitating for a written exam. There's a*

> *wee bit with the history, the project 20%. There's a bit of an element there where it encourages obviously independent research, creative writing and stuff like that, and I suppose creative writing comes into the assessment too. But other than that like, it's the same with geography like they're learning content. Even the field trip like, they go off into a field trip and they work in groups together for half a day. But to come back and write all about it what they did but. They're not really being tested or anything else like'.*

We see here how participant 12 alluded to the impact of the exam on all aspects of the SC, even the coursework that is part of the curriculum, which strives to develop other skills that may not be as prevalent in the LCE. This point was echoed by participant 15 *'you are geared towards your points and it's all points based'.*

The way in which participants felt they should focus on examination results and qualifications shows from a Bernsteinian PD lens, that the evaluative rules that structures what Bernstein (1990) describes as teachers' viewpoints on valid acquisition, have been adapted to affect the way in which they view and teach skills as a bit part of the SC. Biesta (2015a, 2012) argues this emphasis has led to the 'learnification' of the discourse within education whereby learning fails to value the human element of the teacher, through the establishment of an empty discourse of learning and narrow pedagogy reliant on behavioural science, while dismissing the teacher's professionalism to engage with content to be taught but rather are viewed as facilitators. This from a neoliberal perspective could point to the acceptance of rote learning in order to gain qualifications as neoliberal means of pedagogical socialisation, which Giroux (2003) argues spreads commercialisation and increases isolationism in society.

With SC qualification being the main mode of measuring success, participants put forward that this fostered short-term thinking on teaching based solely on meeting these criteria, was justified to meet expectations on getting qualifications. Participant 10 posited *'it is hell for leather and it's, you know, repeat, redo, reemphasise, there's very little room in key skills …Because at the end of the day, this is what they need now. Is to get through that exam so that they can take the next step'*. Participant 7 went further and contended that this focus on points mitigates against more important purposes of education:

> *'I think schools are trying to prepare students for life and that gets lost sometimes in points and grades and I need this for the exam and I need this for the coursework and college. So I do think that gets lost a bit'.*

This short-term focus on educational attainment over skill development is a direct consequence of the commodification of knowledge that is reflected in the Irish education system through increased standardisation and a technicist approach to teaching and learning (Hyland, 2011; Lynch, 2006). It could be argued that these are key neoliberal elements affecting teaching in SC, as 'assessment for qualification' is a neoliberal trope. With qualification being the measurement of success at SC, participants felt that they taught based on attaining qualifications rather than teaching skills. Parental pressure on attaining exam results in particular was mentioned by many participants as one of the reasons that qualification as a measurement of educational success was justified as more of a focus than skill development. Participant 1 put forward, *'I suppose we are so stuck in our ways and the pressure, parents and points and all of that',* while participant 11 felt, '*you're teaching the content, you know you're teaching them to get results. And that's again, nail on the head. That's what parents look at. It's the results that schools are getting in the LCX. So I think the whole, the whole system needs to be changed like there's none of the keys skill*'. Participant 5 also voiced that, '*I've seen it for years, is it because I'm dealing with these highly motivated parents… Parents somehow stopped thinking about their broader issues, the ones that you're talking about, the life skills*'. Interestingly, in terms of parental pressure, Simola et. al. (2013, p.615) contend that this focus on the market turns parents into purchasers of education for their children. From a neoliberal viewpoint this may have an impact on the perspectives and values of stakeholders such as teachers within education, which by extension could also influence the teaching of skills at SC. Crucially, when analysing the participant's viewpoints through Bernstein's PD, in the majority of instances, when parental pressure to gain attainments in the LCX was mentioned, the participants argued that they felt 'stuck' and unable to change. This may point to an acceptance of the official recontextualising field of what their practice should look like in the classroom in order to meet student and parent expectations. It also points to the way in which discourses of work and qualification are tacitly accepted by parents rather than the other purposes of education such as socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2015).

The importance of the SC and the emphasis of the high stakes LCX to gain entry to routes to courses for professional qualification, participants also felt was manifested in the perception of how society placed value on the league tables which are published by the Irish Times newspaper [12]. These league tables report on the percentage of students from each school progressing to third level, while at the same time comparing them to other schools at a national level. Participant 4 felt that this placed emphasis on these examinations as a race for examination results and not the teaching of skills:

> *'I suppose just being focused on the academic and then you've got all the league tables that was such an emphasis solely on the results at the end. Which actually isn't to do with any key skills. It's to do with being able to remember the knowledge. I think the system doesn't allow you to have that same flexibility to put the emphasis on key skills that you would want to'.*

Participant 2 felt that the importance of student performance for league-table rankings and transition purposes highlighted why skills were disregarded by many teachers as a second-level consideration in their teaching within the SC:

> *'so that's how you assess the results. But there's no way of actually assessing, well, you know, how did your kids actually do after school? Like you know there's none. You could you know, tie in with how they're doing not just academically. But how they are doing as a person after leaving school. It's all results and league tables. And where do they go to college'.*

Grummell & Lynch (2016) argue that these league tables have placed pressure on students and teachers while also promoting individualistic education. From a Bernsteinian PD viewpoint, this shows how different sources of influence, in this case outside media and third-level institutes who compile the information, have an influence on educational perspectives and actions through the establishment of distributive rules and discourse. This, from a neoliberal viewpoint is useful in furthering educational goals that are driven by outcome regulation that suit employers and industrial interests. Participants also felt other in-school pressures emphasised examination attainment and qualification priorities that enabled a focus on this aspect for transition purposes to further education over skill development. Participant 2 posited, that school management also fed into this focus within schools*, 'the management looks at the grades that the previous students have gotten, you know, and*

[12] These league tables track the proportion of students in each Irish second-level school who progress to third-level colleges after completing the Leaving Certificate examinations

there's a league table the whole lot, so you know we still are very focused on that rather than the importance of things that get us through the day'. This was something participant 7 also referenced when they explained *'our school management talk about league tables, progression stats to third-level and benchmarking subject department results against national averages at staff meetings'*. Whilst these meetings are done on an individual school level, schools are mandated by the DE to compile progression to third level statistics and subject department benchmarking records and to have these meetings by the DE. This demonstrates soft managerialism, whereby influence is enacted in a structured manner without the DE being involved in the process itself, but are engaged in setting the standards and implementation of practice in schools. Participants in the main disagreed with this focus on qualifications, as they felt that teachers were pressured to focus on examinations over skills which were not measured by results and league tables. For example, participant 1 spoke of how students who flourished in the SC and went on to do an apprenticeship were not accounted for:

> *'like we find that apprenticeships are frowned on. You know even from the practical subjects, everyone talking about the CAO and the points from the league tables and who's measuring who in these brilliant electricians and carpenters? And what is our code? There is a culture that if you don't go to university or apply for CAO, then you haven't reached your potential, you haven't achieved'*.

Participant 11 spoke about the pressure of examination attainment and qualification in his previous school, where the principal tried to dissuade students from gaining skills elsewhere in education, through alternative settings such as apprenticeships because it would impact on the dropout rates and examination results of the school:

> *'Like the last school I was in in Dublin, there was a man who offered to come in and give a talk about apprenticeships. But the principal said no straight away because he didn't want anybody leaving to do an apprenticeship, because then, statistically that doesn't look good on the school in an area where there's three or four competitive schools competing for the same kids from two or three primary schools. So, like it's the whole system sort of. It's in need of a big overhaul in my opinion'*.

These examples speak to the explicit devaluing of non-university qualifications and education in the neoliberal milieu with its 'knowledge economy' by many stakeholders such a school management. This element seemed to have transcended through to the experiences of many of the participants,

where this viewpoint has become accepted knowledge through distributive discourse when viewed through the lens of Bernstein's PD.

Participants perceived an inequality of educational experiences in terms of accessing additional tuition or attending private schools which are advantageous to performance in gaining qualifications (Prendergast et al., 2022). In particular "grind schools", which are private for profit second-level schools that focus solely on exam preparation (Lynch et al., 2012), and the perceived additional access to capital through fee payments in a system where all students sit the same tests, exacerbated a feeling of having to focus purely on academic orientation within the cycle to help students achieve their examination and transitional capabilities, which participant 5 conveyed:

> *'Well, senior cycle is totally, handicapped by the points system. It's shocking what's happened as you all know, it's outrageous what happened in the last few years. That, that you need 600 points sort of to get into anything. And it's shocking, the grind schools are steaming ahead. Private grinds, incredible numbers of people who go into grinds getting grinds and paying for grinds for points'.*

Participant 6 felt that this led directly to skills not being developed, '*perhaps that's why the likes of those grind schools thrive is because there's probably very little emphasis on those key skills being built. It's really get the points, like you know*'. Furthermore, private grinds for students were also an extra pressure source according to participant 5*, 'I talked to a mother from [county] yesterday. She's paid €3000 this week to the [named grinds school] for her daughter to get grinds from now until the leaving cert*'. From a neoliberal viewpoint these services are paid for privately and underline how valued examinations and qualifications such as SC points are. According to Bray and Kwok (2003) they are a major factor in exacerbating social inequality which will set the course of students' lives.

Interestingly, participant 12 also voiced that examinations have become more difficult and this added to a move to focus on curriculum exploration for assessment and qualification, *'the assessments have got tougher in my mind compared to whenever I did the LCE which is near 20 years ago. But, I think the LCX is probably tougher in terms of how they're testing students, but it still is going back to your, they're being tested on knowledge'*. Some participants added in relation to this that they hoped that the ongoing SC reform (NCCA 2019) would help to balance assessment and curricular needs with skill development, although there was an expectation amongst many participants that the curriculum

would still remain focused on LCE qualifications and as such on the learning of content, which participant 1 noted:

> *'but my subjects were biology and maths and you know just learn it, learn it and there's the exam question. Learn it again, and you do know the definition? But when I look at the JC and the CBA's and the creativity and skills that's allowed there, like it's completely different. But again, then there's the big jump, LCE reform will happen. But you know, are we still teach into the exam too?'.*

The loss of time over the Covid-19 period also meant that a lot of participants put forward the need to focus on covering curriculum content for qualifications over skills, with participant 13 arguing, *'We've had to push on with the curriculum, you know, I think the last thing that we're really going to be thinking about are key skills'*. Participant 12 also raised this when they said:

> *'You're just, you're running against the clock. Maybe Covid has probably impacted that, but I definitely think you're under pressure completely to, to finish off the course and get them ready for the exam and you, you're leaving out all those key skills. You, you'll be touching them here and there, but it's all dictated by you know the rush comes up to mocks. And then after the mocks here you're going back over what, where they made mistakes and all that. So key skills have gone out the window at this stage like'.*

Kuhfeld and colleagues (2020) similarly argued that extended time out of school due to Covid-19 almost certainly affected student achievement but that this would be difficult to measure on a statistical basis. From analysing the way in which participants perceived the increasing standard of assessments as well as the time lost from the Covid pandemic, it was clear that they were in the main accepting of the official recontextualising field rules of assessment for qualification being more important than the teaching of skills in SC, which shows that the boundaries around the practice of using the SC to achieve qualification is very strong in comparison to the emphasis on incorporating skills to be one of the most important elements of this period.

4.2.2 Qualification Differentiation Leading to Different Priorities When Teaching Skills in SC

When asked about their views on teaching skills in SC, all teachers involved in the focus groups agreed that they had a role regarding student skill development. However, there was a major difference in participants' understanding and framing of firstly how to teach skills in SC in comparison to other second-level programmes, as well as why this was the case. Bernstein (2000)

argued that while the distributive and recontextualising rules affect practice within the classroom through accountability practices, teachers control how knowledge is taught through the steering of practice. Therefore, evaluating how participants perceived the practice of teaching skills in the SC and what influenced this, was a key part of the research question. Participant 7 voiced the reason why most participants agreed with students being taught skills for further education as well as life, when they argued that they had a responsibility to assist students develop *'education skills and you know the skills they need to progress in whatever you know chosen pathway or area and to have a balance hopefully between practical and theory or the academic side of things'*, while participant 12 also argued a similar rationale when they said '*we do it for hopefully helping them in life as well as the exams*'. However, there was a lack of a conceptual understanding of what was meant by the term 'skill' and how skills can be developed. This lack of comprehension about what a skill is, was in general expressed by many of the participants attempting to explain skill development without concrete examples and in general they used simplified terms. For example, participants cited teaching generic well known skills such as communication, literacy, and numeracy skills through the prism of them being important for life or exams. Participant 7 showed this when they described how students in SC develop communication skills in a vague way, *'like how to interact with each other, how to you know, listen to instructions and you know like the big communication*', with participant 3 similarly showcasing the lack of comprehension of what a skill was when they said '*we teach them skills for life, skills for doing things like exams. It's hard to nail down what skills we teach them but we do. Like working skills, study skills, communication skills and the like'*. The lack of drive for knowledge around understanding skills and what they are, from a neoliberal viewpoint could point to a deficit of value around this for participants. Participants showed this in many cases in the focus groups, where it was evident that they were progressive and eager to teach skills about how to prepare students for exams or for their future needs in the labour market, but lacked concrete examples around what skills were.

Participants in the main were unable to explicitly link their teaching of subject knowledge and practice within the classroom to the development of skills,with the majority struggling to outline what

aspects of these skills could be broken down and taught in their practice. The lack of clarity in regards to this was highlighted by participant 2 who felt that in their own classroom they were not sure what skills they were assisting students to develop, as they had not chosen any specific skills to target beyond hoping to make a difference to students lives after school through teaching skills that his subject covered, *'so we'd like to think through our own subjects that we're actually imparting you know some skills that they could go out and actually make a difference. Like I don't know… That's what we're hoping to do'*. This was something participant 2 also referenced when they explained, *'you're hoping that they're learning in leaving cert and you're trying to empower them, which can be transferred not just between other subjects, but also real-life scenarios as well. But it's hard to know how'*. This raises the question of how teachers can embed the teaching and learning of skills within their classroom if their understanding of skill development is limited and they are not cognisant of skills embedded within the curriculum. Gordon et. al. (2009) found that awareness was paramount to skills being developed in a student-centred environment, where the traditional roles and methodologies of teaching are focused on competence development rather than subject knowledge. But through the prism of Bernstein's PD many of the participants showed that domain specific knowledge was being prioritised in the evaluative rules, which constituted school knowledge for qualification and educational transition rather than skills development for life.

The year of SC that participants were teaching directly affected their views on how and why skills were taught. The TY programme, which is an optional non-examined year where students sample subjects and gain work experience, was highlighted by participants as a space where skills could be taught through facilitated external and internal school experiences, along with other aspects that students doing a two-year SC would not necessarily have access or time to do. Participant 16 noted, *'the social skills and those kind of key skills you'll be teaching them more in TY, more than you would as I said the exam style when it's traditional leaving cert, 5th and 6th year'.* Participant 6 also voiced this when they said, *'TY is different, you teach skills there, but you wouldn't focus on it in 5th and 6th year*'. It was evident that other participants also viewed TY as a place to develop student's skills, but

likewise as an extra year to help overcome the perceived curricula and examination gap that they felt is between JC and SC, which participants felt can see students struggle to achieve both skill and academic development in SC as a result, as participant 5 argued, *'filling in that huge gap somehow during the TY year… there is such a gap as you're describing there between what they're doing at the new JC exams now. And what they have to do in the still pretty traditional LCX. Like follow, do the course. There is a need for something to up that and to make that transition'*. It was notable that many participants who mentioned the transition from JC to SC focused not on the gap in skill development but rather on the gap between examination requirements, which may show that skills were not viewed as valuable in comparison to the academic progression of students. Participant 3 captured this when they said, '*now TY is being used as a place to prep for the Leaving Cert because it's just seen a prepping year for the exams for many schools and students and skills are forgotten about'.* This is similar to what Jeffers (2011) argued was the hegemony of the LCX over all areas of the programme, which in this case was TY. From a Bernsteinian PD viewpoint, it is notable that teaching exam knowledge often takes precedence over other skill development, even at a time such as TY, where teachers in many cases not perceived as under pressure from other stakeholders such as parents to facilitate students attain exam results through the pedagogic recontextualising field and official recontextualising field. This may showcase the conditioning of the psyche of some participants, to accept neoliberal orientated social norms and dialogue such as a preference for academic knowledge retention for examination purposes, over skill development which is then normalised in their teaching. Many participants also felt that even 5th and 6th year in the traditional SC were different as regards teaching skills to students and supporting skill development. This was based on the pressure to assist student performance in exams which led to a change in rationale and actions in the teaching of skills in 5th and 6th year. Participant 5 posited *'bringing them away on a trip. You wouldn't dream of doing that in 5th or 6th year, like that was in 4th year and so yeah, 5th and 6th year I would imagine the high stakes exam'*. However, even when experiences outside the classroom were facilitated, teachers felt that they were often focused on helping to gain qualification and to enhance motivation. This was also in many cases linked to subject and career choices, which participant 11 observed:

> *'just before Covid that year whatever it was, 2019 maybe, but he [13] was talking about subjects that lend itself to coding. But obviously maths was the main one, and sure straight away there you have extra points in the LCX for taking the higher-level maths, so that's just one example there of pushing for more engineers. Again, it's just supply and demand, that's whatever. It's IT, engineers and pharmaceuticals that's needed'.* [14]

Other programmes and cycles influenced the views of many of the participants on the teaching of skills to students at SC and were regularly used to contrast their experiences to the drive for qualifications at SC. The JC has been reformed more recently than the SC and many of the participants felt that it targeted the teaching of skills in a far more effective manner. Many of the participants felt that this was the case as it provided a chance to incorporate real life situations to be explored in the classroom such as presentation skills and project work. Participant 1 put forward that the *'JC has really kind of taught us, take a wee step back and its more real-life scenarios and like that all these skills'*. This was an element participant 8 also put forward when they said '*I suppose if we look back at junior cycle, junior cycle obviously skills being developed and stuff, the Junior Cert, and I suppose our junior cycle is more honed in to teach all the different skills, whereas you have a gap between the junior cycle now and the senior cycle'*. The CBA's in particular were viewed as a positive aspect of the JC that helped participants engage in teaching skills such as self-evaluation and creativity within their subjects and made *'students managing themselves and well-being'* (Participant 7). The comment above and others showcased that there was a sense of time and place to focus on this in the JC curriculum.

Many of the participants felt that while the SC structure was not as conducive to the teaching of skills as JC, the teaching of skills was not actually intrinsic to their teaching of the syllabus but was an optional additional element to their practice, which participant 12 posited *'you probably are teaching the syllabus, you're teaching the content first, and you're making sure that they're prepared for their*

[13] A computer scientist guest speaker
[14] Companies, many whom are multi-national in nature, often do talks in local schools and run initiatives in liaison with them to show what their company does and showcase possible employment opportunities in the future

exam first and foremost'. Interestingly, while many of the participants commented on positive elements of the JC, the majority of their perceptions on the negative aspects of the programme were exam related. Often it was viewed as not preparing students for the demands of the rote learning required for the LCX, with teachers only willing to focus on developing skills in the earlier programme as it was not viewed as important as the SC in terms of qualification. Participant 1 argued *'I suppose for JC we're prepared to do it because it's only the JC'*. Through Bernstein's PD lens this showed the implicit weighting of skills not being of great value in the evaluative rules and practice of teachers in the classroom, that resulted in them not being viewed as important when stakes are perceived as higher in SC,while participant 9 further questioned if parents and students actually valued the teaching of skills at any time, as they are not assessed in a concrete and quantitative way. This was highlighted with the introduction of descriptors for grades in the case of Classroom Based Assessments[15], *'I don't know whether their skills are improving a whole lot, and because it's only a descriptor on the JC certificate, parents don't give a damn about it, and it's thrown in as an aside almost'*. While many of the participants critiqued their experience of the barriers to teachings skills at SC, in comparison to the JC, it was apparent that they still valued many of the skills that students developed within the JC. Looking at this in terms of a hierarchy of skills, there was an emphasis on using time in the JC to teach knowledge recall strategies that were required for exams, which may be linked to how participants more often underlined this aspect as something of note than the holistic

[15] CBA's are classroom based assessments that an assessment conducted in second- level schools by JC students in a range of subjects in a variety of means. The students own teacher assesses the work, which is done in school and then conducts a review of these grades along with colleagues who teach the same subject. CBAs will be reported on in the JCPA using the following descriptors: Exceptional, Above Expectations, In Line with Expectations, Yet to Meet Expectations. This was used instead of A, B, C, D, E, F and NG. The following descriptors will now be used: **Distinction 90 to 100%, Higher Merit 75 to 89%, Merit 55 to 74%, Achieved 40 to 54%, Partially Achieved 20 to 39%, (not graded) 0 to 19%.**

skill development gap. From a neoliberal perspective this may point to the influence of exams on all cycles within the second-level education system and the systematic exigencies or structural demands for pedagogical efficiencies that has become mainstream in SC.

Many of the participants felt that the '*gap between junior and senior is huge even in terms of content and skills*' (Participant 9). This it was felt has led to more of an emphasis on getting the curriculum covered for examination related purposes in SC. Interestingly Banks et. al. (2018) found that the majority of their schools felt that although SC curricula underlined skills development like the JC, there was more of a focus on examination in the SC in comparison to skills. This emphasises the difference in qualification between JC and SC, and may show from a neoliberal viewpoint, how the preference for the proceduralization of teaching the curriculum for assessment purposes in SC, in comparison to the JC, may be down to the reductionism of subject curricula and examinations so that hidden assumptions and goals are not apparent to practitioners who teach them. Biesta (2009) also argued this was a distinct problem as the purpose of education is not something widely reflected on. Mooney Simmie & Lang (2019) argued that this inhibits the holistic development of the student by paradoxically tying teachers to the concept of good teaching based on reductionist principles of practice, including teaching to the test due to market influences.

Similar to the TY programme and JC, teachers' views on teaching skills in the SC differed with the experience of teaching skills in the LCA programme, in comparison to the traditional LCE, because of its differentiated structure, makeup and assessment procedures. The teaching of skills within the LCA programme, it was argued, facilitated the growth of independence-related skills and soft skills that were developed through modules like communication, but also as a consequence of the structure of the LCA programme by virtue of aspects such as work experience. The fact that skills are assessed through the terminal examinations is also crucial here as is the fact that TY, LCA and JC are all low stakes examinations compared to the LCX. Participant 14 gave the example of this within their school when they said:

> *'there is more of a balance within the LCA because it's tested. They are tested in their* [skills]*, they have to be able to use communication skills. They have to go to work. So those*

> *skills have to be developed in their work experience, their tasks. But they're all examined. So there's a bit more of a balance. But then, those skills aren't tested over the traditional LCX'.*

It was interesting that the modularity within the cycle and variety of LCA examinations were viewed as a positive for focusing students on the teaching and learning of skills unlike in the SC which mostly focused on the retention of curriculum content. Participant 16 raised this when they noted, *'I think in LCA obviously you would have a communication modules and others. These modules help students take responsibility which is different to the traditional LCE students who just focus on learning'*. As a result of this, the traditional SC students were viewed by many as being spoon fed information rather than developing a range of skills which led to many LCA students being perceived as better prepared at organising themselves for school and life thereafter. However, this is indicative of the discourse around the LCE because arguably in SC assessments such as oral examinations, project work in History and other subject's skills actually are assessed. As participant 16 outlined, LCA students have:

> *'more about them and then they're clued in more. I think the traditional LCE students can just go through the cycle and kinda, nearly be like zombies, going through the whole system, they don't tune in as much. And we had the same problem in our school where an LCA student would be on top of everything, will be organised, will know exactly when and where their modules are going'.*

These comments showcase how the evaluative rules for different SC programmes such as the LCA were largely differentiated by participants because of the perceived qualifications that are awarded through assessments. The evaluative rules seemed to alter the viewpoints of the participating teachers, as these programmes were viewed not as academically focused, and therefore they were more comfortable with facilitating skill development through the different structures and assessments that these programmes had in comparison to the LCX and traditional SC.

Another of the key aspects in relation to teacher's views on the teaching of skills at SC was the way in which they felt that they were doing this in a more ad hoc manner in the SC in comparison to other programmes. This was as a result of skills that were supposed to be developed in SC not being known by the majority of participants with only two out of sixteen participants saying they had heard of the SC Key Skills Framework. A consequence of this lack of explicit thinking and teaching meant that the

modelling and teaching of skills were not always whole school in nature according to participants and thus stunted collegiality and professional development around this area. Participant 7 stated *'I think what needs to happen is to have the whole school approach to it, not just for it to be hit and miss by the teacher or the subject'.* This was also underlined by participant 1 who explained *'we never talk about it in school or any other school I worked in. It's off the hoof in the classroom'*. There was a marked difference in participants' views on where they felt they were influenced in their choosing of skills to teach, even on a subconscious level or in an ad hoc way, with experience and training as educators being raised as some of the key influencers of this. Participant 15 felt it came from experience, *'it probably is a part of teaching that we've maybe not known we do it. But we are all probably through our own personal views or experiences were probably influencing kids or not influencing'.* Whereby in comparison participant 1 felt the choosing of skills to develop during the SC was influenced by the new JC and the training that was incorporated around this:

> *'and then I suppose you know with all the JCT training we've been upskilled. So it is now part and parcel, do we have one set of skills for JC exams class and then we change where we're going with the SC class? So surely it's penetrated all our teaching, and as you said, participant 14, it might not be conscious, and I might not be conscious, at naming the skills. But surely if we're doing it with the juniors we're bringing this into our senior classroom'.*

Even though many of the participants struggled to outline what skill development entailed, how they implemented this idea within their practice, and which skills they were helping to develop, many of the participants viewed the act of teaching as a way of assisting student's skill development. While it may be true that some skill development might be achievable despite this, it is unlikely that this would be an effective way to teach students skills in comparison to the targeted teaching of skills. But at the same time from a neoliberal viewpoint, participants showed they were accepting of their role as technicians in preparing students for examinations in a structured manner but did not regard skills as a crucial element of this educational period as they weren't measured in results. This lack of explicit understanding and practice may show how participants have become more accepting of what Ball (2016a) points to as the acceptance of educators as technicians who teach skills tacitly but who's performativity is measured by numbers and exam results rather than professionals who actively intellectually interact with frameworks according to student's needs.

Participants views on teaching skills in the traditional SC were directly affected by the time pressure and curricula content associated with the cycle, and in particular the importance of qualifications from this in comparison to other programmes, which Banks and colleagues (2016) also found. These time pressures were perceived to have been down to several aspects that included the breadth of topics and information on the curriculum that had to be taught for assessment. Participant 2 put forward, *'sometimes we can just get bogged down… so much in the curriculum'*. This often resulted in personal stress for participants which affected their practice in teaching skills in the classroom. Participant 14 put forward, that while they felt they had time early in the cycle to focus on skill development in students and was aspirational about this, *'once the pressure kicks in, I think it'll kick back in teacher mode an awful lot more'*. This point was echoed by many participants who did not view the teaching of skills as an aspect that teachers should be incorporating within their practice throughout the SC, especially when time pressures for covering the curriculum and preparing for exams came on, as it wasn't embedded as a key part of curricula in this period. This outlines how teachers' views on teaching skills are constructed and shaped by perceived time pressures, which from Bernstein's PD could be due to the establishment of subjectivity and a lack of emphasis on skills by official recontextualising field through publications by the SEC, NCCA and DE in comparison to qualifications. Bentley et. al. (2007) argued that a lack of understanding of curriculum content is a result of the reification and recontextualization of knowledge and practice, which takes away from the relational meaning of how teaching and learning takes place in the classroom. This recontextualization is evident in the comment on "*teacher mode*" (Participant 14) being associated with teaching content knowledge and the development of skills being seen as something other than teacher mode. From a Bernsteinian lens this could show how teachers view their professional identity as being a limited interactor with the curriculum, especially in regard to the teaching of skills. By extension, it also may suggest a technical attitude to teaching and the technical practice of preparing students for examinations. The time and curricular pressures were heightened for many participants

when it came to features of the SC like project work and mock exams in 6th year[16]. These were met with far more apprehension according to participants when compared to similar projects like CBA's in the JC which are considered low stakes, despite appearing on the JC Profile of Achievement. Interestingly many of the participants felt that this time constraint led to a lack of agency in their teaching which translated into their priorities in the classroom, which shows a feeling of lacking control on their teaching of SC students. Participant 4 signified this when they said that *'I think the system doesn't allow you to have that same flexibility to put the emphasis on key skills that you would want to'*, hile participant 14 felt that the lack of agency for teachers in regard to project work also led to a lack of trust and agency being given to students which ultimately hinders skill development:

> *'I think it's quite hard to let go of teacher control with older students like it's much easier to make them all do something and not let like a project go home. Not let a history project leave the building because then what do we do if it's lost? Not, it's not a major focus. You know, it's hard to give up control, so I wouldn't say I focus on those skills all the time'*.

Crucially, from a Bernstein's PD viewpoint the perceived sequential nature of the curriculum and project work within it, as set out by the official recontextualising field, could be viewed to promote outcomes-focused teaching that emphasises a performativity orientated mode of education. This type of teaching Boxley (2003) argues is a key part of neoliberalism which aims to govern the means and outcomes of education to suit its goals of producing a workforce and society capable of performing tasks, following set procedures and schedules, while crucially taking away from the agency of teachers to make decisions as assessment and qualification takes priority over this. The power exerted on teachers by the distributive and recontextualised rules from sources outside of the school environment, such as governments, companies and the DE, which regulate how teachers teach in SC, may show one of the core contradictions inherent to neoliberalism: the illusion of freedom, even when this is limited. This element also takes away agency from the students through this lack of trust. Although they might lose their projects, the lack of trust in them to look after materials is telling in

[16] Mock examinations are exams that follow a similar format to LCX that are perceived to prepare students for sitting the real exams. The papers are usually set by outside companies and in many cases are sent to get corrected by external examiners.

how some stakeholders such a teachers and parents believe a discourse around exam preparation and attainment is more important than developing students' skills.

While participants mentioned the mock exams as a perceived constraint on the teaching of skills at SC it is worth noting that they are a system-led phenomenon. The DE do not say schools should do mocks, rather schools have given these exams an important status by introducing them in many cases. Some have furthered this standing by introducing pre-mocks, which participant 12 posited:

> *'I definitely think you're under pressure completely to finish off the course and get them ready for the exam and you're leaving out all those key skills. You will be touching them here and there, but it's all dictated by you know the rush comes up to mocks. And then after the mocks here you're going back over what, where they made mistakes and all that. So key skills have gone out the window at this stage'.*

Additionally, participant 16 put forward that:

> *'I wouldn't be able to let that teacher control go at all, so it does depend on the students you have. I suppose as participant 15 said the aspiration is you do it throughout the year but we are, we're all smart enough and we're all long enough in the business that we know that when it comes to exams there's like that pressure I suppose with deadlines and mocks and things that, even now. You know, yeah, so you teach to the curriculum at the end of the day'.*

These quotes capture how for many of the participant's mock exams are perceived as linked with getting students ready to sit the LCX, which as is raised above, is a 'business' to try and facilitate' to gain qualifications and takes precedence over the teaching of skills. This neoliberal language could point to how this has become prevalent in the discourse and evaluative rules adopted by participants in this educational cycle. gain qualifications and takes precedence over the teaching of skills. This neoliberal language could point to how this has become prevalent in the discourse and evaluative rules adopted by participants in this educational cycle.

4.3 Marketisation and Intense Privatisation Driving Skill Development

It was clear throughout the focus group discussions that the teaching of skills at SC was affected by marketisation for the purposes of career opportunity and progression. This theme explores how aspects of practice in regard to this was influenced by pedagogic knowledge and discourse regulated and spread by market driven forces that reinforced the ideal of privatisation within the SC. Bernstein's PD can be used to explore how mental power is often exercised through pedagogic means and through

the establishment of distributive rules (Singh 2017). Evidence of this will be explored in regard to how participants felt that the SC was a period where teachers and others emphasised skills and learning that was driven with the intention of filtering students into suitable university courses and careers which suited particular interests. Furthermore, the teaching of skills at SC with a view to prepare students to become functional and active individuals of the labour market will also be analysed. Lastly, this theme will explore how participants felt that the teaching of skills at SC was influenced by the financialisaton of educational practice and language at this stage.

4.3.1 Skills at SC- the Emphasis on Progress to University

In the focus groups, participants clearly linked the teaching of skills at SC to facilitating students gain individual admission to a pathway to university, which would allow access to careers, and thus taught based on attaining skills and grades that would allow for this to happen. This pathway was normalised through the pedagogic evaluative rules within the classroom, but also in how distributive discourse and policy recontextualisation was skewed to offer what Bernstein (2000, p.30) contends as a lack of 'an alternative order, an alternative society'. Participants 14 and 2 respectively highlighted this when they put forward, *'the aim is going to college, at the end of the day that's what everyone believes'*, *'it's college and university all the way, most people think of nothing else'.* As a result of this however, within many classrooms participants argued that students were spoon-fed information which ultimately had led to a discourse of entitlement being adopted by students in terms of being given the knowledge they had to learn. Participant 13 argued, '*they expect everything to be given to them. They expect to be handed, you know, everything in terms of, you know, say if a student misses a class they expect the teacher to go to them, rather than the student take responsibility and go and figure that out for themselves.'* Organisational skills particularly were felt not to be developed as a direct result of this emphasis on progress to university and the pressure to help gain results to do this, with a lack of ownership over learning skills and knowledge a direct extension of this. Participant 2 explained this when they said:

> *'the biggest one I think is just organisation skills, and it's especially in my subject like they need their equipment, and they need their folder. And like sometimes kids would come in and they wouldn't have this, that and the other. And you just you just can't perform the task … It's like starting from scratch'.*

Participant 16 argued that this stemmed from individualised practice in the new JC:

> *'and then I suppose to go on 14's point about managing themselves and hitting deadlines and managing their time, because I suppose when they're in JC. They are very much spoon fed and they're given their homework. They do their homework, which is quite enough, but I suppose it's going that extra mile as a senior cycle student and that is a skill itself. Being able to manage your own time which is different'.*

Interestingly, while many participants felt that students were 'mollycoddled' (participant 9) and lacked organisational skills, from a neoliberal perspective this may highlight how students lack an awareness or drive to gain these skills mainly because they see themselves as consumers who learn and focus on what they wish. Giroux (2019) argues this is a result of education being viewed by many from an instrumentalist perspective, whereby students learn specific useful knowledge to improve their economic position. From this study, this could point to certain skills not being taught or learned as a result of a focus mainly on skills which help attain economic or societal status through access to courses or careers.

The focus on teaching knowledge and skills for exam attainment, and by extension for progress to university, participants felt stunted the holistic development of students at SC with participants arguing that many students don't develop useful everyday life skills as a result, which participant 15 voiced *'there's definitely an emphasis on maybe developing the student towards, you know getting that that exam rather than maybe someone having the life skills to do their taxes or you know, do something that they're going to actually have to use'*. This, many of the participants argued, was important for students at SC as they felt that student's holistic development was directly connected to the ability to transfer skill development to their lives both inside and outside education. Participants 10 and 4 respectively highlighted, *'it's that whole idea of transferability. You know that what you learn in one context you're going to apply to another', 'to be able to transfer the skills that they use within the class outside of us and just have an understanding of the purpose of what they're doing and how they could apply it to different settings or scenarios outside of school'*. From a Bernsteinian lens,

the projection of the importance of certain skills for attainment to gain access to university over some life skills by the distributive and recontextualising rules could mean that teachers teach skills based on these ideals even if they don't agree with this concept. Viewed from a neoliberal perspective, this could also point to the impact of employer focused discourses on education, and in particular the teaching and development of skills that suit these labour market interests. Shin and colleagues (2016) argued this has resulted in education being viewed by many stakeholders such as large businesses as a regime of neoliberal human capital. With Bourdieu (1998a) further arguing that this also started a narrative on skills that subjected people to a neoliberal belief system on what was important for them. The way in which students are taught based on a focus specifically on university admission needs, rather than taught skills, participants felt, also negatively affected student outcome when they progressed to third-level education with participants citing dropout rates as a consequence of this. This may show that students are socialised into being dependent on others for skill development. Evaluating this through Bernstein's PD, this may underline the relational nature of learning being ignored in SC by some stakeholders such a third-level institutions, DE and businesses, where students are not being treated as a subject of partnership with their teacher and peers in their own education. But rather are at the end of a delivered curriculum set out by recontextualised official recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field, with little change from evaluative rules and procedures in the classroom. This could leave students lacking basic skills such as organisation and timekeeping etc. These soft skills are part of the socialisation or hidden curriculum of education, but with many stakeholders such as parents focusing mainly on the university admission aspect of this period of education, teachers may be neglecting the socialisation and subjectification of the students. Biesta (2017) argued that this has been the result of measurability being put forward as the key educational construct that focuses on being able to audit success, which at the same time takes away from the professional agency of teachers, which participant 13 outlined:

> *'dropout rate is really high as we know amongst college students because they're not able to self-regulate and self-manage the other two guys spoke about it. So by being able to I suppose learn about what drives them and what their passions are and how to communicate that and find out information and you know, motivate themselves is hugely important, because if they don't have that that there's not going to be anything to drive them on in life and keep them in*

> *college or keep them in the job. And I suppose that has big impacts on the rest of their life then'.*

Participant 8 also argued that such is the problem that some third-level institutions have introduced modules to try and overcome this lack of skill development:

> *'the massive dropout rate in first year kind of college. And it's like OK, like how can we help our students? I suppose in some of the colleges I've started to notice they have critical thinking skills classes… They are trying to adapt to the students'.*

A point of note here is that many of the participants when describing critical skills both in second and third level often describe critical skills as recall skills for exam success, which participant 6 raised when they said, *'they have everything handed to them and everything is clearly laid out. And while the whole kind of idea of it being that it's developed critical thinking, I think it nearly takes away critical thinking'*. This may be a key reason why third-level institutes introduced these modules to try and develop critical thinking.

The following observations exemplify through Bernstein's PD the way in which many of the participants believed university education had created a large distributive influence on SC students, with the emphasis on rote learning mitigating against the development of critical skills such as decision making around this area. A point of note may be that many participants believed they had more of a knowledge of skills valued for third-level education, such as critical thinking, organisation and communication than the actual prescribed skills from the DE. However, participant 16 also argued that the above skills aren't valued by students' regardless due to the emphasis on gaining access to university, *'a lot of students they are worried about where they're going to go to college or what they're going to do so, they're probably more concerned about learning the curriculum than they are may be improving their communication skills or their working with other skills'*.

Participants felt that the focus on certain third-level college courses effected the way in which students and teachers approached the choosing of certain subjects, due to matriculation requirements. In particular, languages were mainly viewed positively by students, participants felt, because they believed in the need to pick these subjects based on college entry requirements, rather than a focus on

mastery of these languages and the skills associated with this. Participant 2 argued this when they said, *'this is similar to you have to do French to get into most third-level colleges or a second language I think it was'*, while participant 6 also posited even where there was an emphasis on languages, alternative subjects also had a higher bearing than others due to college and career emphasis, *'the overemphasis towards STEM subjects is taking you away from let's say the arts and learning languages'*. Many also felt other students also took subjects at ordinary level purely for entry requirement purposes, even if they were able to do them at higher level had they tried. Participant 5 expressed this when they said:

> *'I think languages have suffered, Irish probably included, although Irish, they say is going better now. More people are speaking it, but the languages suffered in the take up within a boy's school particularly they want to do physics, applied maths, maths etc. Engineering and all that. And they said well I don't need to do a language because you don't need a language to get into Trinity. Just Irish pass will do. And also DCU you don't need a language at all or TU Dublin or Limerick at all. That's true. So the languages have suffered, and that's a pity because one of the problems, we have thousands of people coming in from all over Europe to work in Google and Facebook and all those places because they, they have several languages and that we don't'.*

Through a Bernsteinian lens, this emphasis by many students on certain subjects in order to transfer to colleges or gain access to careers, shows the belief of participants that many teachers, students and parents have been influenced to view the SC as a type of input-output mechanistic system of marketisation for educational progression, rather than an opportunity for skill development. Many participants showed that this had come from distributive sources such as Universities who create the requirements for gaining access to universities, as well as through official recontextualising field which is projected by organisations such as the CAO who maintain the set of standards for entry. Other official recontextualising field sources, like state-run websites such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland which runs the most popular careers website Qualifax, add to the distribution of these requirements to SC students it was also felt. Participant 1 exemplified this view when they argued '*you know to reach their potential, and to get to the career they want. But we are only thinking of what's going to come up on the Leaving Cert, what Qualifax says about course and what levels they're at'.*

The promotion of subjects that would enable students to start further education also often came from outside influences promoting and marketing them. Pedagogic recontextualising field sources such as subject organisations as well as distributive sources, such as companies were key players in promoting subjects for further education, which resulted in certain skillsets being underlined as important. Furthermore this underlined how this period of education was a privatised investment in the self through individual choices. For example, many of the participants felt that this was particularly prevalent in regard to STEM with subjects related to these college courses being promoted, which could affect the skills and knowledge that students would learn and value over the SC. This also affects the perceptions and practices of teachers in the classroom in relation to what was deemed important in this period, as participant 11 described *'yeah, like even the, the science subjects. I'd be exact same as participant 10 there when she says that you'd ask some people why they picked biology. You always do it the first day of fifth year and a lot of them would say oh, I need one science, eh, subject to get into college. Or depending on the course they might need two'*. Participant 5 argued outside organisations such as Universities and Science Foundation Ireland coming into schools promoting careers in science, affected the way in which certain areas and courses were marketed as more important than skills, '*we have SFI Science Foundation Ireland in the school talking and all sorts of things like that. So they drive it…Trinity come up so often and explain that they have also many students doing this, that and the other'*. Interestingly participant 6 argued that this promotion of STEM had manifested in his school where the principal promoted science, and students were seen to have been devalued if they didn't choose those subjects or didn't have the aptitude for them, '*he drove on all about STEM and everything along with it. And then they sent essentially the, the dumping of students got put onto the arts. And it's either that the French language classes and the Spanish, were just filled with kids who just didn't have science'*. Participant 16 also felt that the promotion of these courses and careers and the skills that went with them was sometimes down to gender also, '*also having more science subjects options and. And so on. So obviously they're promoting more females in the STEM organisations, so again, that could be coming from an AIG or those kind of companies'*. From a neoliberal perspective, while many schools welcome and experience the promotion of sectors or subjects in different ways. The manner in which they might influence the college options, career or

life choices, and views of students shows that influence marketisation and privatisation have an evident influence on education. Lolich (2011) argued that neoliberal elements have enabled this through the spreading of the idea that education is an investment in the self, and that the individual will reap the rewards of good choices but at the same time suffer if they do not utilise this freedom of choice wisely. Moore et al. (2011) argues that the neoliberal use of science and scientific rationale has been used to spread as a form of regulatory policy to restrict any questioning of neoliberal values, which it could be argued are present in the participants viewpoints above.

Participants also felt such was the emphasis on certain facets of third-level courses that there was an individualised 'whatever it takes' [Participant 6] attitude to get in amongst many parents, students and teachers which affected how skills were perceived and taught at SC. Participant 5 argued that many parents in particular underlined the importance of this, over skill development, in their efforts to have points reduced for admission through the DARE[17] scheme, even if it was questionable whether their child should be eligible for this scheme. They underlined this when they said:

> *'highly motivated parents who want the value for their money. Pushing for higher courses, doing anything, they have kids going to psychologists in order to just check could they possibly get a DARE application. Or all that sort of stuff. And that's, that's parents pushing. So it really takes away a lot of the other things. Parents somehow stopped thinking about their broader issues, the ones that you're talking about the life skills'.*

Many of the participants felt that this strategic 'winner takes all' mentality had developed among stakeholders such as students, teachers and parents, evidenced by the way in which many schools enabled students to focus on subjects for points purposes, such as maths. This as well as the quest to gain extra points through other pathways such as DARE when not justified, could call into question the balance between the purpose of education and the role of student's interests, in comparison to commercial and labour market needs. Using a Bernsteinian PD lens it could also show the way in which distributive rules and accepted knowledge that focuses on access to universities is highly prevalent for stakeholders such as students, teachers and parents and is viewed as high stakes in nature.

[17] The DARE scheme is an alternative admission scheme for people trying to gain access to third- level education who's disability has negatively impacted on their second- level education

Participants also felt that there was such a competition for CAO points that this was reflected in the perceptions of stakeholders such as students and parents in how these were important for college entry purposes over skill development with many, including participant 9 stating that a 'rat race' for points caused skills at SC to be put aside. Participant 9 put forward, *'I don't know if there has to be a whole sort of root and branches change that changes the focus on points and if you were getting into college on skills maybe as opposed to this rat race for points'*. Participant 11 backed this up when they said, *'I think we're just preparing them for, for after school or preparing them for college'*. It was clear that many participants felt that their agency to make decisions in the classroom was influenced by a focus on attainment for access to university at SC, especially regarding the teaching of skills which showed how many of the participants had become accepting of the official recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field which recontextualised this distributive discourse within SC.

4.3.2 Skill Development for Career and the Labour Market

Many of the participants felt that multinational and local business interests had a bearing on the teaching of skills at SC and regarded their influence as one of the reasons why skills that focused on careers and the labour market were prioritised and marketed in SC. In particular from a Bernsteinian lens, it was clear that distributive and recontextualising rules, and the discourse and knowledge that were put forward from these elements, were influential from participants perspectives in the reasoning that skill development for careers in particular labour markets were put forward as important in SC. Multinationals, companies and well known business people were referenced as key purveyors of distributive discourses on the importance of skills for careers and the labour market, with participant 9 stating, *'we're saying, well the multinationals, all the CEOs of companies are telling us what type of person they want coming out from schools... they're looking out for their own gains, looking at their own agenda. To get type of people they want'*. Other participants spoke about how this had influenced the curricula content of SC subjects, which participant 12 argued was the case in his subject of geography, *'you can see it there and the LCE course over the last three years the LCX how it's changed. Now you're always going to get a question now on sustainability and renewable energies*

and stuff like that. That that wasn't the case six or seven years ago. Again, is that coming from multinationals?'. From a neoliberal viewpoint this may show how teachers perceive economic self-interests as a factor in what skills and knowledge are being taught in this time and what is perceived as being important due to labour market influences. It also exemplifies how power and politics are evident in the curricula, with neoliberal ideals embedded in curriculum that value certain kinds of knowledge.

Many of the participants felt that skills for careers and the labour market were put forward through companies coming into schools and trying to influence practices and subjects. Participant 7 explained how a company had even directly tried to initiate the introduction of subjects in their school:

> *'I think to a certain degree as well, you know some companies or business backgrounds. So, for example in our local area we have a lot of engineering companies. Engineering isn't a subject in the school. There is a big push to get it into the school. There is the offer of money to equip a classroom and all of that. So I think that can have an influence on decisions within that'.*

Participant 14 felt that within their school the promotion of skills and careers associated with this, had been enacted through donating equipment related to occupational skills within the tech industry, whilst also heavily branding the equipment:

> *'Google would be the same for us and like women in Google and they put they have an actual programme about like. And ours is a mixed school but only the girls were allowed go. Zurich fund a lot. They nearly drown us in laptops. Like there's a lot of those kind of private interests and it is sometimes like, why aren't they great for helping us like? Well, their branding has to go on everything like. Yeah, you know. It's not like we'll give you money and it's like we won't say any more about it. You know, like it's, it's much more that there's a benefit to them from it'.*

Participant 5 argued that the use of college scholarships and bursaries connected with certain career areas also heightened the profile of these companies and the careers and skills associated with them:

> *'scholarships they give to people, including other companies, do the same thing. They're all for getting those students to do the maths, to do science subjects, engineering. So there, those things are terribly important to all those companies. It started years ago ... And there's all sorts of rewards and attractions for people to do those things. Huge awards and stuff for them, scholarships etc.'.*

The way participants felt that scholarships and sponsorship from businesses affect schools and influence teachers to prioritise certain skills or career information through distributive rules and discourse may show how self-interest with a labour market orientation has influenced many stakeholders such as teachers and students. Interestingly, looking at the way in which these interests were viewed through the evaluative rules set by the teachers who observed them, it was clear that most of the participants were able to view how knowledge was being framed by labour market interests through these rules and recontextualised knowledge. Although, none explicitly said they looked to counter or work against this within their own practice.

Participants also felt that various outside influences impact on teaching and learning through recontextualised rules and discourse strategies, such as developing policy and programmes that focus stakeholders such as students, teachers and parents on skill development for the labour market. In particular, policy makers linked with the education system in Ireland had an influence on teachers' perceptions of teaching skills at SC as much of their distributive knowledge was recontextualised by official recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field in the Irish system. Participant 8 argued that the OECD was a major influencer, *'it's the OECD that's driving most of that research with all the different European countries. And what are they based on? Economic development and cooperation over everything'*, whilst participant 1 and participant 3 in conversation posited other organisations like the World Bank also worked with companies to promote certain skills, *'(Participant 1) 'Is it market orientated? It's probably the policymakers'…. (Participant 3) The World Bank, then Intel's, Hewlett-Packard, like you see the emphasis that they put on STEM subjects. And you know, in the last 10 years and you see the explosion of Intel and all of those companies in Ireland'*. Participants also felt that certain segments of the labour market had a large impact through lobbyists on the direction and priorities within education and particularly on skills that they as teachers were focused on as a result of official recontextualising field such as thinktanks and lobbyists. As participant 14 captured, *'but it's definitely thinktanks and even like saying they're looking for trades. That's other people influencing the policymakers to say right we need more general skilled labour. We want more people like that. That might be where it's the computer science*

came from, a think tank'. These participants in their comments exemplify how Irish education and the teaching of skills at SC is influenced to pursue certain careers and labour market interests, putting a neoliberal perspective to the fore, which ultimately participants felt affects the teaching practices of teachers within the SC classroom. As well as this, the above comments demonstrate the sensibility of teachers to the decentring of state protections to education through a large range of policy ensembles, which is critical feature of neoliberalism, which McGimpsey and Youdell (2018) also argued.

The majority of the participants when speaking about teaching skills at SC focused nearly totally on work skills. Therefore, this perception had a bearing on what skills were taught and how this happened. This showed that recontextualised knowledge and the regulative discourse set out by evaluative rules and official recontextualising field had directly influenced the discourse and by extension the values and expectations around the teaching of skills in SC. Participant 14 gave an example of this when they said:

> *'I think a big driver for me with why I think self-management and communication skills are important is because they won't last in the workforce without it…predominantly in my school, predominantly they would go into the workforce rather than college, and they'll be very quickly sacked for some of their behaviours that happen in the school. So, I think at SC like we were always more aware. Like I would hear myself even saying it quite a lot. No boss will tolerate you showing up at 10:00 o'clock. You're an hour and a half late. You will be sacked for this, you know, an idea of what it's going to be like when they're in the workforce or when they were employed by somebody. Would kind of influence why I focus on some skills over the other skills'.*

From a neoliberal perspective this may show how participants believe that people's status and worth in society is based upon having paid employment and working vigorously and efficiently. Lynch (2022) argues this has resulted in education being metricised by quantifying peoples worth based on their human capital, entrepreneurial ability and production. Interestingly while most of the work skills mentioned by participants in the research were focused on skills that required interaction with others, they were framed as important because they benefitted the individual not the organisation or society. This may highlight how individualism has been underlined as important by certain stakeholders such as businesses and government, and has from a neoliberal viewpoint become a norm that suits these parties' requirements for a workforce. Participant 3 said '*we're trying to develop these skills that*

we've spoken about, even though they're not clearly defined yet. Well, they are clearly defined (Key Skills Framework at Junior Cycle), but I don't know what they are for LCE. But yet we're teaching in order to get these kids to be active members in the labour market'. Participant 10 agreed with this when speaking how this trickles down to practices within the classroom, which through a Bernsteinian PD lens highlights how horizontal recontextualised discourse is present around the teaching of skills in SC, which means that this discourse is often perceived as common sense with no epistemic founding:

> *'it's driven from outside it it's, you know. And we'd be foolish not to respond to what's going on globally. And you know, you have to prepare people for the future. You have to prepare them for, for you know, a pathway into life. So if you're in denial about what's happening globally then you're not preparing people fully. Uh, but you know, like participant 11 was saying there, it's still happening, where, where is the demand? What you know? And it does have an effect it does trickle all the way back into to what you're doing then in the classroom'.*

Participants also felt that the media along with public private partnerships have a bearing on how work-related skills that suited careers and the labour market were publicised. Participant 7 felt that this was particularly evident with national competitions and in particular the BT Young Scientist Competition[18] which is publicised widely:

> *'and I would say even look at our national competition, BT Young scientist, it gets huge media attention. It gets huge school attention. You know I'm pushing it myself in my own school, wanted us to be in it and get on well in it. You know, there isn't a nationwide language competition. There isn't a nationwide music competition, you know'.*

Participant 11 also regarded on a push to the sciences that they have observed in the media:

*'yeah, like there's, massive like, it's no coincidence that lately that everything there's a big push in the media about science and pharmaceuticals. And like ya's know what's going on the last couple of years and there's all of a sudden, even last year or the year before the year before that, all this push for extra engineers or extra scientists or extra pharmaceuticals lik*e'.

This influence from the media, Banks and colleagues (2018) found, translated into stress for students in regard to the race for points to acquire entry to college courses and careers. This could be viewed as a neoliberal tool to further certain individual and market drivers such as work-related skill

[18] The BT Young Scientist Competition is an annual second- level students' science competition where student showcase scientific projects

development. From a Bernsteinian PD perspective this underlines the way in which some participants felt that there is an acceptance of the recontextualised rules and discourse set out by official recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field agents that are some of the main drivers of curriculum planning and assessment at SC is the labour market and the needs of employers, whilst they have little influence on these matters individually or collectively in comparison.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the perceptions of teachers around the teaching of skills in SC. It explored how participants perceive how value put on skills by many teachers in SC were based on labour values, individual needs and performance of students in examinations and how teachers were perceived as effective in assisting students to prepare for this. Many participants argued that this has led to the instrumentalization of teachers and a push towards qualification as a result of assessments being a key part of the focus on labour market needs. Neoliberal elements such as corporate interests, who spread discourses through the official recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field, were pointed to as being key to this. The internalisation of this value on performance in examinations was evident in the way in which participants had adopted these beliefs around why some SC programmes were viewed as more academically important than others. Furthermore, the teaching of certain skills, such as examination-orientated skills, in order to satisfy requirements for entry to third-level education and by extension the labour markets were perceived as highly influential to many participants with neoliberal forces such as businesses and think tanks spreading this through research organisations reports, national competitions, as well as the advancement of accountability practices within the SC educational sphere also.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of neoliberalism on the teaching of skills in SC using a Bernsteinian Pedagogic Device lens. This was enacted by exploring the perceptions of participants, on whether there are certain skills valued at SC, as well as exploring why these skills were valued. There has been some work completed in the Irish and international context on the implementation of skills frameworks within second-level education (Buckingham Shum and Deakin Crick, 2016, Ahonen and Kinnunen, 2015, Ananiadou and Claro, 2008, Dede, 2010, Lamb et al., 2017). In the Irish context researchers have focused primarily on the structure and formulation of the Key Skills Framework, with little research on how this is enacted within the classroom (Johnston, 2021, Johnston et al., 2015, Looney and Klenowski, 2008). This is important in the Irish context, where there has been the implementation of a SC Key Skills Framework, as a direct result of the Lisbon Agenda (NCCA, 2009A) , but with little research or dialogue on how teachers perceive or enact the teaching of these or other skills in SC (Banks et al., 2018, Smyth and Banks, 2012, Walsh, 2008). This research is vital and timely as a Key competencies in senior cycle (draft) (2023) has been released, thus, understanding teachers' past practices and perceptions will be invaluable in supporting its implementation. Especially as researchers such as Printer (2020) have found that there has been a perception that teachers are left out of this process in the Irish context. This chapter will discuss the main findings of this study, while presenting critical interpretations in line with current and previous research. The structure of the discussion chapter centres around evaluating the findings on how assessments are affecting participants' pedagogical choices when teaching skills in SC, as well as how teachers' professional identity was perceived to be positioned in a post-neoliberal education system. Finally, policy implications for SC are discussed.

5.2 Neoliberalism Impacting Curriculum Enactment in Senior Cycle

Neoliberalism's emergence has had a wide impact on curricula enactment in the Irish SC context. School values in many countries became, as a result of this neoliberal agenda, focused on grade

achievement in state exams, with teachers' effectiveness in their interaction with curricula viewed as a crucial part of this (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, Gaches, 2018). Furthermore, a more neoliberal business orientated language based on accountability and quantitative performance metrics has emerged which affects curriculum enactment (Gray, 2010, Giroux, 2020). This means that in many cases teaching and learning become driven by these performance indicators, narrowing the curriculum and producing a new regulatory culture of performativity (Ball, 2000, Ravitch, 2014, De Lissovoy et al., 2014). This section will discuss how neoliberalism has affected participants' curriculum enactment with regards to teaching skills in SC. In addition, the normalising of SC engagement with supranational organisations and business interests will also be discussed.

5.2.1 Assessment Affecting Pedagogic Choices when Teaching Skills at Senior Cycle

For over 100 years Ireland has valued high stakes externally assessed exams that facilitate third-level entry and the world of work (Looney, 2009). In more recent years this summative assessment has been influenced by neoliberal pushes from various locations, which has led to didactic learning and huge value being put on assessment (Skerritt 2019A, Gleeson 2021). This research provides compelling evidence of the lack of curriculum flexibility for teachers, because of the perceived high value LCX, which has meant that teachers make impoverished pedagogical choices within the classroom when teaching skills. This in turn likely reduces the experience of SC for students to mere rote learning. The teacher discourse evident in the data presented acknowledges a race to the top of CAO points. This race was especially evident for recent policy change awarded to the subject of mathematics in SC, which granted extra points as the subject was a priority for third-level institutes and the labour market.

Participants in the focus groups showed, in a myriad of ways and viewpoints, that their pedagogical choices were more focused on helping students gain qualifications in the SC through the LCX, over focusing on teaching skills and skill development. Participants argued that this emphasis emerged from different sources within the official recontextualising field, which were spread by universities

and other educational organisations, such as the CAO. These organisations espoused strong framing and the classification of knowledge through subject matter and examinations based on external standards, directly impacting their pedagogical choices, which Bernstein (1975) also argued. Assessments were shown to have a major effect on teachers' perceptions of skills in SC and the pedagogical choices they took within the classroom. This was reflected in this study through the difference in how skills were valued and taught in the Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes, in comparison to the traditional 5th and 6th year LCE programme. This was because their assessments were not as closely linked, by participants, to helping students gain qualifications, which was perceived as leaving time for developing skills. However, this was contrary to Jeffers (2011) argument, which suggested that the values of TY had been altered by LCE assessments. However, most participants viewed skill development in traditional 5th and 6th year as less important in comparison to knowledge retention and assessment related skills that were perceived as more valuable for attaining qualifications. Although the majority of participants practiced this rationale, it was noteworthy that many participants did not agree with this ethos.

The value of assessment over skills was particularly important for many participants because there was such a significant emphasis from teachers, students and parents on helping students gain the skills to achieve qualifications, so that students could progress to third-level education. Amongst the key reasons for why participants valued helping students gain admission to these third-level intuitions was the accepted neoliberal societal distributive discourse, that this pathway offered students the greatest chance to climb the social ladder and gain employment in well paid jobs, which is similar to research enacted with teachers from other countries such as the United States and United Kingdom (Lingard, 2010, Brown et al., 2008, Delaune, 2019). This could explain why many of the participants in this research justified that much of their practice was focused on assessment, as this was based on evaluative rules that accepted the SC as a period of teaching students' content to rote learn in order to achieve qualifications, rather than prioritising skill development. This quest for qualification was also valued in the same way by students, that participants argued many became tactical in their choice of school subjects, so that they would meet the entry requirements for third-level institutions which was

spread through official recontextualising field, even if they had no interest in the content or skills associated with the subject. This seemed to affect how many of the participants felt that society, schools and even teachers valued certain subjects over others due to the subjects' ability to provide additional points[19] for better qualification or for admission requirements to college courses. This showed that the official recontextualising field associated with the awarding of additional points had spread and transcended to evaluative rules and discourses adopted by the participants within their practice. From a neoliberal viewpoint this emphasis on assessment over skills could be as a result of a derived neoliberal influence that may have been shared through a variety of experiences, spaces and consciousness that merge to formulate these priorities (Kincheloe, 2008c). Through a Bernsteinian lens, Skerritt (2017) argues that this emphasis leads to a more traditional didactic mode of teaching, which is something Bernstein (Morais 2002, Bernstein 1971) argued led to strongly framed knowledge. Conversely, he argued weak framing of knowledge with more flexibility and an open approach to teaching, was to the advantage of student's overall development in the long term. Many of the participants put forward this and felt strong framing of subject knowledge affected what skills were developed at SC, which resulted in them feeling that nuances between subjects meant that different skills were taught depending on the subject.

The value that participants placed on assessment meant many of the participants did not consider skills to be vital in SC. They viewed their role as educator practitioners who should help students gain qualifications by following a standardised method of teaching to achieve assessment results. This is a key trope of neoliberal educational practice (Delaune, 2019, Roberts, 2007). It was evident this was affected by the high stakes nature of gaining qualifications through assessments. It secondly pointed to the acceptance by participants of the standardised and technicist role of teachers in this educational period. Biesta (2020b) argues that this showcases the argument that many practitioners have accepted the empty discourse of learning and narrow pedagogy reliant on objectifying students' needs, which dismisses teachers' professionalism to engage with curricular content on a contractual basis. This

[19] 25 extra CAO points are awarded for anyone who passes Higher Level Maths in the Established Leaving Certificate Examinations (Lynch and McGarr 2016)

professional engagement with the curriculum is one of the most important elements of curriculum interaction as this helps translate ideas into classroom practice and helps the teacher to improve their practice by testing ideas (Stenhouse, 1975). It also exemplifies a notion of teaching and planning that is focused on one output, that of grade attainment in the LCX. There was also little reference by participants to other purposes of education, such social interaction and relatedness, to learn about the world and students' ever-changing place within it. Biesta (2015b) argued that this had become more of a norm in educational environments which focused on exam attainment. These beliefs may also arise from a Bernsteinian PD lens from evaluative practices within the classroom, which focus mainly on assessment and qualification in SC. This may mean that some participants have little time to reflect on their professional practice, which was an aspect many of the participants noted, and thus they may stick more rigidly to the process of teaching the SC subject matter for qualification, rather than reflecting on how they are teaching skills, and potentially more importantly, what skills they are choosing to teach, which may show a focus on datafication over skill development during this period. The NCCA (2010) report on the implementation of the Key Skills Framework also argued that time for teacher reflection was a problem at SC. The short-term educational focus on attainment over skill development, studies have found, is as a direct consequence of the commodification of knowledge that is reflected in the Irish education system through increased standardisation and a technicist approach to teaching and learning (Hyland, 2011; Lynch, 2006). It could be argued that neoliberal elements such as governments, corporate interests and international organisations, influencing teaching in SC, charactered by the commodification of knowledge and a technicist approach to teaching and learning, suits those interests,. This is because they have more influence on teachers' practice through shaping the accepted standardised success criteria such as the LCX, which dictates both the skills taught in the classroom and how teachers teach.

The pressure to value assessment over skills in the classroom was added to by stakeholders such as the media, who influenced distributive rules through shaping public perception. This was done through the publication of the percentage of students who went on to third-level education from each school, which, according to participants, was the gauge for success for stakeholders such as students

and parents. According to Mooney Simmie (2012), this is also viewed as the best way to achieve capital accumulation in the Irish context. This lack of balance participants felt, was also justified, as those who created curricula such as the NCCA were disconnected from what was possible for teachers to teach in terms of content and skills yet set much of the official recontextualising field around SC skills. Added to this, many of the participants also pointed to a privatised neoliberal culture pervading this period of education, through aspects such as private tuition and grind schools adding extra pressure to conform to evaluative rules through helping students achieve grades in the LCE, rather than focusing on teaching skills in their curricular enactment. Participants also perceived an inequality in educational experiences for students, particularly regarding accessing additional tuition or attending private schools, which were advantageous to learning. This heightened the value on the LCX, which was also argued elsewhere (Prendergast et al., 2022). This emphasis on extra provision was backed up by Smyth and colleagues (2019) who found that teachers felt the current structure emphasises a culture of notes and private grinds. From a neoliberal viewpoint, these services are paid for privately, which underlines how these qualifications are highly valued. However, in discussing this practice, skills weren't mentioned as being prioritised or taught privately. These grinds are a major factor in exasperating social inequality which will set the course of students' lives (Bray and Kwok, 2003).

5.2.2 Teacher Professional Identity in a Post- Neoliberal Education System

Through Bernstein's PD it was clear from the research focus groups that neoliberal features had affected participants' views on the professional identity and agency of teachers to teach skills in SC. Teachers should be afforded the agency to be responsible for their development and to adapt to the changes that are needed to heighten competencies in students (Hagger and McIntyre, 2006). However, the rise of viewing the role of a teacher as a technical instructor has undermined professional action, along with the belief in the ability of the teacher to enact positive change (Biesta, 2017). Many of the participants put forward that there was a culture of regulation that limited their agency in the classroom which De Saxe (2020b) and colleagues also found. This regulation often was cited as a

reason that participants focused on outcomes and evaluative rules rather than holistic development processes when interacting with the curriculum, which Lynch et al. (2012) also argued in their writing. Within the focus groups, it was evident that participants' professional identity was affected by regulatory measures stemming from evaluative rules and discourse within the school environment, including departmental meetings. Additionally, participants felt the potential judgement from other stakeholders, such as school management, who it was felt set the criteria for valid acquisition and evaluation of knowledge within their teaching. This backs up Skerritt et. al.'s (2021) assertion that the way in which policy is translated and enacted in school settings is down to both outside agents and all levels of staff in schools, although middle and senior leadership tend to be the most active policy actors. A lack of professional agency in curriculum enactment and the teaching of skills, it was felt, was also furthered from outside stakeholders such as the media through the focus on league tables and parental expectation to achieve grades, which constituted official recontextualising field. This captured from a neoliberal viewpoint showed how participants their practice and values were impacted by input accountability regimes, which prioritised rankings, examinations as well as policy outcomes over skill development, which aligns with Gleeson's (2022) perspective. The DE is also pointed to as being complicit in allowing SC curricula official recontextualising field discourse to be focused on creating what was needed for the workforce rather than giving teachers agency for teaching skill development. Skerritt (2019a) as well as Ball (2003) argued that this emphasis on performativity over agency is a neoliberal asset that forwards performance as a main value in society, through introducing a culture that judges performance based on students' results in exams rather than skill development. In this study this focus on performativity, participants argued, affected the curriculum interaction and agency of teachers and by extension, which skills they taught and why.

Participants also showed that there was an acceptance of evaluative rules and discourse, that led to the metrification of the role of the teacher at SC, which effected teacher agency and professional identity. This meant that aspects such as skills development, were not measured and did not easily show in data and were thus deemed as unimportant in curricular enactment in the classroom. Rather, there was an emphasis on measurement throughout the SC, where the professional judgement and agency of the

participants was lessened as a result. This was noted in the focus groups by many of the participants describing themselves as professionals lacking agency. Grady et al. (2012) as well as Lipman (2009) similarly found that this is a result of neoliberal test-driven education, that constrains teachers' ability to develop critical approaches to knowledge and practice, as the only things worth teaching are those that are measured. Skerritt (2019a) as well underlined the importance of the assessments and by extension its qualifications and heightens the pressure on teachers to help students achieve these. Participants also argued that this focus on assessments takes away their agency to focus on skill development because of the official recontextualising field and evaluative rules that maintain expectations around teacher professional identity which should in large part be a key aspect of how teachers identify and put in practice effective teaching for their particular students, particularly in the case of teaching skills. Various organisations such as the Teaching Council are supposed to uphold the professional standards of the teaching profession in Ireland. However, this research shows that there was a distinct feeling among participants that this was being undermined, and action is required if the role of teachers is to be valued, with Curran et al (2023) arguing that the devaluing of teachers' professional standing is apparent in various assembles but especially in DE documents and policies. In a time where there are already teacher shortages, this may be key to the profession and to the education system as a whole. The research further showed that teacher's professional identity had been altered from neoliberal-related changes in society, that had been spread through educational agencies and had impacted students' needs, and opportunities both in education and future life such as in work. This was particularly evident in the acceptance of the atomisation and systemisation of society which was viewed as an aspect that affected student development and by extension teachers' professional identity, with this being a similar belief to Bourdieu (1998b), that the atomisation of society was an aspect that affects people's development. This was an aspect Skerritt (2019b) argued had been reflected in the individualization of some schools in the English context, through introducing more autonomy for schools but paradoxically governing them through standards to be met and the introduction of competition, which must be guarded against in the Irish context according to this study. Participants justified altering their professional practice regarding the skills that were taught due to changes in student experiences that resulted in skill deficits, such as time-keeping and

social skills, which had to be overcome. This was attributed to a change in teenagers' experiences due to parental work patterns and a lack of time to facilitate experiences that were common in the participants' own childhoods. They emphasised this with examples such as no longer being sent to the shop or having time to play that wasn't parentally organised. Participants felt that these changes in experiences influenced how students presented and behaved in the classroom which also affected the teaching of skills at SC.

The fetishisation of the preparation of students for entrepreneurial pursuits was viewed as a vital element of SC, and which affected participants' priorities and professional identity when teaching skills, with personal advancement, in terms of careers and tacitly class also being referenced by many participants. The importance for career readiness and being able to assume a position in the labour force affected how teachers valued certain skills. This was expressed by many participants who had internalised and accepted a narrative propagated by various multinational businesses and organisations emphasising the importance for students to foster personal advancement in all aspects of their education and career. Fitzsimons (2017) also observed this emphasis on personal advancement in terms of careers in the Irish education context. This could point to an acceptance that individual development in terms of skills to further economic self– interest has been incorporated into teachers' evaluative practice, as they felt as if they were helping students to develop their individual human capital throughout this period. This is also similar to how Lynch et at (2016) and Gleeson (2022), who observed that education in the Irish context has changed to emphasize primarily human capital formation.

From a Bernsteinian lens, this mirrored key EU policy on the labour market through the Lisbon Agenda and the introduction of frameworks around skill development, which also affects distributive rules and principles within education in the EU and Ireland through establishing knowledge stores and devices which regulate consciousness (European Parliament, 2007, European Communities, 2007, Gordon et al., 2009, Council of the European Union, 2018a, Council of the European Union, 2018b). This, therefore, may have informed professional identity, dialogue and policies through official

recontextualising field and pedagogic recontextualising field in the Irish context, on the need for fostering economic self-interest.

In a manner comparable to Mooney Simmie's (2012) research, many of the participants also chose to focus on aspects of education that they believed students and parents would expect, and that were externally driven by corporatists among others. Similar to Gleeson's (2023) research in the Irish context, this pointed to output accountability regimes being highly influential in teachers' values and professional identity. Especially in the case of individuality and personal accountability when teaching SC skills. This was especially evident in many participants' views on how the acquisition of texts and knowledge was being taught. This was similar to Jarke and Breither's (2019) and Gray et al's. (2018) argument that this extended to many participants believing that they were individual customers. Even in this study, if skills or the curricula were not enacted as might have been set out by the NCCA in the official recontextualising field, that was acceptable, as these stakeholders' expectations were more important. An example of this is the way in which project work was not viewed as an aspect of the curriculum to teach and learn different skills, as set out by the NCCA (2019), but was viewed as just another assessment piece by the majority of participants. This reflects a key aspect of neoliberal theory, which contends that the student is a consumer within education and should be treated as such with great care in interactions. This can be attributed to neoliberal attempts to stimulate market forces by making schools behave more like businesses (Saunders, 2010, Hill and Kumar, 2008, Simola et al., 2013), especially in the Irish context where Skerritt also argued this was prevalent (2019b). From a Bernsteinian lens the emphasis on accountability within SC, which has been internalised through the governance and practice set out in distributive rules, and recontextualised both through pedagogic recontextualising field and official recontextualising field by the educational stakeholders mentioned such as the Central Applications Office, NCCA and the State Examinations Commission, has had an impact on the professional identity of participants', which by extension could also influence their evaluative practices when teaching skills at SC as the participants have shown. This is similar to Skerritt's (2019a) assertion that accountability practices have affected teachers on a global level.

Many of the participants felt that the value that teachers put on skills in SC is influenced by the value they put on the labour market which affects their professional identity and practice in the school environment. This was highlighted in the perception around the apprenticeship pathway of education, and the way in which labour market needs had changed many teacher's views on the merits of this job sector, which reflected some of the ways in which SC education has been influenced by labour market needs. Some participants noted that with the CAO now showing this work option alongside college courses, it was apparent how career sectors and the skills needed for these were heightened in value, by official recontextualising field according to labour market needs. However, it was noteworthy that in some participant's schools the value on helping students gain the skills and academic needs for these alternative pathways to the world of work, such as apprenticeships, were still not viewed as important in comparison to achieving good standing in league tables for college admissions and having high school completion rates, even if these might not meet certain students' aptitudes or interests. Grummell & Lynch (2016) argued that, in particular, league tables have placed pressure on students and teachers while also promoting education for the labour market. According to Skerritt (2022), schools are increasingly being administered based on documents such as the 'Looking at Our School: a quality framework' (DES 2022), which sets out parameters for teaching, learning and leadership amongst other things, which are based on data-driven, objective rationales. From a Bernsteinian PD viewpoint this showed how different official recontextualising field discourses, in this case outside media, have an influence on educational perspectives and actions. This aligns with Ten Dam and colleagues (2011) assertion that schools have in essence become a second-level apprenticeship system for the labour market. The influence of the labour market, participants felt, was evident in SC by the way in which curricula and policies were being changed to suit future labour market and societal needs in terms of developing skills, interests and workers. For example, one participant cited the introduction of sustainability within the geography curriculum as an example of this influence. Another participant put forward that the focus on IT skills at SC was down to the needs for workers and consumers in this area which Lynch et al (2016) also argued affected the way in which subjects such as mathematics were chosen and valued in the Irish context, with subjects linked to this more highly regarded by teachers. The way in which participants felt that educational practices

changed quickly to meet labour market contrasts with the lack of flexibility participants felt in the system to teach skills regularly within the classroom. This juxtaposition, viewed through a Bernsteinian lens highlights how strongly the official recontextualising field discourse on this area has embedded within the professional identity of participants in this study.

5.2.3 Policy Implications for Senior Cycle Development

One of the big issues for the teaching of skills in SC was that many of the participants were uncertain what skills they should teach, or in reality, which skills they were actually teaching. Furthermore, even if they did believe they knew what skills they should, and were teaching, it was evident that it would make no difference because the curriculum is strangling them with summative assessment, with space not being viewed as available for skills at SC. Also, there was a disconnect between the skills valued by teachers and policymakers such as the DE, government and supranational organisations such as the EU at SC.

The focus groups showed that participants emphasised skills perceived as important for work in the labour force, which were perceived as ranking alongside examination attainment skills as the most important to teach in SC. However, there was a distinct lack of emphasis on students' holistic development, which pointed to participants accepting distributive and recontextualised discourse that this period was less about skill development, and more about helping students to increase their potential human capital value through helping them enter into the workforce at the highest point possible, which Harvey (2005a) and Lauder (2006) also observed. Linked to this, from a Bernsteinian PD viewpoint, participants felt that the skills that they perceived they were supposed to teach at SC were not defined by any framework or policy, which meant that the skills they taught were based heavily on perceived labour market needs and career opportunity. It was therefore clear that there was an acceptance of this period of education as being largely based on practice which valued skills that were important for the labour market that spread its influence through distributive rules around the value of knowledge and skills being produced. This was raised by one participant who underlined the potential careers opportunities in technology firms, despite admitting to knowing little about the

skillset needed for this or what these jobs entail. This emphasis has manifested in the form of cognitive capitalism where the emphasis on gaining education is to fulfil the needs of the knowledge economy (Morgan, 2016). From a policy implication viewpoint, it is evident that the new draft key competency publication released in 2023 by the NCCA (2023) for SC needs to be meaningfully engaged with by teachers, policy makers and key stakeholders involved in its implementation, such as the DE and specifically the Professional Development Service for Teachers, who typically engage in CPD on new developments. This engagement is necessary so that teachers and by extension students and parents understand what competencies and skills they need to teach and learn. Additionally, there needs to be a discussion as to how this implementation may be enacted on a whole-school basis within local school settings to ensure effective enactment across all subjects and programmes of the SC.

From a policy implication perspective, participants felt that the agendas of businesses and supranational organisations influenced the curriculum enactment and teaching of skills in SC in a far more effective manner than the NCCA and DE. This influence was believed to be spread through a multitude of processes, but the way in which business partnerships with schools were normalised by many of the participants' schools it was felt opened up a narrative that spread distributive discourse around reacting to business needs, which is similar to what Gray (2010) as well as Mooney Simmie (2012) put forward. Participants felt this affected the way teachers approached the curriculum and the skills they perceived as important. Multinational businesses in particular, were viewed as very active in their influence on the distributive discourse of the Irish SC, with sponsorships of equipment, competitions, tours and work experience programmes being ways in which participants believed they furthered influence by spreading what skills teachers needed to focus on in curriculum enactment in SC. Interestingly, the government and DE were viewed as being complicit in recontextualising expectations around the teaching of skills through official recontextualising field policy, that underlined the needs of these companies within curricula, as well as through their other arms such as the NCCA, SEC and CAO, which it was felt affected teachers curriculum enactment and focus on skills at SC. Looking forward to future policy implications around this in the Irish sphere, it is crucial

that there is reflection on what constitutes acceptable commercial partnerships and accepted discourses and influences so that these partnerships don't skew the holistic development of students or society as a whole so much that it reduces teachers' ability to teach skills that will help holistically develop students. Linked to this, participants felt that supranational organisations such as the OECD, EU and WB influenced the curricula enactment and teaching of skills, through lobbying the government to structure the curriculum and teaching expectations in order to get students to focus on subjects and skills that would suit workforce demand, which Mooney Simmie (2012) also found in the Irish education context. There was therefore an element of mistrust among some participants around policy produced in the Irish context, which may affect how this is enacted in the classroom. This, from a Bernsteinian viewpoint, is crucial as the government agencies such as the NCCA and DE set much of the recontextualised official recontextualising field discourses within Irish SC education, while also being influenced by these organisations. Supranational organisations, such as the OECD, were viewed as a key reason why there was a neoliberal focus on education, through employing skills testing like the PISA tests. This contributes to shaping distributive rules, which McNamara et al (2022) suggested was influential in the Irish second-level education sphere. These it was felt guided views about what skills and subject matter were important to be focused upon by teachers in this research. The dissemination of results and policies from these organisations were, participants believed, put forward into the Irish education system to suit these organisations agendas, which other researchers have also argued in international contexts (Sireci, 2015, Burbules and Torres, 2013). Participants also felt this led to what Ball (2016) argued was policy borrowing in a neoliberal sense, characterized by crafting knowledge as common sense, where neoliberal policy ideas move between locations. This research therefore explicitly showed the importance of considering, and in some cases, rejecting or negating the influences of these organisations' when designing policy and thinking about its implementation, especially considering that some, such as the OECD have their own agendas. Surprisingly however, the DE seems to be forging closer ties with these organisations, which can be highlighted in the invitation of the OECD to review the DEIS programme. Therefore, how this training and ethos may affect the practice of teachers when teaching skill in the classroom may be a point of interest in further policy implementation or research.

It was evident that participants felt that SC education is individualistic in its nature, and therefore participants valued skills that could help the student as an individual achieve both during this educational period and in later life. In particular, individualistic organisational skills such as goal setting and meeting deadlines were highly valued, as well as individual accountability to be resilient when challenges arose. From a Bernsteinian PD perspective, participants felt that distributive agents such as business and universities, as well as official recontextualising field agents such as curricula designers and the State Examinations Commission (SEC), emphasised individualistic skills. This emphasis was enacted through the weak classification of skills and the strong classification and boundaries established for individualised subjects and assessments in the SC, leading to the sacrifice of other skills, such as working collaboratively. . This may point to a form of subjectification, where the individual's needs are more important than collective societal needs, and the need of the economy trumps the needs of society where skills such as creative thinking and working collaboratively should be of value. Biesta (2015b) argued there needed to be balanced with qualification and socialisation to positively impact the education of students as these domains need to be balanced responsibly to help student development, especially in terms of helping them to become responsible people with initiative rather than objects of action for the good of others. This research has shown that there needs to be a rebalancing in terms of the way in which the SC has been developed in an individualistic manner, especially given that research shows that an over emphasis on individualistic tendencies leads to mental health problems and loneliness and by extension other cultural and political problems (Roiste, 2000, Twenge et al., 2021).

5.2.4 Social implications

From a social viewpoint the potential implications from this research may be that there is a renewed evaluation of the role of third-level progression when teaching skills in SC. The exploration of skills and the links that practitioners make to the workforce when teaching skills in SC may show that as a

society, this is an area that may need discussion at national and community level to explore alternative and diverse pathways. The recent work of the Department of Further and Higher Education to broaden apprenticeship opportunities and the pathways to different courses and careers through increased linkage between further education and training providers and third-level providers is a start (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2024). In a globalised connected world, this study suggests that Ireland must be aware of supranational organisations and their influence on educational policies and practices in implicit ways. It emphasises the importance of prioritising societal and individual well-being rather than neoliberal agendas, which is an element Skerritt et al (2020) also cite as exceptionally important as global drivers often miss local factors in their reform. This may be enacted by making these aims and influences on educational discourses explicit for all stakeholders. From a Bernsteinian lens this could help all stakeholders, and in particular teachers, understand how bias and influences have affected their policy enactment and action when teaching skills.

5.2.5 Theoretical implications

Utilizing a Bernstein's PD as a lens for critical research is a lesser known and used paradigm within research in comparison to other research paradigms (Asimaki et al., 2022, Bibila, 2020, Cox and Cox, 2019, Ekberg, 2021, Kang, 2010, Lilliedahl, 2022, Christie, 1999). However, the outcomes of this research have underscored its effectiveness in exploring educational practice, specifically with the use of small focus groups to explore perceptions of practice and distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules within the Irish educational sphere that have been implemented by teachers who at times have been influenced by neoliberal elements.

The research has shown that the skills that teachers perceive as important and their instructional aims have been heavily affected by multiple neoliberal influences, that include supranational organisations and multinational companies amongst others. Employing the Bernsteinian PD has exemplified how this has impacted what skills are perceived and taught in the classroom, and as an extension of this how frameworks that influence teachers are drawn up and disseminated. Bernstein (2001) described this as the acquisition of informational capital and labour of inculcation through the process of

pedagogic socialisation, which is particularly evident in the messaging systems that are outlined above. This was notably evident in chapter two where details of the key documentation around the formulation and dissemination of information around skills need for the labour market and the teaching of skills was influenced by many neoliberal stakeholders (NCCA, 2009A; Banks et al., 2018; Smyth and Banks, 2012; Walsh, 2008).

Participants demonstrated that they were cognisant of the importance to teach skills, although this was not evident in their ability to name what skills they teach and how they do so. However, most participants clearly framed the teaching of skills based on the students' needs to gain assessment result, particularly in the LCX, which is similar to Skerritt's (2017) argument. This by extension was also linked to most participant's focusing on requirements for entry to third-level education and the labour market. This research clearly shows that the pressure that teachers feel to help students on this pathway to a perceived better life, takes away from the perception of being able to teach students skills for holistic development which was similar to Gleeson's (2021) assertion that summative assessments take away from this focus. Therefore, this research supports the need to teach skills in SC education, but also shows that the lack of perceived emphasis on this in classrooms is evident in the participants' practices and experience in their school settings.

5.3 Recommendations For Future Research

- Explore teachers' labour market ideals through a critical Bernsteinian PD lens and examine how these ideals may affect teachers' practice in teaching skills in Ireland.
- Evaluate how teachers' experience of the labour market have contributed to this phenomenon, which could also be an important topic of future research.
- Explore the reciprocal relationship between the development of alternative assessment methods and the teaching of skills. In addition to this, evaluate whether this would be accepted by teachers if the assessments were not so closely aligned with entry to third-level education.
- Assess within other EU contexts, the influence of neoliberalism on the teaching of skills for participants in post-primary schools.

This study highlighted the importance of teacher values when exploring participants' perspectives on teaching skills in SC, and how these values were informed by distributive, recontextualised and evaluative rules and discourses. This fed into the perceived importance of skills to help retention and exam attainment, with skills for work also viewed as vital. In terms of future research, reviewing teacher values on a nationwide basis through using quantitative techniques may be able to decipher if these findings are generalisable for the majority of the SC teachers. There is still a broader research gap based upon viewing teachers' labour market ideals through a critical Bernsteinian PD lens, and how these affect teachers' practice in teaching skills in Ireland. An exploration of whether teachers' experience of the labour market has fed into this could also be an important topic of future research. The importance of assessment and the way in which this influenced teachers' perceptions of the teaching of skills at SC was a finding of note in this research. Future research could potentially explore the reciprocity of the relationship between the development of alternative assessment methods and the teaching of skills, as well as finding out whether this would be accepted by teachers if the assessments were not so closely aligned with entry to third-level education. While this research through a critical Bernsteinian PD lens explores the influence of neoliberalism on the teaching of skills for participants in SC in the Irish context, it would be worthwhile to do this within other EU contexts to determine if these interests are the same in position and weighting for teachers in other EU countries. The outcomes of this could feed into the practice of the EU, in this area, while helping practitioners explore their influences and values. Bentley et al. (2007) argues that this is the essence of critical research in education, to contextualise and expose value orientation. Meanwhile, the amount of research done on the neoliberal influence on SC since the early 2010's could be interpreted as limited. Therefore, it is hoped that this research may add to the knowledge or interest of other educators on this influence in the SC, while at the same time showing that critical research explored through Bernstein's PD could possibly help teachers, as practitioners review their own practices and theories of education through qualitative conversation in focus groups.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

The design of this study is subject to limitations. I decided to use nonprobability convenience sampling where existing participants recruited other participants that they knew which is otherwise known as snowball or chain referral method (Coleman 1958). One of the weaknesses argued about this method of sampling is that it holds little value in terms of inferring formal centralised results and can't be representative of a general sample population (Heckathorn and Cameron, 2017, Erickson, 1979). However, as I used a critical paradigm, this ability to infer generalisable meaning and outcomes is not a priority and ignores the power structures that come from positivist generalisable knowledge (Kincheloe, 2008a). Rather, this sampling aimed to help the teachers within the research, through a critical exploration of their perceptions, to improve their understanding and practice, which may by extension of this exploration, potentially improve the reflection and practice of other teachers who read or hear about the research.

Furthermore, another potential limitation is the use of focus groups as a data collection method. This depended on all participants being honest in their experiences and perceptions when addressing the focus group questions. This was extremely important for the quality of the findings as I aimed to facilitate exploration of experiences, perceptions and power dynamics that have helped teachers formulate and implement views and practices when teaching skills. However, from a critical lens, honesty or lack thereof is a possible opportunity to learn about participants' experiences and to help them to reflect on the notion of power around their beliefs and practice. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these focus groups were conducted online which may have led to body language cues and flow being affected. However, this was not observed by me at the time they were being conducted or when the data was being reviewed or transcribed. This research was enacted by one researcher, myself, which could be viewed as a limitation. However, there was constant monitoring of my thought patterns or biases within reflective field notes and personal journaling throughout the research. I enacted the coding, which could be viewed a limitation due to potential biases when engaging in this process. However, I overcame this limitation by making use of participant checks by

providing participants of the focus groups with transcribed interviews so that they could check the accuracy of the transcription and note any instances where the transcription was not accurate.

5.5 Conclusion

Dempsey (2016) found in her research that solid evidence of the development of key skills was lacking in the schools in her research. The findings of this research also show that participants knew very little about what skills they were supposed to teach, or in particular the Key Skills Framework at SC, even though this framework was produced as a result of the Lisbon agenda nearly twenty years ago. Furthermore, it was evident that many participants had not explored or reflected on what skills in general they felt were important to teach to students or the values that led to certain skills being both explicitly and tacitly taught within their practice. What was clear however was that participants valued skill development that helped students retain knowledge and achieve results in the LCX as well as skills that were perceived to be important when they eventually entered the workforce, which was similar to Banks et al. (2018). The focus on exam attainment also led participants' to perceive the teaching of skills differently across the curriculum, with the year or programme that was being taught affecting the perceived importance of teaching skills.

Using Bernstein's PD, it was clear that aspects of neoliberalism have been adopted and accepted into the SC system from some participants' perspectives. This could be viewed through the acceptance of rules that constituted this educational period as being an avenue for human capital creation for influential stakeholders such as businesses and multinationals, with third-level pathways being shown to be the perceived best mode of achieving this. Furthermore, there was a perceived a loss of agency amongst teachers to make decisions around their practice with internal and external pressures and management structures stifling exploration on aspects such as teaching skills due to other demands. Similarly to Skerritt's findings, (2019a) the research shows that this loss of agency needs to be explored, to try and avoid a negative feeling of isolation and helplessness in teachers of the SC.

Lastly, the majority of the participants showed that they felt that governments and supranational organisations had a key part in setting the skills agenda for SC and directly affected teachers' practice in the classroom. This point warrants consideration to ensure that the SC does not primarily serve as a pathway for human capital creation, which Lynch et at (2016) and Gleeson (2022) also put forward.

As an educator who has qualified as a teacher in the last ten year and has held roles as a teacher, Guidance Counsellor and Deputy Principal, it was at times apparent to me that new protocol and circulars laid out by various educational organisations were not implemented as intended, or were in some cases subsumed by the business of the school day. This study ultimately shows that the focus on skills for these participants was comparatively non-existent in comparison to the 'rat race' of the LCE as one participant termed it. As we now enter a world where artificial intelligence will not only store information but can create and interact with users with human likeness, it is imperative that education adapts to this with skills for holistic development that will help students adapt to the everchanging face of change as they grow. To focus mainly on retention of information will only solicit failure in the long-term, especially at a time where change happens faster than ever before. It is my hope that some new questions can be asked around what education could or should like, especially in relation to the teaching at skills at SC, as a result of the study.

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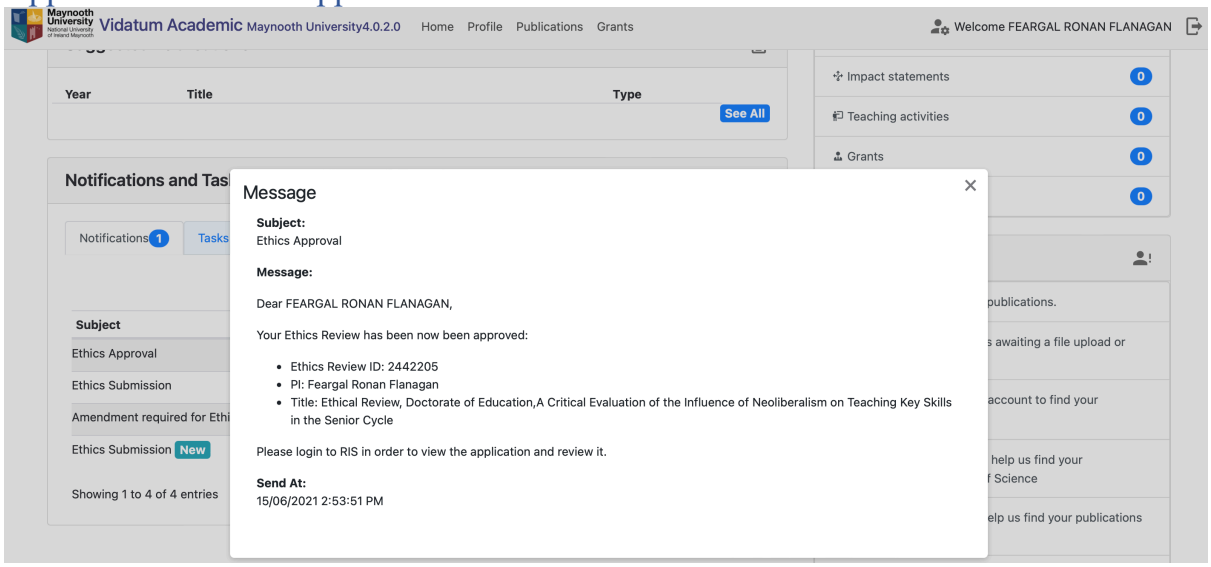
Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval



Appendix 2: Interview Protocol and Focus Group Questions

Focus group questions:

The study is concerned with the teaching of key skills to senior cycle students. It will also explore if neoliberalism has affected the teaching of key skills in this context. Specifically, the research will endeavor to explore if teachers' feel that elements of neoliberal idealism such as individualism, privatization and using education solely for the benefit of preparing the workforce to suit the needs of those in power has affected how they perceive and implement the teaching of key skills to senior cycle students.

Facilitator introduction:

- Thanks everyone for participating.
- Outline the time that the focus group may take (between 60 – 80 minutes)
- Agrees ground rules in collaboration with participants
- Ensure that the limits of confidentiality are outlined
- Emphasise the importance of talking one at a time
- Respecting others views is discussed and I remind participants that all views are welcome and there may be diversity of views in the groups and that is to be welcomed
- Shares information on the role of the facilitator: for example, to elicit views, ensure the smooth running of the sessions and report back findings to inform my research

Settling in with introductions and general questions to induce comfort and camaraderie:

What motivated you to become a teacher?

Research question 1:

What skill and competencies do you feel are important for Senior Cycle (SC) students to develop as part of their SC experience?

Probe: Why do you think these skills are important?

Probe: In what area do you think they will apply this ___ skill?

Research question 2:

In what way do you develop these skills in your class?

Probe: How do you know you're helping students to develop the skills you want them to develop?

Probe: Do you have any examples of when you develop them in your classroom? e.g. groupwork

Probe: How often do you use the examples?

Probe: How long would it normally last in your class?

Probe: Is it linked to assessment?

Probe: Do you think we assess what we value or do we value what is easier to assess?

Probe: Can you give me an example?

Research question 3:

Do you think there is a balance between teaching skills and subject knowledge?

Probe: Are there other skills that are missing in the education system?

Research question 4:

What do you think is the purpose of education?

Probe: What do you think the NCCA and Department of Education thinks the purpose of education is?

Probe: Do you think what we do here in Ireland is better or worse than what other jurisdictions do in terms of education?

Probe: Who do you feel has the power to make decisions around the purpose of education?

Probe: Who do you see as key players in influencing educational policy?

Probe: Do you think there is an overemphasis on economic skill develop?

Research question 5:

Are you familiar with NCCA key skills framework?

Probe: What do you know about these skills?

(If needed then list skills: information processing, communicating, critical and creative thinking, being personally effective, working with other)

Question 6:

Have you come across the concept of Neoliberalism?

Probe: What is your understanding of it?

If lack of understanding-give my concept and a definition

Lubienski et al posits that neoliberalism is not based on classical liberal economic ideals 'with less state intervention and the championing of the individual but is the result of concerted efforts by an array of think tanks, policy entrepreneurs, public officials and private interests who have orchestrated policy change in ways aligned with their pro-privatization agenda, and often their self-interest' (Lubienski et al., 2016) (Lubienski, 2003, p.2 & p.3;).

Probe: Do you think that the skills you emphasise are influenced by neoliberal elements?

Probe: Is education effected by neoliberal individuals or organisations do you feel?

Probe: Do you feel neoliberalism has affected your teaching of skills directly?

JC skills: Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking.

Appendix 3: Interview sheet and consent form

SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study. I am Feargal Flanagan, a doctoral student, in the Department of Education, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for Doctorate of Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Majella Dempsey and Rose Dolan.

The study is concerned with the teaching of key skills to senior cycle students. It will also explore if neoliberalism has affected the teaching of key skills in this context.

What will the study involve? The study will involve focus groups of four teachers each who will meet twice for 60 to 90 minutes on Microsoft Teams.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because you are a teacher with experience of teaching senior cycle students and may have experience of teaching key skills during this time.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in two focus group sessions. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will

be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are analysed within three weeks of the data being gathered. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with Maynooth University or place of work.

What information will be collected? Qualitative data from the conversation in the focus groups by recording them on Microsoft Teams.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by Feargal Flanagan and Majella Dempsey.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give? All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed (by the PI). Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the PI in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented as a thesis, summary report, discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences, and may be published in scientific journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part, but it is possible that talking about your experience may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the focus group, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you experience any distress following the focus group, you may contact the HSE Mental Health Support and information Service at 1800804848. You may contact my supervisor Majella Dempsey at majella.dempsey@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Feargal Flanagan at feargal.flanagan.2020@mumail.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in Feargal Flanagan's research study titled 'A Critical Evaluation of Influence of Neoliberalism on Teaching Key Skills in the Senior Cycle'.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my focus group with Feargal Flanagan to be video recorded

☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to anonymization on the 8th of March 2022. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I am interested in participating in a follow up focus group ☐

(Can be typed)

Signed…… Date……

Participant Name in block capitals ……..

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

(Can be typed)

Signed…… Date……

Researcher Name in block capitals ……..

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI