

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment: An exploration of the process of meso-level curriculum making from the perspective of primary school principals in Ireland

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TABLE OF ACRONYMS

AP	Administrative Principal
AP I	Assistant Principal Level 1
AP II	Assistant Principal Level 2
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
DE	Department of Education
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DL	Distributed Leadership
DP	Deputy Principal
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
ESCI	Education Support Centres Ireland
ETBs	Education and Training Boards
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IATSE	Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
ISSU	Irish Second-level Students' Union
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LAOS	Looking At Our Schools
LfL	Leadership for Learning
MU	Maynooth University
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
NSCE	National Council for Special Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SCT	Social Cognitive Theory

SLT	Social Learning Theory
SSE	School Self Evaluation
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TL	Transformational Leadership
TP	Teaching Principal
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Irish primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment, particularly through their interactions with meso-level actors and activities. It builds on international research that highlights the growing complexity of curriculum reform and the pivotal role of school leaders in shaping its success. Situated within ongoing national curriculum reform, it examines how principals conceptualise curriculum, lead change and navigate a policy environment marked by complexity, fragmentation and reform intensity. It addresses a significant gap in the Irish educational research landscape, where the role of principals in curriculum leadership and the meso space remains underexplored.

Guided by a social constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the research adopts a qualitative design. Data were generated through focus groups with practising primary principals and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy frame the study, enabling a nuanced understanding of how curriculum leadership is experienced, interpreted and enacted at the school level and across system layers. Findings reveal that principals occupy a pivotal but often under-supported position as mediators of curriculum change. Their leadership is shaped by personal conceptualisations of curriculum, system coherence, emotional and relational dynamics and access to professional networks. Despite strong commitment and adaptability, principals' agency is constrained by policy overload, unclear messaging, and limited meso-level infrastructure.

The interpretive space between policy and practice emerges as the site where much of the most important curriculum work occurs and where leadership makes a critical difference. Principals are not passive recipients of change but active agents who filter, shape and, at times, challenge system messages and frameworks. This study makes a theoretical contribution by repositioning school leaders as key meso-level curriculum actors and by reconceptualising the meso layer as a relational and interpretive space. It offers practical and policy recommendations to strengthen system coherence, regional collaboration, and leadership sustainability through intermediary supports, professional learning and curriculum processes that are dialogic, trust-based and anchored in shared purpose. Ultimately, if principals are to act as effective mediators of curriculum change, their leadership must be systemically recognised, supported, and positioned as central to the success of meaningful and sustainable curriculum change.

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*To my greatest joys, Ayla and Hugh,
You are my heart, my inspiration and my proudest achievement.
I am endlessly proud to be your Mum.*

*May you always know your strength, rise with resilience,
pursue your passions with courage
and carry a lifelong love for learning.*

*And to the little one already with me as I finish this journey,
you are part of this story too.*

This is for the three of you, with all my love.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Curriculum change is rarely a straightforward process. While reform efforts may be clearly articulated at the policy level, their success depends on how they are understood, mediated and enacted within the everyday realities of schools. This thesis is situated within that intersection, the meso space where policy meets practice and where change becomes real through the leadership, interpretation and relational work of educators.

Across the globe, education systems are increasingly recognising the centrality of curriculum in shaping not only what is taught, but how and why it is taught. Internationally, there has been a noticeable shift from viewing curriculum as a static product to seeing it as a dynamic and locally negotiated process, one that requires professional judgement, agency and meaningful collaboration among all stakeholders. Such an orientation places new demands on systems to build coherent connections between macro level policy intentions and micro-level enactment in schools. In Ireland, this shift is evident in the ongoing redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum, a process that emphasises child-centredness, teacher professionalism and whole-school engagement.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the role of primary school principals in mediating curriculum change. It asks how principals engage with curriculum not only as policy implementers but as active participants in curriculum development, mediation and enactment. In doing so, it explores the often-overlooked meso dimension of curriculum reform. This encompasses the relational, interpretive and connective work that enables coherence between national frameworks and local realities. Conducted during a period of significant curriculum change in Irish education, the research provides a timely and situated exploration of leadership, sense-making and system coherence in the midst of change.

This opening chapter sets the scene for the study by outlining its background, context and significance. It begins by situating the research within global and national debates on curriculum change, with particular attention to the redevelopment of the Irish Primary School Curriculum and the governance structures that shape its development and enactment. The chapter then presents the rationale for the study, explaining the professional and scholarly motivations underpinning the research. Key

concepts and terminology are defined to guide the reader, followed by the presentation of the research question, aims and objectives. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure, providing a roadmap for the analysis and discussion that follow.

1.2 Setting the context

Curriculum change does not take place in a vacuum. It is shaped by governance arrangements, professional cultures and the structures that connect policymakers to practitioners. In many Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, regional or local governance tiers act as important mediating layers between national policy and schools, creating spaces for professional dialogue, contextual adaptation and ongoing support. In the Irish context, these governance dynamics are explored in greater detail in [Chapter 2](#), which examines how national policy structures and the relative absence of formal regional infrastructure shape the conditions for curriculum development, mediation and enactment.

Ireland's education system is unusual in lacking such a formal regional governance structure at primary level. While sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) represent the main regional governance structure for education, their remit relates primarily to the post-primary sector, encompassing approximately 35% of post-primary schools but less than 1% of primary schools (Walsh, 2023). A second regionally based structure, the Education Centre network, operating under the umbrella of Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), provides professional learning opportunities and a forum for collaboration among teachers and school leaders. However, its remit is focused on professional learning rather than governance or system coordination.

At primary level In Ireland, therefore, there is effectively no formal tier that mediates between macro-level policy and micro-level school practice. This absence is reflected in OECD comparative data, which, although drawn from lower secondary education, illustrate the broader governance pattern. In 2010, 50% of decisions for lower secondary schools in Ireland were made at the school level and 50% at the national level, with none at a local or regional tier (OECD, 2012). This contrasts with the OECD average, where 23% of decisions are made at a local or regional/subregional level. While ETBs provide a regional governance structure for part of the post-primary sector, and Education Centres play an important professional learning role, these

entities do not serve as mediating layers for decision-making or policy translation at primary level. The result is a system in which schools, particularly at primary level, are directly linked to national departments, agencies and partners without an intermediary regional structure. In the absence of this regional layer, the functions of mediation, interpretation and professional learning have increasingly shifted to a diverse constellation of national partners and professional actors operating within what can be understood as the meso level of the system.

The absence of a robust regional layer has significant implications for curriculum change. In its place, national education partners, professional organisations and stakeholder groups often act as *de facto* intermediaries, facilitating communication, interpreting policy and reshaping it, thereby constituting what may be described as the meso layer of the educational system (Priestley et al., 2021). While these actors provide valuable bridges between policy and practice, their support is not uniformly available to all schools due to capacity constraints and the differing remits of organisations involved, leading to variability in both the depth of engagement and the interpretation of policy messages. Without a formal regional infrastructure, the system's ability to build capacity, sustain professional networks and respond to local needs is constrained.

In contrast, European systems typically recognise meso activity as a vital component of curriculum making, even when its absence is noted (Priestley et al., 2021). These authors emphasise the importance of middle ground and mobility, the capacity for actors to move between sites of practice and policy, enabling learning, dialogue and sense-making across system levels. Such meso activity provides an essential conduit for engagement with policy, creating the conditions for coherence and professional agency. Without it, schools risk operating in relative isolation, relying on *ad hoc* or uneven support networks.

These dynamics also highlight the importance of balance in curriculum regulation. As Priestley et al. (2021) argue, overly prescriptive policy can constrain professional agency, while overly open frameworks can leave teachers without the cultural or structural supports necessary for effective curriculum making. A systemic and holistic approach, therefore, requires deliberate strategies to build the connective tissue of the system, the meso infrastructure that enables dialogue between macro policy design and micro enactment. This involves not only engaging practitioners as local experts in curriculum development, but also establishing collaborative spaces in which professional and policy expertise can intersect productively. For principals, this

fragmented mediation space translates into a complex leadership role that depends on sustained professional dialogue and opportunities for contextual adaptation. As discussed further in [Section 1.2.1](#), this reform raises important questions about how coherence, trust and shared understanding can be cultivated within this mediating tier.

It is within this loosely coupled and often fragmented space between national structures and schools that principals increasingly find themselves acting as curriculum leaders and sense-makers in the Irish context. Their role extends beyond the technical management of change to the interpretation, relational work and vision-building required to make curriculum meaningful in context, work that also carries significant emotional demands and requires resilience, empathy and sustained professional commitment.

In the reconceptualised role of the teacher as curriculum maker, the expertise and judgements exercised at the local level, whether by teachers or school leaders, must be acknowledged, supported and celebrated by wider stakeholders. Effective curriculum making, undertaken both individually and collaboratively, requires time, space, support and professional judgement to ensure it is contextually and developmentally appropriate (Walsh, 2024). This study aligns with a shift away from the traditional centre–periphery model of curriculum development (Kelly, 2009), where policy was created by experts and implemented by practitioners, towards a more distributed and participatory model of reform. As Hayward et al. (2022: 6) suggest, conceptualising curriculum change as “everyone learning together” invites a more collective approach that spans the entire system, a vision that depends on coherence in messaging and structures so that teachers and school leaders are equipped with the clarity, time and collaborative space to engage in meaningful, contextually appropriate curriculum making (Shirley, 2016; Fullan, 2018; Walsh, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study positions itself within the evolving meso landscape of Irish education. The absence of a formal regional tier has created both challenges and opportunities: challenges in terms of coherence and equitable support, but opportunities for new forms of professional agency and leadership to emerge within schools and across networks. It is within this dynamic and often fragmented space that principals are called upon to interpret, mediate and lead curriculum change. The publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) has brought these questions of agency, coherence and curriculum leadership into

sharp focus. The following section outlines the principles, structure and defining characteristics of this Framework, which provides the immediate policy context for the present study.

1.2.1 The Redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework

The publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) represents a landmark moment in Irish primary education. Adding 2023 to a short list of seminal years in curriculum history (1922, 1971 and 1999), the Framework signifies a fundamental shift in how curriculum is conceptualised, structured and enacted. Developed by the NCCA following extensive research, consultation and deliberation (Grant et al., 2020), the Framework reflects advances in understandings of children's learning and development since the 1990s, as well as a recognition of the need for education to respond to societal, cultural and technological change.

Unlike previous iterations, the Framework introduces a curriculum architecture that moves decisively away from prescription towards flexibility and professional judgement. For the first time, Irish primary education is guided by a curriculum framework rather than a detailed syllabus, setting out a vision, principles and key competencies that inform all aspects of teaching and learning. The Framework articulates an overarching vision of children as agents of their own learning, supported by teachers as curriculum makers who design responsive, meaningful and locally relevant learning experiences. This represents a significant philosophical and practical reorientation of the curriculum towards a process-based and participatory model of curriculum making, aligning closely with international trends towards adaptive and contextually grounded curriculum design (OECD, 2020; Priestley et al., 2021).

At its core, the Framework is underpinned by eight overarching principles that schools need to consider in pursuing the curriculum vision (Figure 1.1). These principles reflect a holistic understanding of learning as both cognitive and social, emphasising the relational and developmental nature of education. Of particular significance for this study is the explicit emphasis on agency, understood as the capacity of children, teachers and school leaders to make informed choices, exercise professional judgement and take ownership of learning and curriculum design. This vision positions teachers and leaders not as implementers of externally defined content but as active participants in shaping and interpreting curriculum in context.

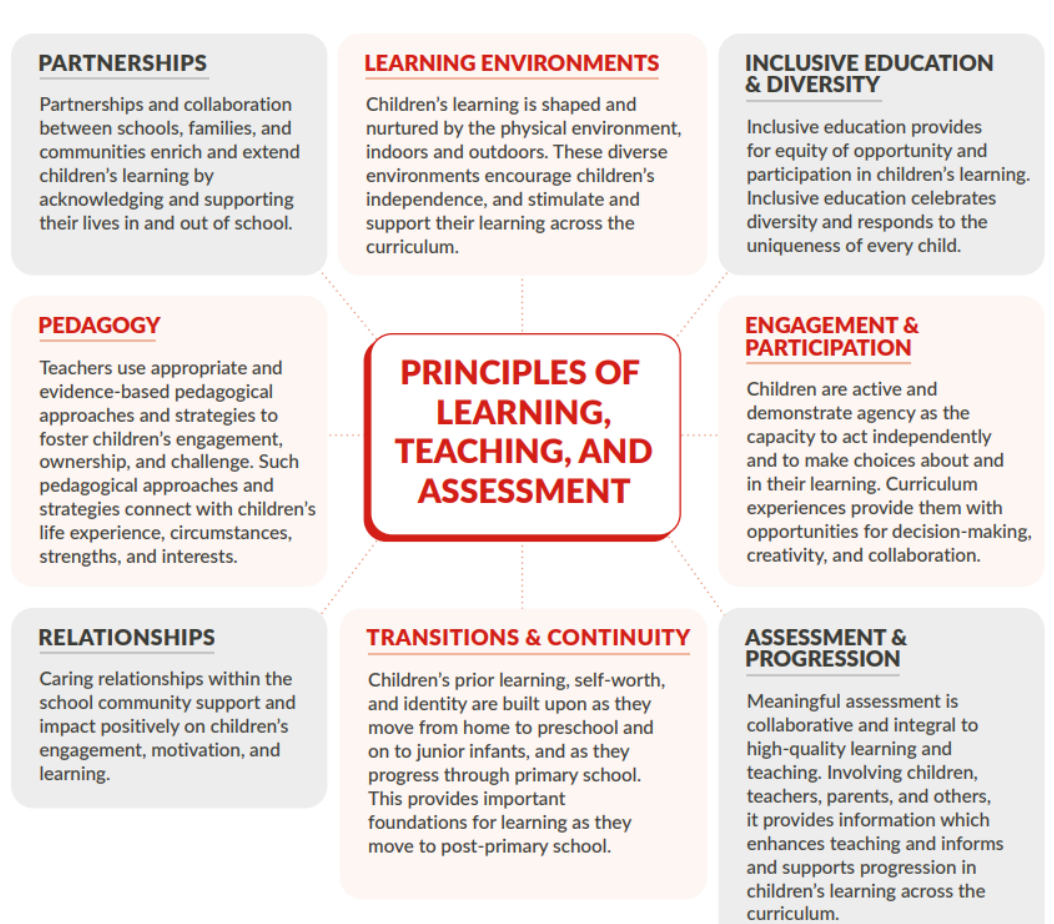


Figure 1.1: Principles of learning, teaching, and assessment (DE, 2023)

The structure of the Framework also reflects this orientation towards flexibility and local adaptation. Learning is organised through curriculum areas rather than discrete subjects in the early years of schooling, with greater subject differentiation introduced in later stages. The Framework identifies new curriculum areas, including Wellbeing and STEM Education (which combines Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), as well as the introduction of a modern foreign language from third class onwards. These changes signal an expansion of the curriculum to better reflect the complex skills, dispositions and knowledge needed for life in the 21st century. The Framework's shift from objectives to learning outcomes further reinforces this move towards flexibility, focusing on what children should know, be able to do and value by the end of each stage rather than prescribing the exact means by which this is achieved.

A further defining characteristic is the introduction of flexible time allocations. The Framework replaces fixed subject time prescriptions with a combination of minimum

curriculum time and flexible time, enabling schools to adapt their timetables to integrate learning across areas, respond to local priorities and pursue emergent learning opportunities (DE, 2023: 38). This flexibility is intended to support integrative and inquiry-based learning, pacing in response to children's needs and immersive learning experiences. It also carries significant implications for leadership, requiring principals to foster collaborative planning, coherence and shared professional understanding within their schools.

Accompanying the Framework is a complementary document, *Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change* (NCCA, 2022), which outlines the conducive conditions required for successful curriculum enactment. Drawing on national and international evidence of past reform efforts (Walsh, 2012; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2013), this document identifies three broad conditions necessary for sustainable change: curriculum coherence and alignment, system and school capacity and leadership and culture. Importantly, it recognises that curriculum reform is as much a relational and organisational process as it is a technical one, emphasising the need for trust, communication and professional collaboration across system levels.

Taken together, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) and its supporting documentation mark a profound departure from earlier curriculum models. By reducing prescription and foregrounding agency, integration and formative assessment, the Framework both enables and demands greater professional and organisational agency. For principals in particular, this change expands their role as curriculum leaders, requiring them to support sense-making, foster teacher agency and mediate coherence between national intentions and local enactment.

1.3 Rationale for the study

This research has evolved alongside my own professional and personal journey. What began as a teacher's curiosity during a master's degree deepened through classroom experience and further matured in my current role as an Education Officer with the NCCA, where I contribute to curriculum development at a national level. Across these vantage points (teacher, leader and system actor) I have witnessed both the possibilities and the challenges of curriculum change. I have seen the ambition of reform and the sincerity of those tasked with enacting it, yet I have also observed the space where good intentions can falter: the complex, often invisible

work where leaders interpret, adapt and make curriculum meaningful in their own school contexts.

A key impetus for this study emerged from the insight offered by Humes and Priestley (2021: 198): that for curriculum change to be effective and sustainable, it must “win the hearts and minds of teachers and the organisations which require them to introduce change must inspire confidence and trust.” This resonated deeply with my own observations. Despite the best efforts of policy actors and practitioners, curriculum change in Ireland has not always achieved the intended depth. This dissonance drew my attention to the interpretive and relational role of principals in leading, translating and mediating curriculum in context, as well as to the organisations at the meso level that support this mediation and contextualisation for schools and how both interact and interface with one another.

As outlined earlier, the absence of a formal regional tier heightens the importance of the meso layer as the connective tissue between policy and practice. Recent international research (Priestley et al., 2021) underscores the importance of this middle ground and the mobility it affords, enabling educators and policy actors to move between sites of practice in ways that foster shared learning, interpretation and coherence. In Ireland, where this infrastructure is informal and often fragmented, the work of school leaders as curriculum mediators takes on particular importance, functioning as a form of local meso activity that sustains dialogue and coherence within schools and across professional networks.

During the redevelopment of the Irish Primary School Curriculum, this study provided an opportunity to engage with school leaders at the coalface of curriculum change. Their perspectives revealed that leading curriculum is not a straightforward matter of compliance or delivery. It is emotionally demanding, relationally situated and contextually nuanced. The concept of the principal as a curriculum mediator emerged as a central thread, someone who bridges the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities, shaping coherence amid complexity, yet doing so without formal recognition or consistent support.

Professionally, this inquiry is underpinned by my commitment to curriculum as a vital force for meaningful learning. I believe that when curriculum is understood as a living, dialogic process, rather than a static set of outcomes, it opens transformative possibilities for schools, children and communities. Personally, it is grounded in a belief in leadership that is relational, values-driven and committed to cultivating trust.

This thesis does not begin from a deficit perspective of curriculum implementation, nor does it position school leaders as passive recipients of curriculum change. Instead, it situates them as central actors in the curriculum ecosystem, whose agency, insight and professional judgement are vital to making curriculum work in practice. By exploring the experiences of principals during this period of redevelopment, the research responds to wider calls in the literature to better understand the human and systemic conditions that shape curriculum change. It highlights the need for clarity, trust and shared purpose across all levels of the education system, recognising that sustainable curriculum change depends not only on strong frameworks, but on the people who bring them to life.

1.4 Research question, aim, purpose and objectives

This study explores how primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment within the broader policy environment of Irish education. In particular, it examines how principals interact with meso-level actors and activities, those occupying the middle space between national policy and school-level practice, and how these interactions shape their leadership, sense-making and agency in the context of curriculum change.

The purpose of the research is to develop a nuanced understanding of how curriculum change is interpreted and enacted at the school level and to explore the relational, conceptual and emotional dimensions of curriculum leadership. Conducted during a period of significant national curriculum redevelopment, the study seeks to illuminate the lived experiences of school principals who are often tasked with making curriculum policy meaningful and actionable within complex and loosely coupled system structures.

Rooted in a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, the research prioritises the voices and perspectives of school leaders, viewing them as sense-makers, mediators and agents within the curriculum ecosystem. The study aims to contribute to both academic scholarship and policy development by foregrounding the role of principals as emergent meso level actors and by highlighting the conditions (structural, relational and emotional) that support or constrain their work.

The primary research question guiding this study is:

How do primary school principals interact with broader meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment?

This overarching question is supported by three core aims:

1. To investigate how principals conceptualise curriculum and how these understandings influence their leadership of curriculum development, mediation and enactment.
2. To explore principals' lived experiences of engaging with curriculum change and their interaction with system-level supports, messages and structures.
3. To identify the professional, relational and emotional conditions that enable or constrain principals' capacity to lead curriculum change within a complex and evolving education system.

In support of these aims, the study pursued the following objectives:

- To capture and interpret the perspectives of primary principals on curriculum leadership through focus group dialogue.
- To examine the extent to which principals perceive themselves as curriculum leaders, mediators and agents of change.
- To explore the influence of policy messaging, system coherence and meso level engagement on principals' capacity to lead curriculum.
- To analyse how principals navigate competing demands, emotional labour and conceptual challenges associated with curriculum change.
- To contribute theoretically to the conceptualisation of curriculum leadership at the meso level and to offer practice- and policy-oriented recommendations for supporting school leaders in this work.

These aims and objectives are addressed through a qualitative design that leverages the interpretive power of focus groups to illuminate shared and diverse experiences. The analytical approach, based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), supports a deep exploration of how meaning is constructed, negotiated and acted upon within the relational and policy contexts of schools. In doing so, the study contributes new insights into the role of principals as curriculum leaders and the

importance of recognising, resourcing and sustaining their work within the meso layer of the education system.

The research question and aims outlined above are underpinned by a theoretical framework that integrates Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. Together, these frameworks support a holistic analysis of how principals engage with curriculum change as both system actors and individual agents. Priestley's model reframes curriculum as a multi-level, relational and meaning-making activity, allowing the study to explore how principals' work spans the meso layer; translating policy, fostering coherence and supporting teacher agency. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy complements this by offering insight into the motivational and emotional dimensions of leadership, highlighting how principals' confidence in their ability to lead curriculum shapes their engagement with change. This theoretical pairing enables the study to situate principals' curriculum leadership within the broader dynamics of systemwide change, while also attending to the deeply personal, interpretive and contextually situated nature of their work.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is noteworthy for several reasons. It addresses a critical moment in Irish primary education, as schools transition from the *1999 Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) to the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023). Unlike the 1999 curriculum, which provided detailed content and prescriptive guidance, the new framework is deliberately broad, emphasising flexibility, professional judgment and localised curriculum making. This shift places responsibility on school leaders and teachers to interpret, contextualise and make meaning of national guidance. Understanding how principals engage in this process of sense-making and interpretation is, therefore, central to supporting effective curriculum enactment and coherence across the system and to ensuring that reform intentions translate into meaningful learning experiences for children.

The role of the school leader in Ireland has become progressively more complex amid continuous waves of educational reform. Yet little empirical work has examined how principals at primary level mediate curriculum change within a loosely coupled system. This study addresses this gap by examining principals' experiences of curriculum development, mediation and enactment through the lenses of leadership, agency and system coherence, situating them as active curriculum makers and

mediators operating within the meso space between national policy and local practice.

As Ireland embarks on the enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum, this study offers timely insights for policymakers, leadership support services and professional networks. It identifies the interpretive, relational and leadership capacities required for principals to navigate the increased agency and complexity inherent in the redeveloped curriculum. By foregrounding principals' voices and experiences, the research contributes to both academic understanding and professional practice, illuminating the meso-level dynamics of curriculum change and supporting more coherent, connected and agentic approaches to systemwide reform. Underpinned by established theoretical perspectives on curriculum making and self-efficacy, the study offers a distinctive lens on the emotional and agentic dimensions of curriculum leadership in times of change. It highlights how coherence, trust and agency can be strengthened across system levels.

1.6 Definitions and terminology

Throughout this thesis, several key terms and concepts are used in specific ways that reflect both the research context and the theoretical framing of the study. This section offers initial definitions to guide the reader, while each concept is unpacked and explored further in later chapters.

Agency

This concept is defined as the capacity of individuals to act intentionally and make choices within particular social, structural and cultural contexts. Following Priestley et al. (2015) and Bandura (1997), this study views agency not as a personal trait but as a relational and temporal achievement, shaped by available resources, past experiences and professional contexts. Principal agency in this study is examined in relation to curriculum leadership and policy engagement.

Autonomy

Autonomy is understood as the degree of professional freedom, discretion and decision-making latitude afforded to principals within curriculum policy and practice contexts. Autonomy is therefore concerned with the scope for independent action and the extent to which such action may be enabled or constrained within organisational and policy structures (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Unlike agency, which emphasises the broader ecological capacity to act within and through structural, cultural and

relational conditions, autonomy relates more specifically to the freedoms and constraints associated with professional practice. While autonomy is frequently referenced within policy discourse, academic literature and participants' accounts, this study positions agency as the central analytical concept, as it more fully captures the interaction between individual capacities and the structural, cultural and relational conditions shaping principals' curriculum engagement.

Curriculum

In line with contemporary scholarship, curriculum is not understood solely as a static product or policy document, but as a dynamic process of sense-making, interpretation and enactment. Drawing on Priestley et al. (2021), curriculum is viewed as a situated, social practice, co-constructed by educators in response to local contexts and broader policy frameworks. This study uses the term to refer both to official curriculum policy (e.g., the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland) and to the lived, relational activity of curriculum making in schools.

Curriculum coherence

Curriculum coherence refers to the dynamic alignment and mutual reinforcement of curriculum goals, content, pedagogy, assessment and broader policy frameworks, as understood and enacted by stakeholders across all levels of the education system. It is not a fixed state but a socially constructed and negotiated process (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Looney, 2011), shaped by the interaction of new curriculum or policy demands with educators' professional beliefs, local school contexts and systemic structures. Achieving curriculum coherence involves both top-down guidance and bottom-up engagement, requiring shared sense-making, institutional capacity-building and time for professional learning and adaptation (Fullan, 2016; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Van den Akker, 2018). Coherence is realised when the curriculum is experienced as meaningful, connected and sustainable in practice, rather than imposed or fragmented.

Curriculum enactment

Within this study, curriculum enactment is understood as a dynamic, interpretive process through which educators and school leaders make sense of, adapt and bring curriculum policy to life in their local contexts. It extends beyond the implementation of externally designed materials or guidance, recognising instead the active role of teachers and principals in shaping curriculum meaning and practice. As Spillane (1999) argues, enactment involves not simply adopting external directives but adapting principles and specifications to local circumstances and, in doing so, developing new professional and curricular knowledge. Similarly, Priestley et al.

(2021) emphasise that curriculum enactment is situated within complex policy and organisational environments, where educators' agency, beliefs and contextual conditions influence how policy is interpreted and realised. Accordingly, this study focuses on how principals' leadership, professional judgment and engagement within the broader policy system mediate this relational process.

Curriculum implementation

Curriculum implementation traditionally refers to the process of putting a planned curriculum into practice. It assumes a relatively linear relationship between design and practice, that is, curriculum is developed centrally (by policymakers or agencies) and then implemented in schools by teachers and leaders. In this view, the curriculum is treated as a product to be delivered, and success is often measured by the degree of fidelity to the intended design (Fullan, 2007; Van den Akker, 2010).

Curriculum leadership

Curriculum leadership, in this study, refers to the ways in which school principals support, influence and guide curriculum development, mediation and enactment within their schools. This includes strategic, instructional, relational and emotional dimensions of leadership, reflecting what Leithwood et al. (2020) and Harris (2004) describe as multidimensional leadership. The term recognises that curriculum leadership extends beyond technical implementation to include sense-making, vision-building and supporting teacher professionalism, dimensions explored by Spillane et al. (2002), Priestley et al. (2015) and Fullan (2016). It is grounded in the belief that school leaders play a key role in fostering the conditions for meaningful curriculum change through collaboration, coherence-building, and attention to the emotional and relational aspects of school life (Crawford, 2012).

Curriculum making

Curriculum making refers to the active, contextually situated process through which educators interpret, shape and enact curriculum policy in practice. It moves beyond viewing curriculum as a fixed product to emphasise curriculum as a process of professional judgment, negotiation and sense-making (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Through curriculum making, teachers and school leaders engage with national frameworks, align them with local priorities and bring them to life within their own context.

Curriculum sense-making

Curriculum sense-making refers to a dynamic and interactive process through which both individuals and groups of people construct meaning from the relationships

between themselves and the environment in which they operate. It is an active cognitive and emotional process that consists of a person attempting to fit the new information into existing knowledge and beliefs (Pietarinen et al., 2017).

Loose coupling

In curriculum policy studies, loose coupling refers to the weakly connected relationship between policy design and classroom practice, where intentions at the policy level are only partially translated into action within schools. This concept, as discussed by Looney (2011), captures both the challenges of achieving system coherence and the potential for professional agency and contextual responsiveness in curriculum enactment (Weick, 1976).

Meso level / Meso layer

The meso level of education refers to the organisational and relational space between macro-level policy (e.g., Department of Education and Youth¹, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) and micro-level practice, which encompasses schools and classrooms where curriculum is interpreted and enacted. This includes education centres, support services, clusters and other collaborative structures. In this study, the meso level is significant as a site of interaction, interpretation and influence, where school leaders can shape and respond to curriculum change.

Professional learning

Professional learning refers to the ongoing, collaborative and contextually grounded process through which educators develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to enhance teaching, leadership and curriculum enactment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It moves beyond traditional, episodic models of professional development towards transformative and inquiry-based approaches, where educators identify problems of practice, engage in professional dialogue and draw on research and peer learning to inform change (Kennedy, 2014). Effective professional learning is embedded in local contexts, sustained over time and aligned with school and system goals, enabling teachers and leaders to take shared ownership of reform and build professional capacity within their communities (DES, 2005; Sugrue, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

¹ The nomenclature of the Department of Education in Ireland has changed in recent times. From 1924 until 1997 it was known as the Department of Education. From 1st October 1997, it became known as the Department of Education and Science (DES). On 2nd May 2010, it was renamed the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and on the 22nd of October 2020, it was renamed the Department of Education. Most recently, in May 2025, it was renamed the Department of Education and Youth (DEY). The relevant name/abbreviation will be used throughout the thesis for the relevant time period.

Self-efficacy

Rooted in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to organise and execute actions required to achieve specific goals. In this thesis, self-efficacy is explored in relation to principals' confidence in leading curriculum change and mediating reform, particularly in emotionally and structurally complex contexts.

1.7 Structure of the study

This thesis is structured across six chapters, each of which builds on the previous to explore how Irish primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment within a changing and often fragmented policy environment. The chapters are organised as follows:

Chapter one

Chapter 1 sets the scene by outlining the background, context and significance of the study, situating it within national and global debates on curriculum change. It explains the professional and scholarly motivations underpinning the research, defines key concepts and presents the research aims and questions, concluding with an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter two

Using a multi-level analytical framework adapted from Priestley et al. (2021) and Walsh (2023), the chapter explores the evolving curriculum policy landscape in Ireland. It traces how global policy trends, national structures and local enactments intersect to shape curriculum development processes. Special attention is given to the role of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the influence of supranational actors such as the OECD and European Union (EU) and the unique governance features of the Irish education system, including the absence of a formal regional infrastructure at primary level. The chapter highlights the fragmented nature of curriculum policy mediation and sets the foundation for understanding the relational, distributed and interpretive work required of school leaders in enacting curriculum change.

Chapter three

Key areas of research that inform the study are reviewed in this chapter, with a particular focus on leadership, agency and curriculum coherence. It begins by tracing the evolution of school leadership from managerial models to more relational, pedagogical and system-facing roles, with particular attention to instructional,

transformational, distributed and emergent leadership theories. The chapter then explores the concept of agency as relational and emergent, highlighting how school leaders mediate curriculum policy in context. Attention then turns to curriculum coherence and the broader policy environment, examining how coherence is constructed through leadership, policy alignment and collective sense-making and how meso-level structures and system-wide capacity can enable or constrain curriculum enactment. The final section introduces the theoretical framework underpinning the study, drawing on Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making and Bandura's (1986, 1997) concept of self-efficacy, providing a conceptual lens through which to analyse how principals understand and enact their curriculum leadership roles.

Chapter four

This chapter outlines the methodological framework underpinning the study, grounded in a social constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. It justifies the use of a qualitative research design to explore how Irish primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment within a complex policy environment. Focus groups were employed as the primary method of data collection, supporting collaborative reflection and shared meaning-making among participants. The chapter details the research design, sampling strategy, ethical considerations and analytical approach, including the use of reflexive thematic analysis. Attention is also given to the researcher's positionality and the steps taken to ensure rigour, trustworthiness and ethical integrity throughout the study. These foundations provide the basis for the interpretive analysis of findings presented in the following chapter.

Chapter five

This chapter presents and discusses the qualitative data generated through focus groups with Irish primary school principals, exploring how they engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment. The analysis is structured around three overarching themes: *Conceptualising curriculum*, *Leading curriculum change* and *Creating the conditions for curriculum leadership*, each comprising multiple subthemes. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, the chapter explores how principals' understandings of curriculum shape their leadership practices and how systemic conditions, particularly at the meso level, influence their capacity to act as curriculum leaders. Grounded in a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, the discussion engages critically with relevant literature. The findings reveal the complex, emotionally demanding and often

constrained nature of curriculum leadership, while also highlighting examples of adaptive, contextually responsive practice shaped by professional agency, relational trust and reflective engagement with policy.

Chapter six

This final chapter synthesises the findings and explores their implications for curriculum theory, policy and leadership practice. It revisits the central research question and presents key insights that illuminate how principals act as de facto meso-level curriculum leaders within a loosely coupled system. These insights highlight the significance of principals' curriculum conceptualisations, their sense-making and agency in navigating policy and curriculum change and the emotional dimensions of their leadership. The chapter argues for the formal recognition and systemic support of principals' meso work, positioning them as anchors of coherence and sense-making within curriculum change. It also extends Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model by integrating Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy to deepen understanding of the emotional and agentic dynamics of curriculum leadership. The chapter concludes by outlining practical and policy oriented recommendations, including the development of regional infrastructures, stronger system coherence and greater investment in leadership sustainability, while also identifying directions for future research and emphasising the importance of a more relational, trust-based and dialogic approach to curriculum change in Ireland.

1.8 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has outlined the rationale, aims and significance of the study, positioning it within the context of ongoing curriculum reform in Irish primary education. It has introduced the central research question, which explores how primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment, particularly through their interactions with broader meso-level actors and activities. In doing so, the study addresses a gap in both national and international research by highlighting the interpretive and leadership roles of principals within curriculum change processes, roles often under-recognised within policy discourse.

The chapter has also introduced the theoretical framework underpinning the study, drawing on Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy to conceptualise curriculum leadership as a relational, situated and agentic endeavour. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative design informed by a social constructivist and interpretivist worldview,

shaped by my professional experience as an Education Officer working in curriculum policy development. That positionality brings both insight and responsibility to listen carefully to practitioners' voices and to examine critically how curriculum is constructed, interpreted and supported across the system. The study aims to contribute not only to academic knowledge but also to the development of more coherent, collaborative and context-sensitive curriculum change practices.

Finally, the chapter has outlined the structure of the thesis, which proceeds across six chapters. The following chapter situates the study within the national policy landscape, mapping the multi-level governance context in which curriculum change unfolds. Together, the chapters that follow build a comprehensive, theory-informed and empirically grounded account of principals' curriculum leadership as it both shapes and is shaped by the evolving Irish education system.

1. NATIONAL POLICY

2.1 Introduction

In Ireland, education policy has traditionally been highly centralised, with a prescriptive approach to curriculum development and implementation (Coolahan, 2017). Since the foundation of the Irish State in the 1920s, there have been only three significant reviews of the primary school curriculum, making the current redevelopment process the fourth. The dominant model has long been what Kelly (2009) describes as a “centre-periphery” approach, wherein a detailed national curriculum is published for implementation in all state schools. In recent decades, however, there has been a gradual shift toward more distributed and consultative approaches, with policy-making becoming increasingly dispersed across various national agencies and stakeholder bodies. This shift is evident in the move from prescriptive curriculum documents to curriculum frameworks that allow schools and teachers greater interpretive and professional agency. While this trend reflects international developments and a broader move toward localised decision-making, it also introduces new layers of complexity for schools and teachers, who must now navigate an increasingly multifaceted policy environment.

As Walsh (2023) notes, the effective translation of national curriculum vision into the beliefs and practices of local educational settings requires careful processes of adaptation, mediation and transformation across all levels of the education system. In this context, mapping the current policy landscape becomes essential for understanding how curriculum reform is initiated, shaped and enacted within Ireland’s evolving educational ecosystem. This chapter adopts a multi-level analytical lens to explore the policy landscape influencing curriculum reform in Ireland. Building on the heuristic model of curriculum making proposed by Priestley et al. (2021) and adapted by Walsh (2023), the chapter is structured around four levels of activity: supranational/international, national, regional and school. This framework enables a nuanced and context-sensitive exploration of the structures, actors and relationships shaping curriculum policy and its enactment.

2.2 Mapping the policy landscape

Curriculum development does not occur in isolation; it is shaped by a complex interplay of global trends, national imperatives and local enactments (Van den Akker & Thijs, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2021). At the international level, policy discourses,

frameworks and benchmarking practices increasingly influence how countries conceptualise and develop curriculum (Lingard & Rizvi, 2009 ; Sahlberg, 2011). This internationalisation of education policy reflects broader shifts associated with globalisation, where ideas about what constitutes quality education are often circulated through supranational bodies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission (Grek, 2009; Sellar & Lingard, 2013).

Van den Akker and Thijs (2009) describe curriculum development as taking place across several interrelated levels: the supra level (international and global policy and frameworks), the macro level (national policy and frameworks), the meso level (institutional and organisational intermediaries) and the micro level (teachers and classrooms). This layered model has been further developed by Priestley et al. (2021), who introduce the concept of sites of activity within curriculum making, dynamic spaces where curriculum is constructed through the interaction of actors, ideas and resources across these levels.

Figure 2.1 overleaf presents Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framing of curriculum making. The model illustrates curriculum work as embedded within overlapping levels of governance and shaped by the interplay of three dimensions: people, discourses and material resources.

This model identifies three broad levels of activity:

- The macro level includes global and national policy frameworks, legislation and reform initiatives.
- The meso level encompasses intermediary actors and institutions such as curriculum development agencies, school networks and professional associations.
- The micro level centres on curriculum enactment in schools and classrooms, shaped by the professional agency of teachers and school leaders.

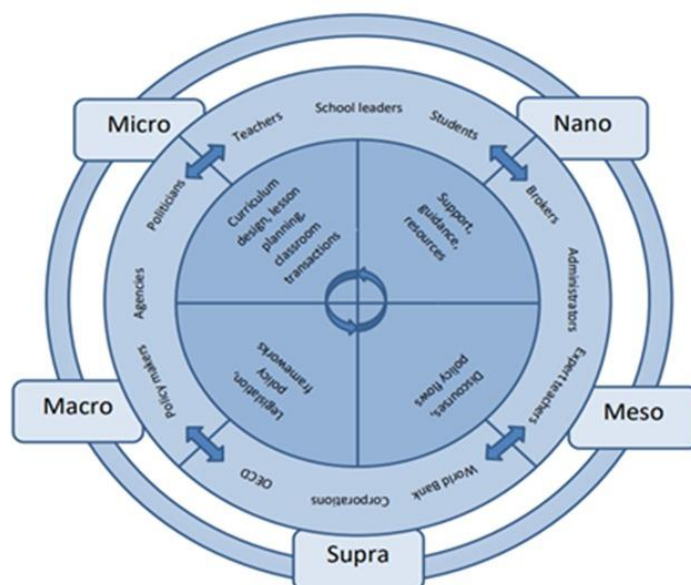


Figure 1.1: Heuristic framing of curriculum making (Priestley et al. 2021)

This heuristic enables a nuanced understanding of how curriculum emerges not as a linear product of policy, but through recursive, multi-level processes involving diverse actors and conditions. Importantly, the model acknowledges that individuals and organisations frequently operate across multiple levels simultaneously, particularly in contexts of curriculum change and innovation.

A number of global policy trends have shaped curriculum development processes internationally. One dominant influence is the rise of outcomes-based education and associated curriculum models that prioritise competencies, standardisation and performance measurement (Biesta, 2010; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). These trends are often embedded in large-scale policy tools such as the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments, which exert soft power by shaping national perceptions of system performance and reform priorities (Grek, 2009). Another significant trend is the growing emphasis on 21st century competencies and future-oriented curricula, often articulated through international frameworks such as the OECD’s Education 2030 agenda (OECD, 2018). These reforms promote skills such as critical thinking, adaptability and global citizenship, but may also introduce tensions between local educational values and globally circulating policy logics (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013).

Supranational and transnational actors play a significant role in shaping curriculum policy discourse. The OECD, for example, has become a powerful policy actor not

only through assessment regimes (e.g., PISA, TALIS) but also through its comparative reports and reform frameworks, which influence national policy directions (Martens & Niemann, 2010). Similarly, UNESCO's emphasis on education for sustainable development and global citizenship has shaped curriculum priorities across a number of national systems (UNESCO, 2017). The European Commission promotes curricular alignment and mobility through initiatives like the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, further embedding European policy influence at national levels (European Commission, 2018a).

These organisations operate within what Sellar and Lingard (2013) call the Global Education Policy Field, a dynamic space in which policy ideas are developed, circulated, adapted and translated across national boundaries. While such actors do not directly determine national curricula, they shape the discourse, structure policy problems and influence the range of “acceptable” solutions (Verger et al., 2017). While the heuristic model proposed by Priestley et al. (2021) provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding curriculum work across contexts, its application within the Irish policy landscape presents some limitations. Ireland's curriculum development process remains relatively centralised, with meso level spaces still emerging and often less formalised than in other jurisdictions. As such, direct application of this model must be adjusted to suit Ireland's structural and historical realities.

To respond to this, the following section of this chapter adopts a modified framing of curriculum actors and sites of activity across four broad levels: international, national, regional and school (Walsh, 2023). This structure, building on Walsh (2023), enables a more context-specific analysis of curriculum policy and practice in Ireland, while still acknowledging the broader multi-level influences described above.

1.3 Policy landscape in Ireland

2.3.1 Curriculum policy development structures

This section outlines the structures and processes that shape education policy development in Ireland, with a particular emphasis on the Primary School Curriculum. These processes are situated within a broader educational ecosystem that includes important interfaces with both early childhood and post-primary sectors. It is essential

to recognise that these structures are not static; they are shaped by chronological and temporal dynamics, with relationships and interactions evolving over time.

Governance structures in Irish schools reflect the country's colonial legacy and the nineteenth century foundations of its education system. As a result, the system is characterised by a unique combination of centralised state control and significant local autonomy, the latter largely stemming from the private, predominantly religious ownership and management of most publicly funded schools.

Over the past two decades, a shifting policy landscape has redefined the roles and responsibilities of key policy actors within national departments and agencies, as well as their engagement with other stakeholders across the system. These evolving dynamics are examined in the sections that follow, using the supranational, national, regional and school levels as guiding analytical frames. The overall institutional structure of this policy landscape is conceptualised as a series of interconnected layers, extending from the supranational context through national and regional structures to the local school level. Drawing on Walsh's (2023) schema as a contextual mapping device, this layered perspective is used to describe the institutional and governance architecture of Irish education policy rather than as a theoretical model for analysing curriculum-making activity. Its value in this thesis lies in clarifying how key actors and structures are positioned within the system, and how these positions may afford or constrain voice, influence, interaction, and policy mediation. Understanding these structures is important for understanding how curriculum policy is shaped and enacted across the Irish education system. Each of these layers is explored in the subsections that follow.

2.4 International and supranational level

By the second half of the twentieth century, the impact of globalisation and the rising influence of supranational actors on Irish curriculum policy had become increasingly apparent. Educational reform and improvement agendas, particularly those centred

on curriculum, became abundant across education systems globally, driven in part by transnational policy dynamics and increasing global interconnectedness (Grek, 2009). These influences are mediated through a complex web of relationships in which international organisations exert both explicit and implicit power over national policymaking. As Sellar and Lingard (2013: 722) argue, the authority of organisations such as the OECD has been significantly strengthened through the rise of evidence-based policy development, allowing them to exert both infrastructural and epistemological governance across national contexts.

In the Irish case, this influence has been particularly notable since the 1960s, when Ireland became the first country to voluntarily invite an OECD review of its education system. Since then, OECD thinking has become deeply embedded in Irish education policy and reform efforts (Sugrue, 2006; O'Doherty, 2014). Conway and Murphy (2013) identify the OECD's PISA as a particularly powerful mechanism of influence, shaping national reform agendas through comparative performance metrics and fostering a policy culture that privileges international benchmarking.

The redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum must be understood within this broader international policy environment. In response to Ireland's declining performance in the 2009 PISA cycle, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, DES, 2011) was launched, placing a strong emphasis on measurable standards, targeted interventions and instructional time in literacy and numeracy. While designed to raise attainment levels, this narrowed focus generated tensions within the system, particularly around the challenge of balancing the holistic aims of the primary curriculum with a renewed prioritisation of core competencies (Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013). As part of the actions assigned to the NCCA under this strategy, a revised *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* based on learning outcomes was introduced in 2016 and extended to all class levels by 2019 (DES, 2019). In addition to this, the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools* was published in 2023 (DE, 2023) and this has been introduced into all schools since September 2024.

Alongside OECD influence, the European Union has become an increasingly important actor in shaping Irish education policy. Policies such as *Education and Training 2020* and the vision for a *European Education Area* have promoted greater alignment in curriculum content and priorities across member states (Klatt & Milana, 2020). This has included a shared focus on digital skills, key competences for lifelong

learning and inclusive education. Soft governance mechanisms such as those exercised by Eurostat, Eurydice have further embedded EU policy logics within national decision-making (Grek & Lawn, 2009). Membership of EU agencies such as the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has impacted on the direction and shape of inclusive education policy in the Irish context, thus impacting on curriculum provisions also.

Ireland's geopolitical position and historical ties to other nations have also shaped its policy environment. Skerritt (2019) argues that recent developments, including the promotion of more "autonomous" schools (DES, 2015), reflect influences from the UK's education reform agenda. Limond (2010) similarly asserts that Irish education policy has long mirrored British developments due to their entangled histories, although this claim has been critically examined and challenged by scholars such as O'Donoghue and Harford (2012). In a wider context, Anglo-American policy trends, particularly those associated with standards-based reform and managerial accountability, continue to exert a strong pull on Irish education (Lynch et al., 2012), underscoring the reality that curriculum reform unfolds within a transnational policy field marked by borrowing, adaptation and negotiation.

2.5 National level

At the national level, education policy in Ireland is framed by both constitutional principles and legislative structures. The Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937) outlines the foundational rights and responsibilities of the state, parents and other actors in education. The Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) builds on this framework, providing the primary legislative basis for the governance and administration of education. It defines the statutory responsibilities of the Minister for Education, school patrons, boards of management, teachers, parents and relevant national agencies (Glendenning, 2018).

Since the 1990s, Ireland has embraced a policy culture shaped by social partnership and consultative governance (Coolahan et al., 2017). Public engagement and stakeholder consultation have become integral to educational decision-making and are enshrined as requirements under the Education Act. As Farry (2006) notes, consultation reflects the broader commitment to participatory policymaking that underpins much of Ireland's social policy development. In this spirit, the Department of Education has articulated a commitment to policy implementation "in a spirit of partnership with other key stakeholders" (DES, 2016: 6), including school patrons,

boards of management and representative organisations. While curriculum content and assessment remain centrally governed, schools enjoy considerable autonomy in relation to pedagogy and ethos. The Department of Education (DES, 2015) has acknowledged this asymmetry, noting that while boards of management have a strong degree of independence in local school governance, curricular autonomy is more constrained.

Building on this consultative culture, the past three decades have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of legislation and policy at national level. The OECD Review of Irish Education (1991) is often identified as a turning point, initiating a wave of reform that culminated in the Education Act 1998, which formally established the governance framework for education. This Act was followed by a series of legislative milestones, including the Education Welfare Act (2000), the Teaching Council Act (2001) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), each of which extended the state's regulatory and developmental role in education. Collectively, these measures marked the gradual construction of a more formalised and complex education policy infrastructure.

From 2011 onwards, this trajectory of reform accelerated. *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011), the phased introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (DES, 2016; 2019), the *Looking at Our Schools documents* (DES, 2016; DE, 2022), *School Self-Evaluation* processes (DES, 2012; 2016) and most recently the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* (DE, 2023), illustrate the breadth of curricular and pedagogical reform. Alongside these, initiatives in early childhood education and care, teacher education and induction, inclusive education, transitions, assessment and standardised testing and Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education contributed to a dense and multifaceted policy environment. Together, these developments reflect a shift towards greater state involvement and coordination in the formulation and implementation of education policy.

The Department of Education, led by the Minister and managed by the Secretary General, oversees education policy, legislation and funding for early childhood (in part), primary, post-primary, special education and aspects of further education. Key policy work is carried out through specialist divisions, including:

- Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit: coordinates curriculum reform in collaboration with the NCCA, Inspectorate, State Examinations Commission and others.
- Inspectorate: provides system-level oversight and contributes to policy through school evaluations and pedagogical expertise.
- Teacher Education Section: responsible for teacher education and professional learning through national support services and agencies (e.g. OIDE²).
- Gaeltacht and Special Education Units, and dedicated North–South and international cooperation units, reflect targeted education priorities and partnerships.

These structures are supported by a range of national agencies under the Department's aegis. Ireland's education system features eighteen national agencies under the Department of Education and Youth. Each is tasked with advancing a specialised area of policy.

2.5.1 Education partners and wider stakeholders

In addition to national agencies, seventeen recognised partners in education have formal roles in policy development. These include:

- Ten school management bodies, representing both religious and non-religious interests, that have managerial responsibility for schools.
- Three teacher unions, one at primary school level and two at post-primary level, that represent the views of their members in terms of education policy development.
- Two principal organisations: the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) for the primary sector and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) for the post-primary sector.

² Oide is the national professional learning support service for teachers and school leaders in Ireland. Established in 2023 through the amalgamation of four existing support services (Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Oide provides coordinated professional learning and leadership support across all sectors of education under the aegis of the Department of Education.

- Two parents' organisations: The National Parents' Council Primary and the National Parents' Council Post-primary, which represent the views of parents in their respective sectors.

The rights of the partners in education are mobilized by their representation on a wide range of educational bodies and agencies, including the NCCA. Again, many of these partners regularly publish and disseminate policy documents to fulfil their remits or to support their constituencies in the interpretation and enactment of wider educational policy.

Beyond these statutory partners, education policy is also impacted by a wide range of state departments and agencies that impact both directly and indirectly on education. In recent times, dedicated state departments have been established or reconfigured to lead policy development for the early childhood education sector (the Department of Children, Disability and Equality) and the higher education sector (the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science). TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, also has a broad remit for education especially in terms of child protection and welfare. At a macro level, the resourcing of education, like all other public services, is determined by the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

In addition to the formally recognised education partners and agencies operating under the aegis of the Department of Education, the Irish educational landscape is shaped by a diverse and expansive array of wider educational stakeholders. These organisations, groups and institutions play a pivotal role in both policy and curriculum development, often serving as representatives of broader constituencies with whom they engage and consult. In the absence of formal regional governance structures, many of these stakeholders act as important intermediaries between national policy and local implementation, much like the recognised education partners.

Among these key stakeholders is the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, established in 2004, which works to promote the rights and welfare of children and plays a critical role in investigating complaints made by or on behalf of children. Patronage and trustee bodies have also become increasingly significant, particularly in the context of the decline in religious vocations. These bodies oversee the managerial responsibilities of schools aligned to various religious denominations, with one of their core functions being the preservation and promotion of school ethos. For instance, the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools represents 64 such trustee bodies with specific responsibility for Catholic schools. Similarly, the Irish

Episcopal Conference, the assembly of Catholic bishops in Ireland, has established a Council for Education to articulate and promote a policy vision for Catholic education.

Language and cultural representation are supported by organisations such as Gaeloideachas and Foras na Gaeilge, which play a prominent role in Irish language education and policy advocacy. The evolving early childhood education sector has seen the emergence of several voluntary and advocacy groups, including Early Childhood Ireland, the Federation of Early Childhood Providers and Plé, the national association of higher education institutions offering degrees in early childhood education and care. These organisations have become increasingly important, particularly as the interface between early childhood and primary education continues to grow.

Student representation has also gained prominence, most notably through the work of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU). The ISSU has emerged as a central voice in articulating student perspectives on education policy, particularly during periods of disruption such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, a range of teacher subject associations, along with groups such as the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), contribute to policy dialogue from a professional and pedagogical standpoint.

Higher education institutions, particularly those involved in initial teacher education and professional learning are also key players in the development of education policy, given their role along the teacher education continuum. Depending on the nature of the policy issue under consideration, other stakeholders such as business organisations and various non-governmental advocacy bodies may also be engaged in consultative processes.

This broad and varied stakeholder engagement highlights the pluralistic nature of curriculum and policy development in Ireland, though it also presents challenges in terms of ensuring coherence, representation and sustained dialogue across multiple levels of the system. Within this pluralistic context, the NCCA occupies a particularly significant position as the statutory body with direct responsibility for curriculum and assessment development across early years, primary and post-primary education. Given the focus of this chapter on curriculum, it is therefore appropriate to examine the work of the NCCA in greater depth.

2.5.2 The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

The NCCA is a statutory agency that advises the Minister for Education on all matters related to curriculum and assessment across early childhood, primary and post-primary education. The NCCA plays the most direct role in curriculum policy among Ireland's eighteen national education agencies under the aegis of the Department of Education and operates under a formal Oversight and Performance Delivery Agreement with the Department, which structures its governance, funding and reporting relationships (NCCA, 2020: 43).

Its 26-member Council is appointed by the Minister and includes nominees from recognised education partners and social partners. These include school management bodies, teacher unions, parent councils, higher education institutions and other stakeholder organisations. This explicitly representative governance model reflects the ethos of social partnership that has shaped Irish education policy since the 1990s (Granville, 2004). A full list of nominating bodies and current members is available on NCCA's website: [NCCA Council Membership and Structure](#).

However, while formally representative, the structure is not without critique. Scholars such as Gleeson (2021) and Sugrue (2004; 2006) have questioned the depth and equity of stakeholder influence within such frameworks. Critics note that the model may over-represent established institutional actors while under-representing others, such as children, ethnic minority communities, special education practitioners or early years educators outside of formal networks. Gleeson describes this phenomenon as the symbolic inclusion of practitioners, where participation in consultative processes does not necessarily translate into policy impact. These critiques highlight the limitations of the representative model embedded in the Education Act 1998, which, though inclusive in theory, may reproduce hierarchical and managerial dominance in practice.

2.5.3 The curriculum development process

The reform of the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) formally began in 2011, when the NCCA initiated an initial consultation process to identify new priorities for primary education (NCCA, 2012). This marked the beginning of an iterative, collaborative redevelopment process that has been extensively documented by Walsh (2022; 2025) in his account of curriculum reform in *Charting the Redevelopment Process*. Over the following decade, the NCCA facilitated a series of structured engagements through surveys, forums and focus groups, including direct

consultations with parents and children (NCCA, 2019a). Further engagements, such as the Schools Forum³, allowed for broader discussion around proposed changes to curriculum structure and time allocation (NCCA, 2018).

The NCCA's work is organised around four interconnected areas of activity that collectively inform its advice to the Minister for Education (NCCA, 2022):

1. Research

Drawing on both national and international sources, the NCCA commissions and synthesises research to ground curricular reform in evidence-based policy and emerging educational needs.

2. Consultation

Robust consultation processes are central to the NCCA's work, including engagement with children, parents, teachers, school leaders and wider stakeholders. These processes seek to ensure democratic legitimacy and relevance to practice.

3. Networking

Through professional networks and ongoing dialogue with schools, sectoral bodies, and education partners, the NCCA gathers contextual insights and feedback that inform the development of proposals.

4. Deliberation

Drawing on the outputs of the previous three areas, internal deliberations by Council members, boards and development groups synthesise evidence and feedback into formal policy advice for the Minister.

The curriculum development process in Figure 2.3 (Walsh, 2025: 3) visualises the interaction of these four strands (research, consultation, networking and deliberation) as an iterative model of curriculum development. These engagements and iterative processes ultimately led to the publication of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* in 2020 and, subsequently, the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* in March 2023. This outcome reflects an ongoing commitment to deliberative, evidence-informed and inclusive curriculum development.

³ The NCCA established a [Schools' Forum](#) of 60 early childhood settings, primary, and post-primary schools to support its curriculum redevelopment work. The forum meets face-to-face and/or online every six weeks during the school year to explore the big ideas in the curriculum development proposals and to reflect on the opportunities and challenges for practice in their respective contexts.

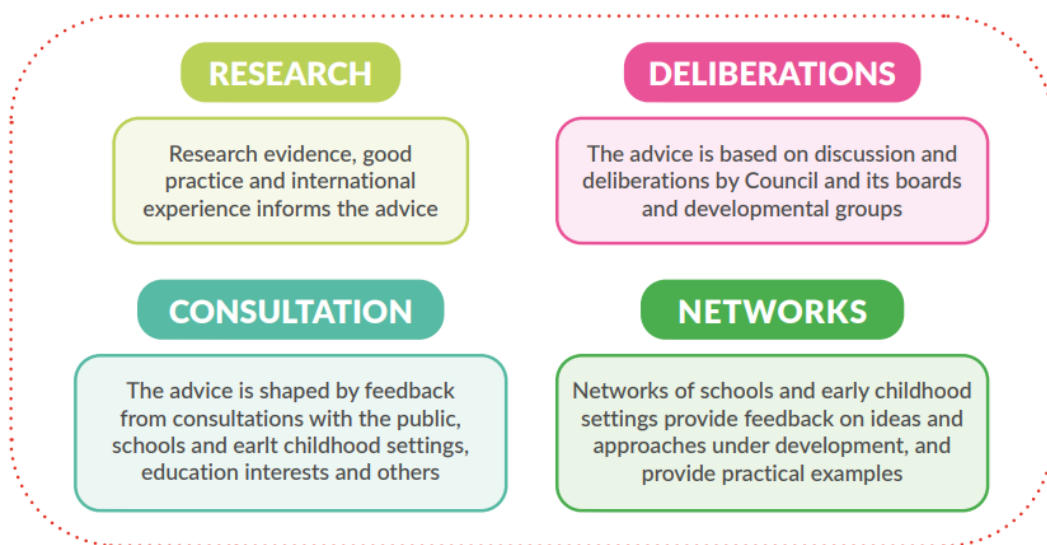


Figure 1.2: The curriculum development process (Walsh, 2025)

The process has helped to establish an expectation of engagement and learning across the system. A wide array of forums both online and face-to-face have enabled diverse stakeholders to engage in respectful dialogue, express divergent viewpoints and work towards shared understanding (Walsh, 2025). These forums have brought together individuals who may not typically interact, helping to develop cross-sectoral perspectives.

The NCCA also recognises that curriculum is both a discursive and textual practice (Ball, 1993), requiring space for professional dialogue and sense-making. This view is echoed by Pietarinen et al. (2017), who emphasise that collaborative engagement fosters both individual and collective meaning-making in curriculum reform. By involving the professional community especially teachers not simply as implementers but as curriculum co-designers, the process has promoted stronger ownership and legitimacy. The result is a curriculum framework that is more context-responsive, research-informed and professionally grounded, reflecting inputs from the supranational, national and local levels.

2.6 Regional level

Ireland's education system is characterised by a notable absence of formal regional governance structures, resulting in a relatively direct relationship between individual schools and national departments, agencies and education partners. This structural feature of Irish education has significant implications for policy mediation, coherence and system-level support.

In the 1990s, a policy decision was taken to centralise educational governance through national executive agencies operating under the aegis of the Department of Education, rather than through devolved regional authorities. This centralising logic was subsequently embedded in legislation (Coolahan, 2017; Walshe, 1999), and continues to shape the operational landscape today. In a country of under five million people, this model may have been seen as administratively efficient, yet it has created a policy vacuum at the meso level, limiting opportunities for regional interpretation, coordination and support in the enactment of curriculum and wider reform.

There are, however, two partial exceptions that serve regionally oriented functions:

- Education and Training Boards (ETBs): Sixteen ETBs operate regionally across the country, providing governance for approximately 35% of post-primary schools and for less than 1% of primary schools. Their influence on curriculum and policy development at the primary level is therefore minimal. While ETBs offer a valuable governance function in the post-primary and further education sectors, their remit does not extend to system-wide curriculum mediation.
- Education Centres Network: Operating under the umbrella of ESCI, the network of regional Education Centres provides vital spaces for teacher professional learning, support services and communities of practice. While not mandated as policy mediators, these centres play an important informal role in connecting national policy to local practice, particularly in the area of curriculum support and implementation.

As outlined in [Chapter 1](#), Ireland's education system lacks a formal regional tier, leaving a significant gap between national policy structures and individual schools. While the absence of regional governance may reduce additional layers of hierarchy and bureaucracy, it also means that many meso-level functions, such as policy mediation, professional support, communication and curriculum interpretation, are

dispersed across a range of education partners and stakeholder organisations. In practice, these actors often operate as de facto intermediaries between national policy and schools, facilitating communication, interpretation and, at times, resistance to policy initiatives. However, because these functions are distributed rather than structurally coordinated, support and enactment may vary across contexts, particularly in areas such as curriculum reform where sustained professional dialogue and contextual responsiveness are important.

Rather than positioning the absence of a formal regional layer as inherently problematic, this study suggests that the more significant issue relates to how meso-level functions are organised and supported within the Irish system. As Ireland continues to enact a redeveloped primary curriculum, questions arise regarding the system's capacity to sustain professional networks, build shared understanding and respond dynamically to local needs. Strengthening meso-level coordination through enhanced collaboration among education partners, regional professional networks, or more structured engagement through Education Centres may therefore warrant consideration in future developments.

2.7 School level

The complexity of Ireland's national education landscape, characterised by a proliferation of policies, agencies and stakeholders, is not effectively counterbalanced by a robust infrastructure at the school level that might mediate, interpret, or contribute meaningfully to national policymaking (Walsh, 2023). Instead, primary schools often operate as individualised units, navigating curriculum policies and change with limited time, structural support or systemic coherence.

State primary schools in Ireland are publicly funded but predominantly privately owned and managed, primarily by religious and denominational bodies. Under the patronage system, these patrons hold significant property and governance rights, particularly concerning the ethos of schools. Each school is governed by a voluntary and representative Board of Management, which is primarily accountable to the patron (Government of Ireland, 1998). The board authorises decision-making at the school level, with many operational responsibilities delegated to the school principal. In small schools, principals often hold teaching roles, adding complexity to their leadership and administrative duties. In the 2024/2025 school year, there were 1,517

teaching principals and 1,565 administrative principals in Ireland⁴. This near parity in numbers underscores the distinctive character of Irish primary leadership, where a significant proportion of principals continue to teach while simultaneously managing the organisational and instructional demands of their schools.

The Education Act 1998 established the governance framework that continues to structure the operation of schools. As outlined in [Section 2.5](#), subsequent waves of legislation and reform have considerably expanded the responsibilities placed on school leaders and teachers. New requirements in areas such as child welfare, teacher regulation and inclusion have introduced additional layers of accountability, often without corresponding increases in time, staffing or structural support. At school level, these developments have intensified administrative and procedural demands, leaving principals and teachers navigating an increasingly complex reform environment with limited capacity for collaboration or sustained curriculum engagement.

This relentless pace of reform has had profound implications for school leaders, particularly principals. Sugrue (2008: 40) famously described the flow of policy change as occurring with "mesmerising regularity," placing mounting pressure on schools to interpret and enact policy. Principals must now balance leadership, teaching, administrative and compliance roles, often without adequate time or professional support.

For classroom teachers, the demands are similarly acute. According to OECD data, the Irish teaching contract focuses almost exclusively on direct teaching time, leaving little space during the school day for policy engagement or curriculum development (DES, 2018). Irish class sizes are among the highest in OECD countries (DES, 2020b), further limiting opportunities for professional dialogue or collaborative planning. These structural features present real barriers to the deep engagement and professional agency required for meaningful curriculum enactment.

As previously noted, the absence of a formal regional infrastructure in Ireland creates a structural gap between national policy and local practice. This lack of intermediary support places significant interpretive and operational demands on individual schools. In response, a diverse ecosystem of stakeholders has emerged to help bridge this gap. While not formally embedded within the system as regional

⁴ Data obtained through direct correspondence with the Statistics Section of the Department of Education and Youth (personal communication, September 23, 2025), in response to a request for information on the number of teaching principals in Irish primary schools.

authorities, these organisations often operate as de facto intermediaries advocating for particular interests, providing guidance and shaping policy discourse through consultation and representation. Their role in the Irish education landscape is therefore both strategic and compensatory, contributing to coherence, advocacy and support in a system otherwise marked by fragmentation.

Efforts to bridge this gap include the creation of the Primary Education Forum in 2018, designed to enhance alignment and coherence between national agencies and schools (White, 2020). Nevertheless, system fragmentation persists. While formal governance lines are clear between the Department of Education and Youth and its agencies, the relationships between agencies and between agencies and schools, are more diffuse and less structured.

2.8 Bridging policy levels

While interaction across Ireland's education system occurs at multiple levels, points of connection between national policy and school practice remain uneven. National curriculum development bodies like the NCCA operate at the intersection of policy and practice, facilitating structured dialogue with schools, stakeholders and international trends. Similarly, Education Centres and professional networks like Oide and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) offer valuable support where curriculum policy is interpreted and translated into practice. Initiatives like the Primary Education Forum and Schools Forum have created intentional interfaces between schools and national agencies, aiming to enhance coherence and mutual understanding. However, these points of interaction are often episodic rather than embedded, and dependent on individual agency or temporary structures rather than systemic design. In the absence of a formal regional layer, there is limited infrastructure to sustain cross-level dialogue, build interpretive capacity or provide feedback loops that might inform and adapt national policy based on lived realities at the school level.

This condition contributes to what Walsh (2023) characterises as "vertical fragmentation" in the Irish education system, a disconnection between those who design policy and those who enact it. Moreover, as noted by Priestley et al. (2021), the relational and discursive nature of curriculum making requires more than the transmission of policy; it demands ongoing dialogue, trust and contextual responsiveness across levels. Yet the current policy environment in Ireland can inadvertently reproduce hierarchical dynamics, where consultation may be symbolic

rather than substantive and where schools are positioned primarily as sites of delivery rather than partners in curriculum development.

Compounding this is the tendency toward siloed policy-making, where different departments, agencies and stakeholder groups work in parallel but not always in concert. For instance, policies on teacher professional learning, inclusion or digital competence may emerge from distinct policy strands with limited cross-referencing or coordination, placing the burden of integration on schools. While structures such as cross-agency working groups and interdepartmental committees exist, their influence on curricular coherence is not always visible at the point of practice.

Efforts to build greater alignment across the system must therefore address not only the structures of governance, but also the cultures of interaction. This includes fostering spaces where educators, policy-makers, researchers and other stakeholders can engage in reciprocal dialogue, share knowledge and co-construct understandings of curriculum in context. Strengthening the meso level, whether through more structured roles for Education Centres or the development of regional coordination mechanisms, may offer one pathway toward greater coherence and capacity-building. Ultimately, for curriculum reform to be sustained and impactful, the system must move beyond episodic consultation toward a more integrated, relational model of policy-making, one that values collaborative agency, fosters trust across levels and supports meaning-making in context.

2.9 Conclusion

This mapping of the Irish education policy landscape has highlighted the complex, multi-layered environment in which curriculum development, mediation and enactment take place. Influenced by global trends and supranational bodies, yet deeply shaped by national histories, structures and actors, Irish curriculum policy reflects both international convergence and local specificity. While recent reforms signal a shift toward greater consultation and decentralisation, curriculum development remains largely centralised and the absence of formal regional infrastructure limits system-wide coherence and support. Mapping these structures was important not only in describing the institutional form of the system, but also in clarifying where key actors and structures are positioned within the Irish education landscape, and how this positioning may afford or constrain voice, influence, interaction, and policy mediation across different sites of curriculum activity.

Across the supranational, national, regional and school levels, curriculum policy is shaped and mediated by a diverse array of actors from international organisations and national agencies to professional associations, school leaders and classroom teachers. However, the interaction between these levels remains uneven. Siloed policy-making, fragmented implementation pathways and limited cross-level dialogue continue to pose challenges for sustained, meaningful reform. The policy space is further complicated by a growing reliance on stakeholder engagement, which, while valuable, can risk being symbolic unless embedded in deeper structures of participatory decision-making.

These dynamics point to the need for a more integrated and relational approach to curriculum policy, one that strengthens the meso level, fosters collaborative agency and creates intentional spaces for dialogue and sense-making across the system. As the literature review that follows will show, understanding curriculum reform not only requires mapping its policy landscape, but also engaging critically with the concepts of leadership, agency and coherence that underpin how curriculum is developed, mediated and enacted in practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Curriculum change is both exciting and challenging. Its history, in Ireland and internationally, is replete with examples of ambitious and progressive policy provisions that have not become embedded in widespread practice (Walsh, 2012; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2013). The publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) marks an attempt to move away from a nationally prescribed curriculum towards a more contextualised approach in which content and pedagogy are determined at school and classroom levels. This shift represents a significant cultural and professional change, prompting schools to move from an individual to a more collaborative culture where teachers and school leaders work together to use their collective professional capital and agency to interpret, negotiate and enact the redeveloped curriculum. It is at the school level where the most significant challenges are likely to emerge.

This chapter reviews relevant literature in the context of the research question: How do primary school principals interact with broader meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment?

The literature for this chapter was identified through a combination of systematic and purposive search strategies. Initial searches were conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC and JSTOR, accessed via Maynooth University Library. Keywords and search strings included combinations of terms such as *curriculum making*, *school leadership*, *educational policy*, *meso-level actors* and *curriculum reform in Ireland*. In addition to these structured searches, my professional role as an Education Officer with NCCA afforded me a deep familiarity with the field and access to key literature, policy documents and emerging scholarship. This dual perspective, academic researcher and practitioner, enabled a critically informed and contextually relevant selection of sources, including literature that may not yet be widely indexed in academic repositories but holds significant relevance for the Irish curriculum reform context.

Given the large volume of articles, reports and papers that emerged, it was necessary to apply selection criteria to narrow the range. In the next stage of selection, I filtered the articles/papers/books by choosing articles/papers/books:

- that examined the role of school leaders in leading teaching and learning and curriculum change.
- addressed professional and teacher agency.
- explored policy and curriculum coherence, particularly through the lens of sense-making.

Reference lists of selected literature were reviewed to identify additional sources through backward citation tracking. While priority was given to work published in the past 10–15 years to ensure contemporary relevance, seminal earlier studies foundational to the field were also included.

The chapter begins by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins this study. Drawing on Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framing of curriculum making and Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy, this framework provides the conceptual basis for analysing principals' engagement with curriculum change. Together, these perspectives illuminate both the social practices and human dimensions of curriculum leadership, offering a lens through which to interpret principals' experiences across the system.

The remainder of the literature review is structured around three interconnected themes, each contributing to the study's theoretical framing and empirical focus:

1. **Leadership in education**, which explores evolving conceptions of leadership and the role of principals in curriculum development, mediation, and enactment.
2. **Professional agency**, which examines how school leaders' agency is relational, situated and mediated by system conditions.
3. **Curriculum coherence and system conditions**, which considers how leadership, alignment, and meso-level structures shape curriculum sense-making and enactment.

Together, these themes provide a layered understanding of the conditions that shape principals' curriculum work and their engagement within the meso-level policy space.

3.2 Theoretical framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study's exploration of principals' engagement with curriculum making in Ireland, with particular attention

to the meso level. As outlined in Chapter One ([Section 1.4](#)), the research question and specific aims guiding this inquiry provide the foundation for the theoretical tools introduced here. Two interconnected frameworks are employed: Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framework for curriculum making and Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory, with a particular focus on self-efficacy. Together, these frameworks offer a complementary lens through which to examine how principals perceive their capacity, motivation and agency as they navigate the complex social and organisational dynamics of curriculum making. They enable a dual focus on the social-relational dimensions of leadership and the individual beliefs that shape principals' curriculum engagement. Building on the preliminary definition outlined in [Section 1.6](#), the following section offers a more substantial conceptualisation of curriculum to ground the theoretical discussion that follows.

3.2.1 Conceptualising curriculum

The term 'curriculum' means different things to different people depending on their context (Dempsey, 2023: 40). It is deeply contested, reflecting the multiple purposes education is expected to serve and the diverse theoretical traditions from which it draws. Early curriculum theorists such as Dewey (1902) located curriculum in the lived experiences of the child, arguing that learning should begin with the learner's interests and experiences. Tyler (1949), writing from a more technical perspective, proposed that curriculum design should begin with clear objectives, with learning experiences, instruction and evaluation logically aligned to these aims. Bruner's (1966) notion of a spiral curriculum extended this rational view by emphasising the progressive deepening of understanding and the development of self-directed learners.

Later scholars challenged these modernist perspectives, emphasising the political, cultural and moral dimensions of curriculum. Stenhouse (1975: 4) defined curriculum as "an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice." His definition foregrounds teachers as active agents, empowered to interpret, adapt and critique curricular proposals rather than merely implement them. Freire (1985) similarly viewed curriculum as a vehicle for emancipation and social change, while critical theorists such as Apple (2019), Lynch (1989) and Giroux (2001) have exposed how curriculum represents struggles over whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are marginalised.

Expanding on Stenhouse's work, Grundy (1987) conceptualised curriculum as praxis, a form of informed, committed action underpinned by moral and political intent. Grundy distinguished between curriculum as product, process and praxis. Curriculum as product reflects a technical orientation, focused on predetermined objectives and measurable outcomes. Curriculum as process shifts attention to the interactions and experiences of teaching and learning, acknowledging the interpretive work of educators. Curriculum as praxis goes further, positioning curriculum as a form of ethical and socially situated action, created through reflection, dialogue and the negotiation of meaning within specific contexts. For Grundy, curriculum is not an abstract concept but "a way of organising a set of human educational practices" (1987: 5). This understanding resonates strongly with this study's focus on curriculum as an enacted and relational practice shaped by professional agency, values and context.

Postmodern writers, most notably Pinar (2019), have advanced this relational understanding by framing curriculum as a complex conversation, a dialogic process situated in the lived experiences of teachers and students and continually shaped by historical, political and personal contexts. In this view, curriculum is not a static product or document but a relational process through which meaning, identity and knowledge are negotiated. Echoing this, Looney (2014: 13) describes curriculum as "the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next," capturing its narrative, ethical and cultural dimensions.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that curriculum encompasses three interrelated dimensions: the content or knowledge to be learned, the process of design and development and the pedagogical practice through which it is enacted. Contemporary discourse further extends this understanding to include competencies, values and dispositions, reflecting the influence of supranational bodies such as the OECD and the global shift toward defining education through learning outcomes and twenty-first-century skills (Goodson, 2014).

In the Irish context, these international trend intersect with a national move toward greater school agency in curriculum decision-making. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) explicitly calls for schools to engage in local curriculum development and collaborative professional inquiry, positioning curriculum as a living process shaped by teachers' and leaders' interpretation and judgment. This aligns with contemporary conceptions of curriculum as a dynamic, socially constructed

practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Priestley & Biesta, 2013) and provides the foundation for this study's focus on development, mediation and enactment.

Accordingly, this research adopts an enacted view of curriculum, one that recognises curriculum as both text and practice, as policy and experience. It views curriculum making as a social process situated within particular contexts and shaped by relationships, structures and professional agency. This conceptualisation underpins the theoretical framework that follows, which explores how curriculum is made across system levels (Priestley et al., 2021) and how principals' beliefs, motivations and self-efficacy influence their capacity to lead and mediate this work (Bandura, 1997).

3.2.2 Curriculum making as a social practice

A rich body of literature has sought to theorise how curriculum is made across education systems. Early models such as Goodlad's (1979) levels of curriculum (societal, institutional, instructional and later personal) were influential in highlighting the multiple contexts in which curriculum decisions occur. However, Goodlad's work has been critiqued for its linear and hierarchical framing, despite his emphasis on negotiation and two-way communication between levels. Subsequent writers sought to refine this model while retaining the idea of levels. Doyle (1992), for example, identified institutional and classroom levels as distinct yet interconnected domains of curriculum discourse, positioning teachers as active "curriculum makers" who interpret and enact curriculum texts in context.

Building on this, Deng (2012) proposed three interrelated contexts: societal (macro), institutional (meso) and instructional (micro/nano) emphasising translation across these as a dynamic process. In this view, curriculum making involves the transformation of formal curriculum frameworks into meaningful educative experiences for learners (Deng et al., 2013). Thijs and Van den Akker's (2008) more fine-grained typology extended this systemic framing by differentiating scales of curriculum activity: supra (international), macro (national/system), meso (school/institute), micro (classroom/teacher) and nano (pupil/individual). These perspectives collectively highlight that curriculum is constructed and negotiated at multiple levels. However, they also tend to imply a hierarchical structure and afford limited scope for multidirectional interaction or the fluid movement of actors, ideas and practices across levels.

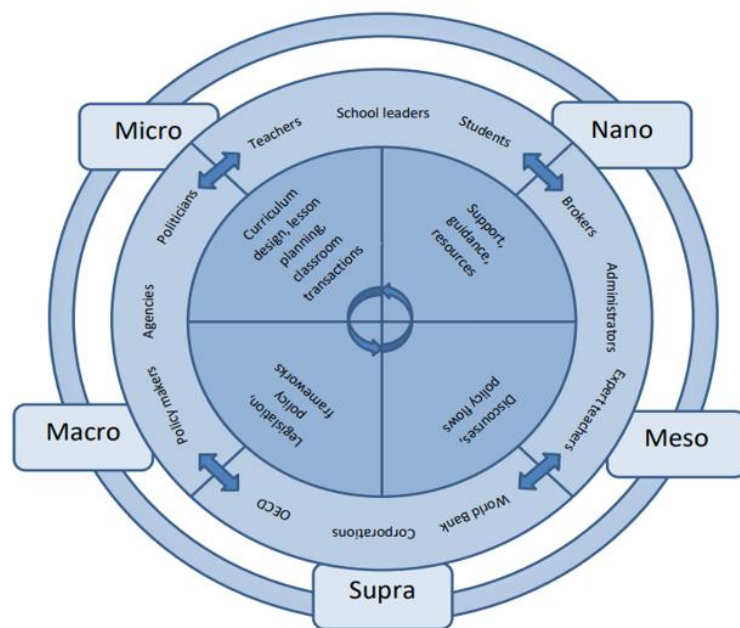


Figure 2.1: Curriculum making site, actors and activities (Priestley et al., 2021)

To address these limitations, Priestley et al. (2021) propose a heuristic framework (Figure 3.1) that reconceptualises curriculum making as a dynamic, relational and non-hierarchical activity across five sites: supra, macro, meso, micro and nano. Rather than associating sites with fixed roles or positions, their framework focuses on the type of activity taking place, with actors able to move across sites depending on the work they are doing. Underpinning this perspective is Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological understanding of agency, which conceptualises professional action as emerging through the interplay between individual capacities, prior experiences and the wider structural, cultural and relational conditions within which actors operate. This ecological perspective is particularly relevant in the Irish context, where curriculum development and mediation are distributed across a diverse and shifting range of actors and agencies.

Within this study, the ecological understanding of agency complements Bandura's concept of self-efficacy by recognising that principals' confidence and capacity to act are shaped not only by individual beliefs, but also by the broader policy, organisational and relational environments in which curriculum leadership occurs. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which forms a further component of the study's theoretical framing, is explored in greater detail in Section 3.2.3. The following sections contextualise each

site of curriculum making within the Irish education system, drawing on both international and national literature.

Supra

Supra-level curriculum making refers to transnational influences such as international organisations and global policy discourses that shape national education priorities. As outlined in [Chapter 2](#), bodies such as the OECD, European Commission, UNESCO and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) exert influence through agenda setting, consultation and benchmarking exercises such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. These global policy instruments have had a notable impact on Irish curriculum reform, particularly through the promotion of key competencies and evidence-informed approaches to teaching and learning.

For example, the response to the 2009 PISA results contributed to the development of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (DES, 2011). As Walsh (2024) observes, Ireland's ongoing engagement with the OECD and EU has continued to shape curriculum directions, including recent emphases on inclusion, learner diversity, and transversal competencies. Membership in EU agencies, such as the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, further reinforces these influences.

Macro

Macro-level activity in Ireland occurs primarily within the Department of Education. Central actors include:

- The Minister for Education and political leadership.
- The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, responsible for overseeing curricular development and change.
- The Inspectorate, which contributes to policy formation through research and school evaluation.
- The NCCA, the statutory agency advising on curriculum and assessment.

The NCCA plays a pivotal role in shaping the primary curriculum by advising the Minister for Education, facilitating consultation, drafting frameworks and coordinating curriculum specifications. While curriculum policy is developed centrally, the Irish system also maintains high levels of school agency in pedagogy, which influences how curriculum is interpreted and enacted (DES, 2015; Walsh, 2024). This is

particularly relevant to this study, which focuses on how primary school principals navigate these dynamics.

Meso

Meso level activity refers to the translation and mediation of curriculum policy and reform. It is a vital intermediary space connecting national directives with local enactment. In the Irish context, meso level actors include:

- The NCCA (in its consultative and developmental role)
- Oide (formerly the Professional Development Service for Teachers)
- Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) and local education centres
- Curriculum development groups and school networks (e.g., the Schools Forum)
- The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
- The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)
- The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)

Unlike systems with strong regional infrastructures (e.g., Finland), Ireland lacks a formal regional education structure (Walsh, 2024). As a result, meso level mediation is often carried out by national agencies or informal school networks. Initiatives such as the Primary Education Forum were established to improve communication, alignment and sense-making across organisations and levels.

Another key feature of meso level curriculum making in Ireland is the use of secondment, whereby experienced teachers and school leaders are temporarily appointed to national agencies such as Oide, NCCA or NCSE. These secondees play a pivotal role in translating policy into practice, designing professional learning, supporting enactment and facilitating school-level curriculum work. Their dual identity as both educators and system actors enhances their legitimacy and ability to mediate curriculum change. O'Donnell (2021) highlights that secondment can enable forms of teacher leadership and foster relational agency, though it also presents tensions around role identity and re-entry into schools. In this way, secondment operates as a dynamic mechanism of curriculum mediation and policy enactment within Ireland's decentralised meso landscape.

Meso actors mediate curriculum by producing support materials, offering professional learning and translating broad policy goals into school-relevant actions. Mediation is

not merely the dissemination of information; it involves sense-making, negotiation and building coherence (Spillane et al., 2002; Soini et al., 2018). In Ireland, principals often become de facto meso actors, interpreting and communicating curriculum messages within their schools. This role has become increasingly significant with the introduction of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023), which, unlike the more detailed 1999 curriculum, requires ongoing sense-making and interpretive work to translate broad national aims into coherent local practice. This is central to this study's exploration of principal engagement at the meso level.

Micro

Micro curriculum making occurs at the level of schools and teacher teams. It involves the contextualisation and planning of curriculum through local structures such as:

- School leadership teams
- Class planning groups
- Collaborative teacher meetings

Teachers at this level operationalise curricular frameworks by interpreting content and designing learning experiences that reflect school context, ethos and student needs. While formally positioned at the micro level, principals can bridge between macro policy and micro practice, especially in smaller schools where they retain teaching roles. This research seeks to understand how this bridging is perceived and enacted.

Nano

Nano curriculum making refers to the moment-by-moment co-construction of curriculum between teachers and learners. This site is often under-theorised but is crucial in the primary context, where pedagogical flexibility and relational practice are central. Nano-level curriculum making includes:

- Adjusting plans based on student voice or engagement
- Responding to learner needs or interests during lessons
- Personalising instruction based on emerging insights

In this way, nano curriculum making can influence micro and even meso practices. For instance, recurring pupil interests or challenges can lead to adjustments in school-level planning or the development of targeted supports. These examples highlight the fluidity between curriculum making sites.

Suitability of the Theoretical Framework

This heuristic framework is particularly suited to this research for three reasons:

- It offers a non-hierarchical, context-neutral model of curriculum making.
- It emphasises the relational, social and distributed nature of curriculum activity.
- It provides a language to analyse the movements and mediations of principals as they operate across various sites of activity.

3.2.3 Social cognitive theory and self-efficacy

Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) posits that learning and behavioural change occur through the dynamic interaction of personal, environmental and behavioural factors. Central to SCT is the concept of reciprocal causation, illustrated in Figure 3.2 below, which asserts that a person's beliefs and motivations are shaped not only by internal cognition, but also by external social systems and the consequences of behaviour.

At the heart of SCT lies the concept of self-efficacy, one's belief in their ability to successfully organise and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as a key determinant of how people think, feel, behave and motivate themselves. It affects whether individuals approach challenges with confidence or avoid them out of fear or perceived inadequacy.

In the context of school leadership, self-efficacy plays a particularly pivotal role. Principals with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist in the face of complexity, take initiative in leading change and influence others' belief in their collective capacity. Self-efficacy influences not only what people choose to do, but also how much effort they invest and how resilient they are in the face of obstacles (Bandura & Locke, 2003). It is thus central to understanding school leaders' motivation, professional agency and emotional wellbeing in curriculum making.

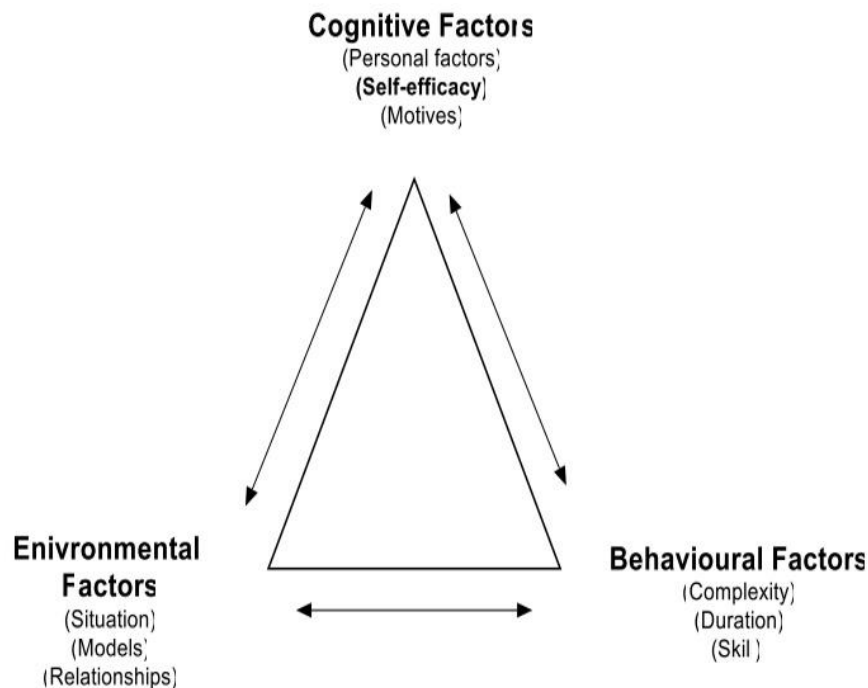


Figure 2.2: Reciprocal causation model (Bandura, 1986)

Bandura (1997) identifies four main sources of self-efficacy, which provide mechanisms through which beliefs in personal capability are developed and reinforced:

- **Enactive mastery:** Derived from direct personal experience of success, this is the most powerful source of self-efficacy. Principals who have previously led or contributed to successful curriculum initiatives are more likely to believe in their capacity to do so again.
- **Vicarious experience:** Observing others (especially peers) successfully navigate similar challenges can enhance one's belief in their own abilities. This is particularly relevant in principal networks or professional learning communities.
- **Verbal persuasion:** Encouragement and feedback from trusted sources, such as colleagues, inspectors or support personnel, can strengthen leaders' belief in their potential.
- **Physiological and affective states:** Leaders' stress levels, emotional wellbeing and resilience affect how they interpret their capability. Negative emotions may lower efficacy, while confidence, energy and optimism enhance it.

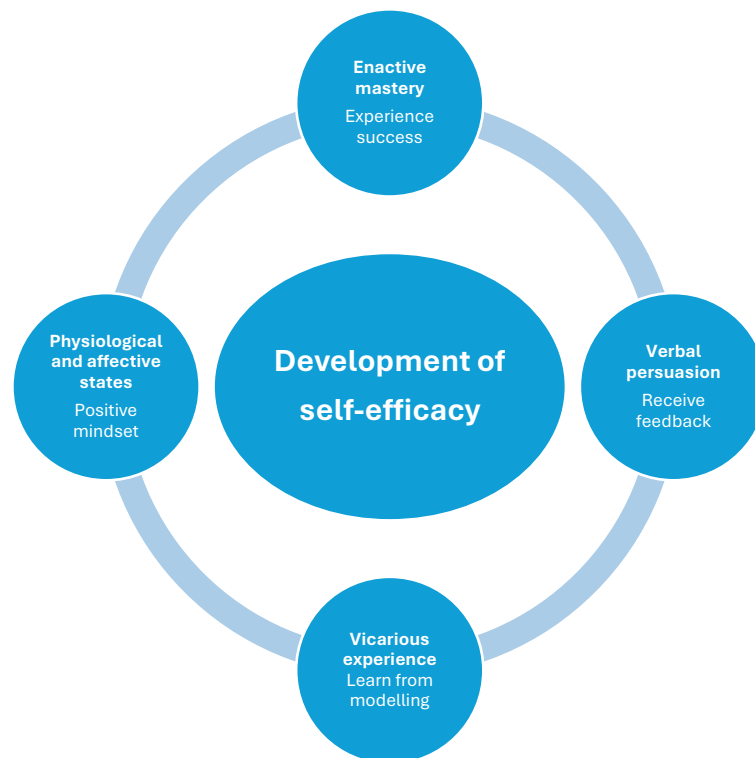


Figure 2.3: Four sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997)

These four sources do not operate in isolation; rather, they intersect with environmental and institutional factors in shaping how school leaders interpret and respond to their professional responsibilities. In curriculum contexts, self-efficacy helps explain how principals interpret their role in driving or supporting curriculum development, mediation and enactment. It also provides insight into the confidence and capacity with which they approach meso level interactions. Therefore, in this study, self-efficacy theory offers more than a personal psychological construct, it becomes a critical interpretive tool to examine how principals' motivation and beliefs interact with the relational and systemic complexities of curriculum making. It enables a more in-depth examination of the human and emotional aspects of leadership within complex policy environments.

Suitability of the theoretical framework

Self-efficacy theory is particularly suited to this research for three reasons:

- It provides a lens to explore the interaction between individual belief, motivation and systemic context, aligning with this study's focus on agency and engagement at the meso level of curriculum making.

- It foregrounds the human and emotional dimensions of leadership practice, offering insight into how principals' confidence, resilience and perceived competence influence their professional actions.
- It complements the social-practice perspective of curriculum making by linking internal psychological processes with the relational and systemic conditions of leadership and curriculum reform.

3.2.4 Bringing the frameworks together

By integrating Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framework with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, this research offers a novel analytical lens to examine principals' curriculum engagement. It moves beyond structural explanations to explore how principals' beliefs about their own capacity shape their curriculum leadership across and within sites of activity. This dual-theoretical approach is particularly powerful in the Irish context, where system complexity, lack of regional infrastructure and increasing demands on school leaders require both conceptual clarity and attention to lived experience.

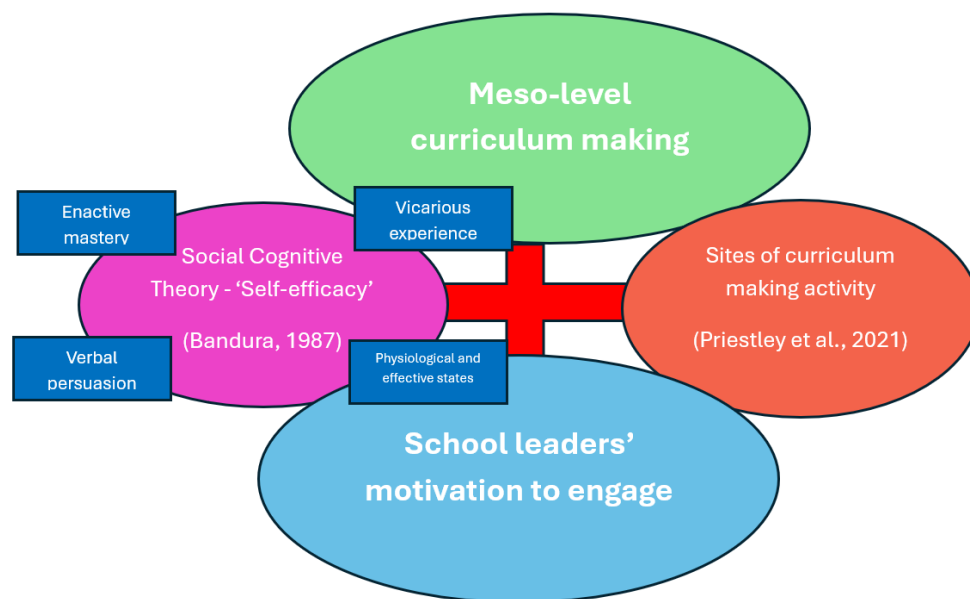


Figure 2.4: Theoretical underpinnings for the research

This combination of frameworks enables a nuanced, practice-sensitive understanding of how Irish primary school principals mediate curriculum change,

reflect on their roles and enact leadership across a fragmented system. In doing so, this research contributes a unique perspective to curriculum studies in Ireland by foregrounding principal agency as a key mediatory force in achieving greater coherence across the system.

Together, Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framework for curriculum making and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy offer a complementary lens through which to examine the interplay between structure and agency in curriculum change. These frameworks illuminate how principals operate within complex, multi-layered systems while simultaneously shaping those systems through their beliefs, motivations, and actions. The following sections build on this theoretical grounding to explore relevant literature on leadership, professional agency and curriculum coherence, beginning with an examination of evolving conceptions of leadership in education and the principal's role in curriculum development, mediation and enactment.

3.3 Leadership in education

This section explores the theme of leadership in education, with particular attention to how school leaders shape, support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment. In the context of this study, focused on how Irish primary school principals interface with broader meso-level actors and activities, leadership is considered not only within the school but also across the wider education system. The literature reviewed here highlights the evolving role of the school leader and examines key frameworks such as instructional, transformational, distributed and leadership for learning, each of which foregrounds the relationship between leadership, teaching and professional growth. It also considers the relational, emotional and collaborative dimensions of leadership practice, recognising the importance of professional learning communities and communities of practice as social spaces through which leadership and curriculum understanding are co-constructed. This review is structured around six interconnected subthemes that frame the analysis which follows.

3.3.1 The evolving role of the school leader

Over the past two decades, the role of the primary school principal has undergone significant transformation. Traditionally viewed as a building manager or administrative overseer, today's school leader is expected to be a pedagogical leader,

change agent and key driver of school improvement (Murphy et al., 2007; Hallinger, 2011; Daniëls et al., 2019). This evolution reflects both international trends and national priorities, including increasing emphasis on student outcomes, teacher professional learning and curriculum change (Fullan, 2007; Day et al., 2010).

In Ireland, this shift is visible in frameworks such as LAOS (2022), which positions school leadership as integral to promoting high-quality learning and teaching (Department of Education, 2022). Principals are no longer expected to manage only the day-to-day running of the school; they are also charged with setting strategic direction, supporting innovation and cultivating a collaborative learning culture (Harris, 2008; Day et al., 2010; Fullan, 2014). As Leithwood and Beatty (2008) note, effective leadership involves not only administrative competence but the ability to build shared purpose, foster professional capacity and lead the enhancement of teaching and learning.

This reconceptualisation of leadership is particularly significant in the context of curriculum change. With the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum, school leaders are being called upon to lead curriculum change, not as passive implementers of policy, but as active agents in shaping how change is understood and enacted in their local contexts (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002; Honig & Hatch, 2004). As explored in this research, principals play a vital mediating role between national policy and school-level realities. They interpret policy, align it with their school's values and capacities and facilitate professional dialogue among staff (Spillane, 2004; Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012). This evolving role requires leaders to engage with both the technical and cultural dimensions of change. On one hand, they must be fluent in curriculum language, assessment practices and evidence-informed pedagogy. On the other, they must navigate interpersonal dynamics, build trust and create conditions for teacher agency and innovation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris, 2008; Frost, 2012). In this way, leadership becomes both a relational and strategic endeavour.

As someone working within curriculum policy and professional development, I have observed firsthand how principals are increasingly expected to straddle multiple domains, including administrative, instructional, emotional and systemic. This complexity not only shapes their daily work but also how they position themselves within the wider policy space. Understanding this evolving role is central to this study, as it provides the foundation for exploring how leaders develop, mediate and enact curriculum in ways that are both context-sensitive and system-aware.

Having considered how the expectations placed on school leaders have expanded, the following section explores different key leadership models (instructional, transformational and distributed leadership) that provide conceptual tools for understanding how leadership supports curriculum development, mediation and enactment. These models are also frequently situated within the broader concept of leadership for learning, which foregrounds the centrality of teaching and learning in leadership practices and highlights the relational and systemic dimensions of curriculum leadership.

3.3.2 Types of leadership

As expectations for school leaders have expanded, so too has the search for leadership models that provide practical guidance on how principals can meaningfully support teaching, learning and change. Among the most prominent models in both academic literature and Irish policy are instructional leadership, transformational leadership and distributed leadership, alongside more recent perspectives such as leadership for learning. Together, these perspectives reflect a growing recognition that effective leadership is both relational and systemic. They collectively offer valuable insights for this study into how school leaders influence curriculum development, support teacher agency and mediate system-level curriculum change in ways that are context-sensitive and sustainable.

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is one of the most well-established models of school leadership, with a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Defined initially by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), it centres on three core functions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive school learning climate. Instructional leaders are expected to set high expectations, monitor teaching quality, support professional learning and align school practices with curricular goals (Robinson et al., 2008; Bush, 2011).

Traditionally, instructional leadership models (Murphy, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) have concentrated on the principal's role in coordinating and controlling instruction, often reflecting a top-down approach (Aas & Brandmo, 2016). While this model has been durable and influential, it has attracted criticism on two main grounds. First, it has been perceived as authoritarian and reliant on hierarchical structures and compliant followers (Marks & Printy, 2003). Second, it has been criticised for focusing more on teaching as a technical act rather than on learning as a socially situated and

complex process (Smythe & Wrigley, 2013). As leadership theory evolved, some scholars argued that instructional leadership lacked clarity in terms of how it could be practically enacted and was increasingly overshadowed by other emerging models (Bush, 2011a). However, Hallinger (2013) contends that instructional leadership remains a central pillar of school leadership theory due to its focus on schools' core purpose: the quality of teaching and learning.

In the Irish context, elements of instructional leadership are evident in the LAOS framework (2022), particularly within the domain of "Leading learning and teaching" (DE, 2022). This domain emphasises the principal's role in modelling high-quality pedagogy, engaging in evidence-informed dialogue with staff and leading planning processes that are responsive to pupils' needs. However, LAOS also promotes a broader, more collaborative conception of leadership, grounded in professional learning, shared responsibility and school-wide capacity building. This aligns more closely with leadership for learning than with traditional, top-down models of instructional leadership. In this way, LAOS reflects a hybrid understanding of leadership that incorporates instructional elements while positioning leadership as a shared and relational endeavour. This is particularly relevant in the current policy context, as the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) places renewed emphasis on learner agency, integrated learning and formative assessment, all of which demand collective engagement and pedagogical coherence across the school community.

For this study, instructional leadership offers a valuable lens through which to examine how school leaders actively support curriculum development, mediation and enactment. It highlights the importance of establishing pedagogical coherence, fostering teacher capacity and mediating curriculum policy into professional practice. However, while instructional leadership provides useful conceptual tools, it also presents some tensions in relation to the enactment perspective adopted in this study. In particular, its traditional framing around the principal's centrality can risk overshadowing the collaborative and distributed nature of curriculum work in schools. Curriculum enactment, as understood in this study, involves shared responsibility, collective interpretation and professional judgement, processes that require leadership practices going beyond coordination and control (Ball et al., 2012; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). Thus, while instructional leadership remains relevant, especially in supporting pedagogical alignment with curriculum goals, it must be situated within a broader understanding of leadership as a relational and contextually embedded practice. This is particularly important given the evolving

policy landscape, which reflects a shift away from linear models of curriculum implementation toward a more situated understanding of curriculum enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015). This reconceptualisation suggests that school leaders may be seen as active mediators who help foster agency, coherence and collective engagement in mediating curriculum policy into meaningful practice.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership emerged in the 1980s as a model that emphasises the capacity of leaders to motivate and inspire others, particularly in the context of organisational change (Gumus & Bellibas, 2016). Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, transformational leadership is concerned with the processes through which leaders influence improvement and cultivate a shared sense of purpose within the school community (Bush & Glover, 2014). Principals who adopt a transformational approach typically seek to articulate a clear vision, model professional values, support staff development and foster a culture of intellectual stimulation and collaboration (Robinson et al., 2008; Day et al., 2016;).

Leithwood and Jantzi's (1999) widely cited framework for transformational leadership outlines six leadership dimensions, such as building vision, offering individualised support and fostering participation in decision-making, alongside four complementary management dimensions, including instructional support and community engagement. These elements position transformational leadership as a model that blends inspirational leadership with practical attention to school operations.

In contrast to the top-down orientation often associated with instructional leadership, transformational leadership is frequently described as a more distributed or shared approach that promotes bottom-up change and collective engagement (Aas & Brandmo, 2016). It has been associated with improved school climates, enhanced relationships and stronger motivation among staff and students (Marks & Printy, 2003; Bush & Glover, 2014). However, this model is not without critique. Some scholars argue that transformational leadership may, in practice, function as a vehicle for reinforcing the leader's values, often aligned with policy or government priorities, rather than genuinely empowering others (Chirichello, 1999; Bottery, 2004). As Bush and Glover (2014: 8) caution, the emphasis on shared values can obscure the reality that "the decisive values are often those of the government and of the principal."

For this study, transformational leadership offers a useful conceptual bridge between instructional and distributed leadership. Its emphasis on vision, collaboration and professional growth resonates with current expectations placed on school leaders to

support curriculum change. However, its limitations, particularly regarding the tension between inspirational leadership and authentic shared agency, highlight the need for leadership approaches that are grounded in trust, dialogue and responsiveness to the complexities of curriculum enactment in context.

Distributed leadership

Building on the foundations laid by instructional and transformational leadership, the discourse has increasingly expanded to include distributed leadership, which shifts the focus toward collective responsibility, professional collaboration and the distribution of influence across the school community. Rooted in the work of Spillane, et al., (2004), distributed leadership shifts the focus from individual leaders to leadership as a collective practice, emerging through interactions between people, tasks and tools. It challenges hierarchical conceptions of leadership by recognising the leadership contributions of teachers, middle leaders and teams across the school.

Distributed leadership is now a dominant framework in Irish education policy. Circular 0070/2018 outlines a leadership and management structure in which senior leaders, assistant principals and teaching staff share responsibility for school improvement and student outcomes (DE, 2018). LAOS 2022 similarly promotes distributed leadership as a means of developing leadership capacity and embedding collaborative practice.

However, the distributed model is not without critique. Scholars have raised concerns about its practical enactment, particularly in contexts where hierarchical structures remain deeply embedded (Hatcher, 2005; Woods, 2007; Lumby, 2013). Torrance (2013) describes how such models may mask the persistence of top-down control, while King and Stevenson (2017) warn that what is often called “distributed” leadership may in fact be “licensed” or delegated leadership, granted at the discretion of the principal rather than genuinely shared. These tensions are important to consider when examining how curriculum leadership is distributed within schools and how teachers are enabled or constrained in their curriculum work.

This study takes a critical view of distributed leadership, recognising both its potential and its limitations. It is particularly interested in how this model is interpreted by school leaders themselves in the context of curriculum change. Who is involved in curriculum leadership? How is responsibility shared or retained? And how do meso level actors such as OIDE, the Inspectorate or the NCCA support or shape the distribution of leadership in practice.

Emergent leadership theories

While instructional, transformational and distributed leadership have each made significant contributions to the school leadership literature, there is growing recognition that these models are most effective when integrated and contextualised within the realities of school leadership practice. Peter Gronn (2009: 213) describes “hybrid leadership” as the intermingling of hierarchical and heterarchical modes of leadership, what he terms a “focused distributed mix, in which varying degrees of each co-exist,” suggesting that a blend of leadership styles operates simultaneously within any given context. Scholars such as Marks and Printy (2003) and Robinson et al. (2008) argue that instructional leadership is most impactful when enacted in tandem with other leadership approaches, particularly transformational or distributed models. This view challenges the traditional, hierarchical framing of instructional leadership and opens up space for more collaborative, capacity-building conceptions of leadership.

As Daniëls et al. (2019) note, research often isolates leadership theories or centres solely on the principal's perspective, missing the more dynamic, collective aspects of leadership. Responding to this, scholars have begun to reconceptualise instructional leadership as a more collaborative and context-responsive practice. This shift reflects the broader emergence of leadership approaches that blend the technical focus of instruction with the participatory ethos of shared leadership.

This reconceptualisation has also emerged alongside broader changes in educational discourse. Biesta (2005, 2016) critiques the rise of the “new language of learning,” which, while advocating more learner-centred approaches, risks reducing education to a market-style transaction. Nevertheless, scholars acknowledge that more democratic and inquiry-based views of learning have challenged traditional, authoritarian leadership norms and created space for practices centred on professional learning, collaboration and shared responsibility.

Such perspectives inform this study's interest in how school leaders operate within increasingly complex systems, both within their own schools and across the broader meso-level policy landscape (Greany, 2018). This complexity calls for leadership that is adaptive to context and situated within evolving networks of policy and practice (Pont et al., 2008; Honig, 2009). While instructional and distributed leadership are often positioned as distinct models, in practice they frequently overlap. Effective school leaders may simultaneously guide teaching and learning while fostering a culture of shared leadership and professional agency. Indeed, leading curriculum

change may require both approaches: instructional clarity to set direction and build capacity, and distributed processes to enable collaborative interpretation and enactment. This evolution in leadership thinking has also given rise to Leadership for Learning (LfL), which extends these ideas by explicitly linking leadership with the conditions that enable learning across the school system.

Leadership for Learning

Leadership for Learning (LfL) represents an evolution in leadership thinking that explicitly connects leadership practice with the conditions necessary for learning at all levels of the school system (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; Swaffield, 2014). It builds on and extends earlier models such as instructional and transformational leadership by positioning learning, not leadership itself, as the central focus of leadership activity. LfL emphasises reciprocity between leadership and learning, viewing both as collective, inquiry-driven and contextually responsive processes.

MacBeath and Dempster (2009) identify five core principles underpinning LfL: maintaining a focus on learning for all, creating conditions favourable to learning, promoting dialogue, sharing leadership and fostering accountability. These principles foreground leadership as a shared and participatory endeavour, rooted in trust, reflection and professional dialogue. In this way, LfL moves beyond hierarchical notions of leadership to one that is dynamic, relational and distributed across the professional community.

The LfL model resonates strongly with the current Irish education context, particularly the NCCA's *Supporting Conditions for Systemwide Learning* (2023), which highlights shared leadership, professional collaboration and reflective practice as key enablers of curriculum change. While this study does not adopt LfL as a formal framework, it draws conceptually on its principles to understand how principals create the conditions for collaborative curriculum development, mediation and enactment. LfL therefore provides a bridge between earlier leadership models and contemporary perspectives on professional learning and system coherence, offering a valuable lens through which to interpret principals' engagement with curriculum reform.

For this research, these leadership models provide valuable conceptual tools for exploring how school leaders engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment. They help explain how leadership operates not only within the walls of the school, but also at the interface with the broader meso space, where system actors, resources and networks converge. Understanding how leaders draw on these models and associated strategies offers insight into how they build coherence,

support change and sustain reform in real-world school contexts. The next section builds on these foundations by turning to literature that explicitly connects leadership and curriculum work examining how principals lead the development, mediation and enactment of curriculum in their schools.

3.3.3 Leadership and curriculum: development, mediation and enactment

The relationship between school leadership and curriculum work has become increasingly significant in the context of contemporary education reform. Research shows that leadership is second only to teaching in influencing student outcomes and is central to shaping school conditions for learning and change (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). For this study, which explores how Irish primary school principals navigate curriculum development, mediation and enactment within their own schools and in connection with wider meso-level activities, it is essential to engage with literature that conceptualises leadership not only as administrative coordination, but as a vital force in shaping and enacting curriculum (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). This involves both leading pedagogical conversations and fostering the conditions in which shared curriculum work can thrive (Spillane, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2020).

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment are three interconnected processes that require active interpretation, professional agency and strategic leadership. As Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) argue, curriculum enactment is not a passive process of implementation but an active, situated and interpretive practice. School leaders, therefore, play a pivotal role in creating the conditions and professional cultures where curriculum engagement can flourish. This goes beyond ensuring compliance with policy mandates; it includes fostering spaces for teachers to engage with curriculum principles, supporting shared interpretation of policy language and navigating external expectations (Coburn, 2005; Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015).

Curriculum development refers to how the curriculum is locally shaped, often collaboratively, to suit the specific needs, values and contexts of the school community. This process aligns with the view of curriculum as a context-responsive and socially constructed practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). School leaders act as facilitators of this work by enabling staff dialogue, aligning local priorities with broader reform goals and integrating the school's vision with curricular aspirations (Harris, 2009; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). In the Irish context,

the evolving *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) invites schools to take a more active and agentic role in shaping their own curricular pathways, reinforcing the importance of leadership that is reflective, context-aware and future-oriented (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Curriculum mediation involves the work of translating curriculum policy into practice, including interpreting curriculum documents, navigating competing demands, and integrating system-level messages into school-based planning and pedagogy. In this regard, school leaders are not merely operational actors but function as sense-makers and brokers between policy and practice (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Coburn, 2005). They actively shape how national intentions are understood and enacted in their schools, drawing on meso-level supports such as Oide, the Inspectorate and local professional networks (Spillane et al., 2002; Ball et al., 2012). Engagement with these intermediary actors not only supports curriculum enactment but also signals a shifting professional identity for principals, one that increasingly positions them as system contributors and curriculum leaders, rather than solely as school managers. This study is particularly interested in how school leaders engage with these external structures and relationships and how such interactions influence their leadership identity and the direction of curriculum work within schools.

Curriculum enactment refers to how the curriculum is lived and experienced in classrooms, a process that is deeply shaped by teacher agency, interpretation and contextual conditions (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta et al., 2017). While enactment is primarily teacher-led, leadership decisions around time, resourcing, professional learning and school culture can significantly enable or constrain what is possible (Pietarinen et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2021). Leaders who cultivate trust, support collaborative inquiry and create structured opportunities for professional reflection are more likely to foster meaningful and coherent curriculum enactment (Day et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2018).

This section has explored the integral role that school leaders play in developing, mediating and enacting curriculum. The next section will continue by examining the emotional and relational dimensions of this leadership work, dimensions which are often overlooked in policy discourse, yet are central to understanding the realities of leading curriculum change.

3.3.4 Emotional and relational dimensions of leadership

While much of the literature on school leadership focuses on strategic planning, instructional quality and policy implementation, there is increasing recognition of the deeply emotional and relational nature of leadership practice (Hargreaves, 1998; Crawford, 2012). Leading curriculum change is not only a technical task but also a human one, shaped by emotions, trust, identity and relationships. For principals engaged in curriculum development, mediation and enactment this emotional dimension is particularly pronounced, as they must support teacher confidence, navigate resistance and maintain professional morale in the face of systemic pressures and ambiguity.

Research suggests that school leaders' work involves ongoing emotional labour, both in managing their own emotional responses to change and in absorbing and responding to the emotions of others (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Zembylas, 2021). Park and Datnow (2022), for example, found that leaders experience a range of emotions during periods of change from pride and hope, to frustration, uncertainty and isolation. These emotional responses are often intertwined with interpersonal dynamics within their schools and their perceived ability to manage the complexities of leadership.

Drawing on Bandura's (1997) theory, self-efficacy defined as the belief in one's ability to organise and execute actions required to manage prospective situations plays a central role in how leaders navigate change and persist through challenges. As discussed in [Section 3.2.3](#), this theoretical lens helps explain how principals' beliefs in their own capability influence their motivation, resilience, and leadership actions in the context of curriculum reform. Leaders with higher self-efficacy are more likely to view change as an opportunity rather than a threat, maintain resilience in the face of adversity and exert a more positive influence on staff (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). In contrast, those with lower self-efficacy may experience diminished motivation, emotional exhaustion and reduced capacity to support others effectively. Federici and Skaalvik (2011) further confirm that self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to burnout, reinforcing its importance as a psychological resource that underpins emotional resilience. Their research also highlights the need for systemic supports aimed at strengthening principal self-efficacy, particularly for less experienced leaders. They propose the development of targeted mentoring programmes as a means of building confidence, leadership capacity and long-term wellbeing. This underscores the view that enhancing self-

efficacy is not only beneficial for individual leaders, but essential for sustaining leadership quality and effectiveness across schools.

Beyond the emotional intensity of leadership, several studies highlight the relational and structural dimensions of professional isolation within the role. Principals frequently operate at the intersection of competing demands, with limited opportunities for collegial support or reflective dialogue (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Hüsrevşahi and Şahan (2021) describe organisational loneliness among school leaders in Turkey, identifying both emotional and social aspects linked to hierarchical accountability. Hansen (2018) found similar dynamics in Canadian contexts, where isolation contributed to attrition, particularly in rural or under-resourced schools. These studies suggest that leadership isolation is not merely an individual experience but a systemic phenomenon shaped by professional culture and governance structures. Recognising this helps to situate principals' emotional wellbeing within broader organisational contexts that influence their capacity to engage deeply and reflectively with curriculum leadership.

This emotional landscape is closely connected to relationships. Leaders must build trust, foster open dialogue and maintain professional credibility, all of which are crucial for successful curriculum leadership. Weddle, Lockton, and Datnow (2019), drawing on longitudinal qualitative data, highlight how teacher collaboration so often celebrated as a hallmark of school improvement can also produce emotional strain when mismatched expectations or inequitable contributions arise. Principals, in turn, are left to navigate these tensions while still championing the goals of collective curriculum work.

Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane (2019) argue that improving the conditions for high-quality teaching should be the central aim of school leadership. Strengthening and enhancing students' educational experiences remains a core priority for school leaders worldwide. However, they contend that many leaders struggle to find the time and space for meaningful improvement efforts, instead spending much of their time "putting out fires" (Supovitz et al., 2019: 8). This challenge is echoed in Irish studies and surveys, which detail the mounting pressures faced by primary school principals (Reid & Creed, 2021; Wang, 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). In the Irish context, these emotional and relational pressures are further intensified by systemic conditions. Recent findings from the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN, 2022) identify workload intensification and limited time for pedagogical leadership as key stressors undermining the sustainability of the principalship. These conditions not only affect

leaders' wellbeing, but also constrain their capacity to engage in emotionally responsive, relationship-driven curriculum leadership.

Understanding leadership as emotional and relational is, therefore, essential for this study. It enables a more nuanced account of how curriculum change is experienced and enacted, not only at the technical level of planning and implementation but in the emotional spaces where professional identities are negotiated and collective meaning is built. These relational dimensions extend to how principals cultivate trust and collaboration, creating spaces for shared learning and reflection that sustain engagement with curriculum change. The next section considers this through Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, which offers a useful lens for understanding how leadership and learning are enacted collectively within and across schools.

3.3.5 Communities of practice

The concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) provides a valuable framework for understanding leadership as a collective and relational practice situated in shared professional learning. Wenger et al. (2002: 4) define communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." Within such communities, learning is conceptualised as a social process, developed through participation, dialogue and the negotiation of meaning. This relational understanding aligns closely with contemporary views of leadership as distributed and collaborative, where principals foster cultures of trust, inquiry and shared responsibility (Hord, 1997; Hall & Hord, 2015; King, 2019).

From a leadership perspective, communities of practice foreground the importance of both formal and informal structures that support sustained professional interaction. Principals play a pivotal role in creating the conditions under which these communities thrive by enabling time for collaboration, promoting reflective dialogue and modelling professional curiosity (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). These environments encourage teachers to assume leadership roles, share expertise and take collective ownership of professional learning, thereby enhancing both individual and organisational capacity. The diffusion of practice within such networks often leads to what Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) describe as "bottom-up" change, though, as

Fullan (1994) notes, sustainable reform depends on the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes.

Viewed through the lens of communities of practice, leadership extends beyond the individual principal to encompass the social systems in which knowledge and identity are constructed. This perspective highlights how curriculum leadership is enacted through participation in professional networks that span school and meso-level spaces, including local clusters, education centre networks and national forums. These communities become key sites for sense-making and policy mediation, enabling principals to connect macro-level reform intentions with the lived realities of curriculum enactment in schools. In this way, the communities of practice framework provides both a theoretical and practical bridge between leadership and professional agency, illustrating how collaboration and shared learning underpin curriculum reform as a social practice.

3.3.6 Summary

This theme has examined the evolving and multifaceted role of school leadership in the context of curriculum development, mediation and enactment. It explored how expectations of school leaders have shifted beyond management to encompass instructional, transformational and distributed leadership approaches that emphasise collaboration, professional learning and curriculum development. Leadership is increasingly recognised as relational and emotionally demanding work, particularly as principals support teachers and navigate change within their unique school contexts.

Importantly, the review also highlighted the significance of the meso layer, an often underexplored space where principals engage with system-level actors, such as support services and curriculum bodies, to make sense of and shape curriculum change. The discussion of communities of practice further illustrated how leadership is enacted collectively through shared learning, dialogue and sense-making within and across schools. Understanding the complexity of school leadership across these dimensions provides a foundation for exploring how leadership contributes to curriculum development, mediation and enactment in practice.

In examining how leadership contributes to curriculum development, mediation and enactment, it becomes essential to consider not only the roles leaders occupy but also the capacity they have to act within and upon their environments. This brings the

concept of professional agency into focus, offering a deeper lens for understanding how principals navigate and shape curriculum change amid systemic and structural influences.

3.4 Professional agency

Agency has become a key concept in contemporary educational research, offering a powerful lens for understanding how educators interact with and shape policy in complex reform environments. This section examines how agency is defined and theorised in the literature, with a particular focus on its relevance to curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Of central interest to this study is how Irish primary school principals experience and exercise agency in these processes, especially as they interface with the meso-level policy space and system actors. By exploring the relational, situated and systemic dimensions of agency, this theme helps illuminate the conditions that enable or constrain school leaders' capacity to shape curriculum change in context.

3.4.1 Defining agency in educational contexts

The concept of agency is central to understanding how educators engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment. It refers not simply to the ability to act, but to the capacity of individuals and groups to make purposeful choices within the conditions and structures of their environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In educational research, understandings of agency have moved beyond individualistic interpretations to encompass relational, situated and temporally embedded dimensions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). This conceptual shift is particularly relevant to this study, which explores how Irish primary school principals experience curriculum development, mediation and enactment within a changing policy environment and how they interface with meso-level structures and activities that influence their curriculum work. It invites a more nuanced consideration of how agency is shaped by policy contexts, school cultures, leadership roles and interactions across different levels of the education system. Within this model, the iterational dimension reflects teachers' and leaders' professional histories, beliefs and accumulated experiences; the projective dimension encompasses their aspirations and visions for future practice; and the practical-evaluative dimension captures the judgments they make in response to immediate contextual affordances and constraints. These three dimensions together provide a powerful framing for

understanding how agency varies across time and circumstance, offering insight into how past experiences and future intentions shape present action. This framing challenges simplistic policy assumptions that educators can or should “implement” curriculum change in uniform ways, and instead positions agency as a key explanatory concept in understanding how principals navigate, interpret and shape curriculum change.

Complementing this perspective, Wyse and Manyukhina (2024) contribute a critical realist lens to understanding curriculum agency. They argue that professional agency should be seen as “bounded yet flexible,” shaped by institutional and curricular structures but not wholly determined by them. Their work is particularly helpful in foregrounding how educators operate within the tensions of structure and freedom, making judgments that are both constrained by policy frameworks and empowered by professional knowledge. This approach adds nuance to the study’s understanding of curriculum agency, highlighting how structural conditions both constrain and enable educators’ professional judgment. While not focused specifically on school leaders, their work offers useful conceptual tools for analysing how agency is exercised within complex curricular reform environments.

Taken together, these perspectives offer a robust and multi-layered understanding of agency that is particularly important in curriculum change contexts, where the success of any initiative depends not only on formal policy design, but also on the interpretive and practical work of those responsible for enacting it. From this standpoint, school leaders are not merely passive recipients of top-down directives; rather, they are active participants in the construction of curriculum in action (Priestley et al., 2021). Their actions are informed by experience, shaped by visions for teaching and learning and conditioned by the wider system structures in which they are embedded.

This relational and situated view of agency also has important implications for how we understand leadership across the meso-level space. While much of the literature focuses on agency at the classroom or individual level, there is growing recognition that school leadership agency is exercised across multiple levels, including through interactions with policy actors, support services and system intermediaries (Greany, 2020). These interactions are not neutral; they are shaped by trust, coherence and access to decision-making spaces. In this research, the conceptualisation of agency helps to frame how principals engage not only with curriculum itself but also with the

wider policy ecosystem, an aspect often overlooked in leadership or curriculum studies that remain bounded within the school site.

Ultimately, this body of literature helps surface the complexity and contingency of curriculum leadership. Principals do not act in a vacuum; their agency is shaped by formal mandates, professional histories, relational dynamics and systemic conditions. Recognising agency as emergent, bounded and context-dependent enables this study to move beyond narrow evaluations of "implementation fidelity" and instead explore how school leaders interpret, adapt and potentially reshape curriculum policy. This is especially relevant in the Irish context, where new curriculum frameworks are emerging alongside efforts to build more inclusive system that focuses on shared responsibility. A robust understanding of agency helps to reveal the often-overlooked ways in which principals contribute to curriculum change both within their schools and through their engagement with the broader system.

3.4.2 Agency and curriculum making

Building on the relational understanding of agency, this section turns to how curriculum is conceptualised not as a static product to be implemented, but as a dynamic, situated process of enactment. Traditional perspectives often frame curriculum policy as a linear trajectory from design to delivery, with schools positioned as the endpoint of implementation. However, a growing body of research challenges this assumption, arguing that curriculum is always interpreted and adapted in context (Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2012). This resonates with Priestley et al., (2022) argument that teacher agency and curriculum making are mutually constitutive, each shaping and reinforcing the other. From this perspective, curriculum change depends on the conditions that enable professional judgment, dialogue and collective sense-making, echoing Stenhouse's (1975) assertion that there can be no curriculum development without teacher development.

This reconceptualisation reframes school leaders and teachers as active curriculum actors who exercise judgment and agency in translating policy into practice. For principals in particular, curriculum leadership involves more than administrative coordination; it includes making strategic and pedagogical decisions, fostering professional dialogue and supporting staff through change. As Priestley et al. (2021) note, curriculum enactment reflects a blend of agency and structure, shaped by the institutional, cultural and material conditions of each school.

One of the critical insights from curriculum literature is that curriculum is always recontextualised at the school level, interpreted and reshaped by school leaders and teachers as they mediate between national intentions and local realities (Bernstein, 2000; Ball et al., 2012; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). In this sense, curriculum making is an inherently social practice involving “an interplay between different actors, contested spaces and power relations, framed by contextual factors of social practice” (Alvunger et al., 2021: 274). These contextual affordances (cultural, structural and material) shape how agency is achieved in practice, reflecting the ecological understanding that educators act by means of their environments rather than within them (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This process is neither neutral nor automatic, it depends on the interpretive work of educators who bring policy texts into alignment with local values, histories and student needs. Braun et al. (2011) describe schools as “policy actors” embedded in specific material and relational contexts. In this sense, principals play a central role in shaping how curriculum is understood and enacted by their staff, often acting as mediators between system messages and the lived realities of the classroom.

This understanding also highlights the reciprocal relationship between curriculum making and professional agency. Engagement in curriculum design and enactment can strengthen leaders’ and teachers’ capacity to act agentically by broadening their professional knowledge, confidence and relational networks (Priestley et al., 2022). In this way, curriculum making not only depends on agency but also serves as a mechanism through which agency is fostered and developed.

This mediating role becomes particularly complex when considered within the meso level space where principals engage not only with school communities but also with broader policy actors and support structures. The meso site, as described by Alvunger et al. (2021: 282), functions as a “melting pot” where ideas, guidance and experiences from macro and micro levels intersect, providing crucial relational and informational resources for curriculum making. When such spaces are well developed, they enhance professional agency by allowing leaders to collaborate across schools and engage directly with system-level dialogue (Priestley et al., 2022). Although formal participation in meso- level networks, such as curriculum forums or leadership initiatives, is not mandated systemically, some principals engage in these spaces through professional networks or policy-facing roles (Greany, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2020). In such cases, leadership becomes system-facing and principals act as boundary-crossers who contribute to policy interpretation and coherence through dialogue, feedback and collaboration (Honig, 2004; Chapman et al., 2021). These

boundary-spanning practices position principals not merely as recipients of policy but as active mediators who interpret, adapt and translate curriculum messages to fit the specific needs and cultures of their schools. Spillane et al. (2003) conceptualise this work as a form of distributed leadership, where responsibility for sense-making and policy enactment is stretched across individuals, tools and organisational routines. Further, Spillane and Kenney (2012) emphasise that principals' interpretive work is embedded within a broader network of policy actors and artefacts, shaping how reforms are understood and implemented on the ground. In this way, school leaders engage in the construction and re-construction of policy, acting as crucial intermediaries between macro-level reform agendas and micro-level classroom realities (Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Priestley & Philippou, 2019). This form of agency expands the scope of curriculum leadership beyond the school gate and underscores the value of meso-level collaboration in cultivating both coherence and capacity within the system.

For this research, viewing curriculum work as an expression of leadership agency provides a more grounded account of how principals navigate curriculum change. It moves beyond notions of compliance or "fidelity to implementation" and instead examines how leaders make meaning through interpretation, dialogue and situated professional judgment. This is especially pertinent in the Irish context, where the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) invites schools to engage with evolving curricular ideas such as learner agency, integration and formative assessment. As Priestley et al. (2022) argue, participation in curriculum making is itself a means through which professional agency is constructed and developed. Opportunities for collaborative curriculum work, dialogue across sites and participation in meso-level processes can therefore serve not only as mechanisms of reform, but also as conditions that enable and enhance the agency of school leaders.

Without attending to the agentic and interpretive work of school leaders, there is a risk that curriculum policy will overlook a key mechanism through which curriculum change is made meaningful. By foregrounding agency in curriculum enactment, this study seeks to understand how school leaders work within and across system layers to shape curriculum that is both coherent and contextually relevant.

3.4.3 Constraints and enablers of agency

While the previous section explored agency as central to curriculum making, it is equally important to recognise that agency is never exercised in a vacuum. Rather, it

is shaped by a range of structural, cultural and material conditions that enable or constrain action (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). For school leaders engaged in curriculum change, the capacity to act with professional judgment is mediated not only by personal disposition or leadership style, but by the environments in which they operate. From an ecological perspective, these conditions are not simply external barriers or supports but integral components of how agency is achieved in practice (Priestley et al., 2015; Alvunger et al., 2021). Understanding these enabling and constraining conditions is therefore critical to analysing how Irish primary principals develop, mediate and enact curriculum within a shifting policy landscape.

Structural constraints on agency are well-documented in the literature, including factors such as policy mandates, accountability pressures and limited autonomy, all of which shape or limit the capacity of school leaders to act with agency in curriculum work (Ball, 2003; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Priestley et al., 2015; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Walsh, 2024). National reforms often arrive with prescriptive timelines, performance pressures and implicit expectations of compliance, which can restrict the space for deliberation, experimentation or contextualisation (Ball, 2003; Ozga, 2009). Within schools, factors such as staffing challenges, limited time for collaborative inquiry and the dual demands of teaching and leading, particularly acute in smaller primary schools can further narrow the scope for meaningful engagement with curriculum development. Fewer staff within the school restricts collegial ways of operating (Clarke and Stevens, 2009). Developing the curriculum and introducing initiatives is further highlighted as problematic in more recent research (Autti & Bæck, 2021). Extra administrative work is created for few members of staff when striving to introduce and embed curricular change (Autti & Bæck, 2021).

Yet agency is not wholly determined by these structures. Several conditions can actively support and extend the agency of school leaders. Professional learning opportunities, distributed leadership arrangements and collegial networks can foster confidence, deepen curriculum understanding and enable collaborative decision-making (Frost, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2018). Participative and dialogic professional cultures where leaders and teachers engage collectively in curriculum sense-making have been shown to strengthen professional agency by building shared purpose and trust (Fullan, 2007; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2022). Critically, such enablers also contribute to cultures of trust and collective purpose, which underpin more sustained and meaningful curriculum reform.

A particularly important enabler (or constraint) of agency lies in principals' access to meso-level structures and relationships. Research suggests that leaders who engage with system actors through policy networks, leadership initiatives or curriculum dialogues are more likely to encounter diverse perspectives, co-construct curriculum meaning and exert influence beyond their own school (Greany, 2020). These forms of engagement can amplify agency by generating feedback loops between policy and practice (Priestley et al., 2015; Ball et al., 2012). Conversely, where such access is limited or uneven, as has often been reported in the Irish context, school leaders may feel disconnected from curriculum discourse, reducing their confidence and sense of influence (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Building on this perspective, Wyse and Manyukhina (2019) emphasise that educators' professional judgement is always shaped by wider structural conditions that may both constrain and enable curriculum decision-making. This understanding is particularly relevant in Ireland, where policy developments such as the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) are accompanied by new efforts to build more dialogic engagement between schools and system actors. Initiatives such as Schools Forum and Leading Out seminars⁵ signal promising steps, yet their voluntary and uneven uptake raises questions about whose voices are being heard and how representative curriculum dialogue can be.

This perspective underscores the importance of examining the contextual conditions under which leadership agency is either activated or inhibited. Principals' actions are shaped by their embeddedness in particular organisational settings and their relationships with actors across system layers. In this research, these dynamics are examined to understand how Irish primary principals experience and navigate curriculum leadership both within their schools and through their interactions across the broader meso-level policy space.

The literature foregrounds how constraints and enablers such as trust, professional capacity, access to system structures and policy coherence shape curriculum leadership as a situated and contingent practice, rather than a generic skill set. This

⁵ NCCA organised a Leading Out Seminar Series between December 2019 and October 2022. The main purpose of this series of seven Leading Out Seminars was to support stakeholder organisations to identify and to begin to cultivate the necessary conditions to support the introduction and enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. Each seminar was organised to explore a key theme related to curriculum redevelopment and change. A full list of organisations participating in the Leading Out seminar series can be found here: [HERE](#). More information on the Leading Out Seminar series can be found at [Supporting Change | NCCA](#).

has direct implications for how leadership development initiatives and curriculum policies might better support the agency of school leaders as key actors in meaningful curriculum change (e.g. Priestley et al., 2015; Greany, 2020; Wyse & Manyukhina, 2019).

3.4.4 Implications for curriculum development, mediation and enactment

Building on the understanding that leadership agency is shaped by relational, structural and systemic factors, recent literature highlights how principals actively mediate curriculum change both within and beyond their schools. Rather than functioning as isolated implementers, school leaders operate within a dynamic ecosystem of influences navigating policy intentions, institutional contexts and broader system relationships. This approach moves beyond binary distinctions between policy and practice, framing curriculum enactment as a process of interpretation, negotiation and situated meaning-making (Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2021).

Curriculum mediation, in this sense, refers to the interpretive and adaptive work principals undertake to align national frameworks with the values, priorities, and developmental stages of their school communities. It is through this work that principals exercise professional judgment, facilitate teacher dialogue and balance competing demands within schools (Priestley et al., 2021). Such mediation exemplifies the ecological nature of agency, where leadership action emerges through the interaction of personal capacity, cultural norms and structural affordances (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Leadership in this context is both instructional and strategic, requiring the capacity to translate curriculum change into meaningful practice while also sustaining pedagogical coherence.

The literature further emphasises that curriculum leadership is not confined to the internal workings of schools. It increasingly unfolds within what is described as the meso-level space, comprising policy intermediaries, professional networks and leadership initiatives where principals interact with system actors and contribute to shaping curriculum coherence (Greany, 2020). School leaders who engage in these system-facing roles often act as brokers or boundary-crossers, helping to align school-based practice with broader reform objectives and generating feedback loops between policy and practice. However, this engagement is not universally experienced. Research points to the uneven distribution of access to meso-level structures, with some principals operating on the periphery of policy conversations

due to geographic, structural or organisational factors (O'Brien et al., 2020). While initiatives in the Irish context such as the Schools Forum and Leading Out have emerged to promote dialogue between schools and policy actors, participation is voluntary and variable. In this context, Wyse and Manyukhina's (2019) conceptualisation of agency as "bounded yet flexible" is instructive, underscoring how institutional arrangements shape, but do not wholly determine, educators' capacity for judgment and action.

In sum, the literature positions school leaders as central actors in shaping curriculum change through their professional agency and system engagement. This perspective shifts attention away from linear models of implementation toward a more grounded understanding of how curriculum change is realised in practice. It also raises important implications for how leadership development and curriculum policy can be structured to support school leaders in this multifaceted role, particularly in fostering trust, building system coherence and ensuring equitable access to the meso-level policy space.

3.4.5 Summary

Taken together, the literature presents agency as a central, multi-dimensional concept for understanding how school leaders engage with curriculum change. Rather than viewing principals as passive implementers, contemporary research conceptualises agency as relational, situated and shaped by temporal, structural and systemic conditions. The work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Priestley et al. (2015), and Wyse and Manyukhina (2019) collectively frames agency as an emergent practice, shaped by structural and systemic conditions yet exercised through professional judgment and context-sensitive decision-making. Curriculum is recontextualised at the school level, and principals, acting as both instructional leaders and system mediators, play a key role in translating change into meaningful practice. Their agency is shaped not only by internal school conditions but also by their access to meso-level policy spaces, where system-facing leadership can amplify coherence and responsiveness. The literature underscores the importance of trust, professional learning and systemic connection in enabling leadership agency, offering critical insights into how curriculum policy and leadership development might better support school leaders as pivotal actors in shaping and sustaining educational change.

If school leaders are to exercise agency in curriculum change, they need more than professional capacity. School leaders require coherent and aligned policy environments. Fragmented or conflicting policies can limit agency by generating ambiguity and inconsistency, whereas coherence across macro, meso and micro levels supports clarity, trust and meaningful engagement (Walsh, 2024). The next section explores how system-level coherence shapes the conditions in which curriculum leadership is enabled or constrained.

3.5 Curriculum coherence and system conditions

The interpretive work of school leaders, explored in the previous section, does not occur in isolation, it is shaped by the broader system conditions in which curriculum change unfolds. Understanding how principals mediate curriculum change requires attention to the coherence (or lack thereof) across policy layers and the structures that support or constrain alignment. This section examines the literature on curriculum coherence, policy alignment and the conditions necessary for meaningful and sustainable curriculum engagement. It foregrounds the pivotal role of the meso layer in shaping school leaders' experiences and highlights how system design influences principals' capacity to exercise agency, lead change and foster coherence within their schools.

3.5.1 Understanding curriculum policy across system levels

In the literature, curriculum change is increasingly understood as a dynamic, negotiated process that unfolds across multiple system levels, shaped by interactions between actors and structures at the macro, meso and micro levels of the education system (Fullan, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2021). Rather than viewing policy as a top-down directive, scholars highlight the interplay between the macro, meso, and micro levels as central to how curriculum meaning is constructed (Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015, 2021). These levels are not fixed hierarchies but interconnected spaces where actors, discourses and practices interact. Of particular relevance to this study is the meso level, which plays a pivotal yet often under-theorised role in shaping how school leaders understand, mediate and enact curriculum change. As such, attention to this mediating space offers valuable insights into the systemic conditions that enable or constrain leadership agency in curriculum change.

System coherence: policy and curriculum

Policy coherence is often portrayed as a technical task aligning strategies and priorities across the system to ensure consistency and synergy between departments, agencies and frameworks (OECD, 2018; Walsh, 2024). From a macro-level perspective, this involves designing policies that are strategically coordinated and mutually reinforcing. However, coherence is more than structural alignment; while alignment refers to the technical consistency of goals, policies and practices, coherence concerns the shared understanding and interpretive connections that give these structures meaning in practice. It is therefore a socially constructed and continually negotiated process that unfolds in the everyday work of educators (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Coburn, 2005). As Priestley et al. (2021) argue, coherence must be understood not only as a matter of system design but as a lived experience that emerges through the relational work of interpreting, adapting and enacting policy in context.

At the school level, achieving coherence involves navigating complex and sometimes conflicting policy messages. For principals, this means actively mediating policies and constructing a vision that aligns external demands with internal values and capacities (Ball et al., 2012). This interpretive work is shaped by principals' professional judgment, the culture of the school and their capacity to lead collaborative inquiry among staff. However, in systems like Ireland's that are characterised by loose coupling between policy and practice, the absence of robust meso-level support structures reinforces isolation and limits opportunities for sustained professional learning and system-wide dialogue (Weick, 1976; Looney, 2011). As outlined in Chapter 1 ([Section 1.6](#)), loose coupling refers to the weak coordination and limited feedback between different parts of an education system. In the Irish context, this means that while schools, agencies, and policymakers are formally connected, they often operate in relative isolation. As Walsh (2024) notes, national policymaking remains fragmented, with many voices and initiatives emerging from the macro level but few mechanisms for feedback, mediation, or upward influence. In such conditions, coherence cannot be guaranteed by design; it must be actively constructed by those working at the intersection of school and policy.

School leaders play a central role in this construction of coherence. As Honig and Hatch (2004: 18) assert, "coherence as a state of affairs is not a technical matter but a social construction produced through continual interactions among teachers, students, organisational structures, curriculum and other tools of schooling." Principals are thus key mediators, responsible for interpreting policy messages,

supporting internal alignment and shaping their school's curriculum response in ways that are both contextually grounded and professionally informed.

Curriculum coherence and the conditions for change

When coherence is framed not as compliance but as mutual alignment and adaptation, the importance of school leadership becomes even more pronounced. Kelly (2009) emphasises that a shared understanding of curriculum purpose is essential for achieving coherence, yet this shared vision must be co-constructed rather than imposed. Principals act as both translators and gatekeepers, shaping how change is interpreted, filtered and enacted within their schools.

Schools may adopt different strategies in response to curriculum change. As Walsh (2024) outlines, some schools buffer external demands, engaging with policy only selectively, while others act as bridges, aligning internal goals with external expectations in more meaningful ways. Honig and Hatch (2004) similarly describe buffering as a way to manage competing priorities without rejecting change outright. The principal's role in mediating these responses is crucial, particularly when multiple initiatives and policies overlap or when top-down initiatives risk disrupting existing practices.

Debates about top-down versus bottom-up curriculum change underscore the significance of agency and participation in policy enactment. Top-down approaches tend to frame educators as implementers of centrally designed reforms (Fullan, 2016), whereas bottom-up approaches are associated with greater ownership, local adaptation and sustainability (Pietarinen et al., 2017; Walsh, 2024). In practice, a hybrid approach is often necessary. As Pietarinen et al. (2017: 25) argue, combining "steering" from the top with participative engagement at the local level can create space for the "cross-fertilisation" of ideas and values across the system. This strategy extends the professional learning capacity or "zone of proximal development" of all stakeholders, fostering deeper curriculum change.

Sustained curriculum change also requires structural conditions that support local adaptation and system-wide coherence. Van den Akker (2018: 17) advocates for a process of "mutual adaptation," where both the curriculum and its users evolve through iterative engagement. This requires not only time and professional development but also mechanisms for open communication across schools and between system levels. However, as international experience demonstrates, the presence of meso-level structures does not automatically ensure coherence, as intermediary spaces may themselves become fragmented or unevenly connected

across the system (Priestley and Minty (2013). When curriculum change is responsive to local conditions and inclusive of practitioner voices, it is more likely to be meaningful, coherent and sustained.

3.5.2 The role of principals in constructing curriculum coherence

In Ireland's complex curriculum policy environment, principals are charged with bridging the gap between policy design and practice. As Stosich (2018: 203) notes, external supports can assist principals in connecting multiple reform agendas, but this depends on the availability of targeted professional learning and sustained relational supports. When such supports are lacking, as is often the case in Ireland, principals are left to make sense of policy demands with limited guidance or coordination (Walsh, 2024).

In this context, school leaders are effectively tasked with constructing coherence from the bottom up. They must draw on their professional judgment, interpretive agency and leadership practices to align external expectations with their school's specific needs and capacities. The absence of clearly defined or adequately resourced meso-level structures means that principals increasingly perform the bridging functions typically associated with intermediary bodies. They interpret policy messages from above, lead collaborative processes of inquiry below and shape their school's curriculum response, all while managing competing demands and sustaining staff engagement.

While scholars such as Chapman (2019) emphasise the critical role of formal meso actors including curriculum agencies, local authorities and regional networks in supporting coherence, such infrastructure remains underdeveloped in the Irish context. In more integrated systems, such as Scotland, Finland and the Netherlands, intermediary organisations provide structured spaces for curriculum dialogue, capacity building and shared sense-making, helping to translate national policy into meaningful local enactment (Priestley & Philippou, 2019; Van den Akker, 2018; Soini et al., 2021). These systems invest in regional collaboration and professional networks that enable schools to engage with policy in sustained and supported ways. By contrast, the Irish system continues to rely heavily on principals and teachers to act as policy mediators in relative isolation, a dynamic that risks fragmentation, uneven enactment and curriculum change fatigue. As the literature clearly communicates (Shirley, 2016; Fullan, 2018), it is ultimately at the level of the individual teacher that the curriculum is co-constructed and mediated and where meaningful, symbolic or

superficial responses to change are formulated. In reality, while partnership structures have operated effectively among national agencies at the macro level, there has been less success in ensuring connectivity and transfer to the micro level of schools (Walsh 2023). Strengthening meso-level capacity in Ireland, through more systematic supports, networking and facilitation may therefore be key to bridging this gap, fostering curriculum coherence and enabling more equitable system learning.

This dual responsibility places considerable pressure on school leaders, who must navigate fragmented policy landscapes while sustaining coherence, capacity and vision at the local level. As Coburn et al. (2016) note, when reform messages are unclear or disconnected, educators tend to fall back on prior knowledge and surface-level interpretations, which can dilute the intended impact of policy. Without structured opportunities for collective sense-making, change may be resisted or enacted symbolically, rather than transforming practice in meaningful ways.

Ultimately, achieving curriculum coherence requires attention to the conditions in which principals operate. This includes recognising the interpretive nature of their work, valuing their agency and investing in the structures that support communication, learning and feedback across all levels of the education system. As Pietarinen et al. (2017: 36) argue, coherence emerges not through compliance, but through collective reflection on how reform affects real-world practice: “opportunities are required so that those directly affected by curriculum reform can work through the effects, imagine the consequences, and experiment on how this is going to affect the reality in their work.”

Leadership and sense-making

Curriculum change is not solely a technical or structural process but one that is deeply interpretive. The success of curriculum change efforts hinges not only on formal supports but on how school leaders make sense of shifting expectations and guide others through processes of sense-making. As Weick (1995) argues, sense-making is a fundamental process through which individuals and organisations interpret complex and ambiguous environments. Rather than relying on rational evaluation or linear decision-making, sense-making involves the ongoing interplay between action and interpretation. People act, observe the effects of those actions, and retrospectively develop plausible accounts to explain their decisions (Weick, 2015). This retrospective nature is particularly important in understanding how school principals construct and rationalise their responses to curriculum change.

In educational contexts, sense-making is not a solitary cognitive task but a collective and situated social practice. Principals engage in sense-making as both interpreters and communicators of policy, shaping how curriculum messages are understood and enacted within their schools. According to Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019), principals operate as key sense-makers in dynamic environments, required to interpret ambiguity, provide direction and guide staff in constructing meaning. This work involves both cognitive and emotional labour. As Pietarinen et al. (2017: 26) emphasise, sense-making is a "dynamic and interactive process" that includes emotional responses, professional values and social relationships. These dimensions influence whether reform is accepted, resisted or reinterpreted at the school level.

The school culture itself becomes a crucial context for sense-making. Principals' interpretations are shaped not only by their personal experiences, values and beliefs, but also by the professional norms, expectations and histories embedded within their schools (Coburn, 2001; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Spillane et al. (2002) contend that school leaders' sense-making is "nested" within these cultural structures, which mediate how new policies are interpreted and whether they are integrated meaningfully into school practices. Deal and Peterson (1999) similarly argue that shaping school culture lies at the heart of leadership, positioning sense-making as a relational and routine social activity deeply tied to the everyday life of schools.

From a curriculum perspective, sense-making plays a central role in enabling principals to mediate curriculum messages, align them with school values and priorities and support internal coherence through leadership practice. In this way, sense-making supports curriculum coherence not by enforcing strict alignment, but by helping school leaders interpret and frame policy messages in ways that make sense locally. As Van den Akker (2018) notes, even in centralised systems, sustainable enactment depends on teachers and leaders internalising change and adapting it to their contexts. Collective sense-making across all levels of the system is essential to building a shared understanding of change and enabling authentic curriculum change (Pietarinen et al., 2017). In doing so, it also helps cultivate a sense of collective ownership and responsibility, which is vital for fostering efficacy and sustainable curriculum implementation (Gouëdard et al., 2020).

This study views principals' sense-making as a key mechanism through which they mediate curriculum change. Positioned at the intersection of macro policy demands and school-level realities, principals must continually interpret, translate and negotiate curriculum expectations in real time. This interpretive work is influenced by

meso-level interactions such as engagement with support services, professional networks and policy intermediaries which shape how curriculum messages are framed and enacted. Yet, as this thesis argues, in the Irish context, the lack of structured meso-level support may place an even greater sense-making burden on school leaders. Understanding how principals experience this responsibility and navigate ambiguity through leadership is central to examining their role in curriculum development, mediation and enactment.

In the Irish context, sense-making is particularly critical due to the often diffuse and loosely coupled nature of curriculum reform. Looney (2011) argues that curriculum change in Ireland has frequently lacked implementation clarity, compelling school leaders to rely on professional judgment in interpreting policy intent. Similarly, Sugrue (2009) notes the increasing responsibility placed on principals to mediate change in an evolving policy environment that offers little in the way of structured support or consistent messaging. Walsh (2024) further highlights the absence of robust meso-level channels to support enactment or feedback, reinforcing the need for principals to serve as interpretive agents within their schools. In this context, sense-making becomes an essential leadership function, enabling school leaders to reconcile national policy goals with local needs and to foster internal coherence amid uncertainty.

3.5.3 A competent system requires shared responsibility

Building on the importance of sense-making at the school level, it becomes clear that individual efforts ought to be supported by a wider system architecture that promotes coherence, reciprocity and shared responsibility across all levels of the education system.

The complexity of the Irish education policy landscape highlights the need to move beyond individual-level capacity and toward the development of a more integrated and competent system. As Urban et al. (2011) argue, a competent system is not defined by the knowledge and skills of individuals alone, but by the interconnectedness of institutions, structures and governance mechanisms that support continuous professional learning, collaboration and responsiveness across all levels. In educational change, however, responsibility is too often individualised. As Walsh (2024) observes, blame for perceived policy failure is frequently placed on school leaders and teachers without sufficient attention to the systemic factors that shape and constrain their work. This tendency reinforces a narrow focus on

compliance and implementation at the school level, rather than fostering the enabling conditions for meaningful curriculum development and enactment.

Developing a truly competent system, therefore, requires a shift in how curriculum change is conceptualised and enacted, one that embraces shared responsibility across all levels of the system. In the Irish context, this is especially challenging due to the fragmented nature of national-level policymaking and the absence of coherent meso-level structures to support enactment (Walsh, 2024). A significant imbalance exists between the volume of policy voices and directives emanating from the national level and the lack of channels for bottom-up feedback or localised mediation. This structural asymmetry not only isolates schools but contributes to the proliferation of uncoordinated initiatives, leading to incoherence, overload and frustration among educators.

As Van den Akker (2018: 8) warns, “the worlds of policy, practice and research are often diffuse and widely separated,” and successful innovation requires intentional efforts to build bridges between levels, actors and systems. In the context of curriculum change, these bridges enable two-way communication, foster mutual understanding and support the co-construction of curriculum that resonates across diverse settings. Without such mechanisms, reform risks becoming top-down and disconnected from the lived realities of schools. Echoing this, Stosich (2018: 205) argues that deep, sustained engagement across the system is essential for moving from superficial policy adoption to genuine policy integration, whereby curriculum change becomes embedded within teachers’ professional beliefs and everyday practices.

School leaders play a pivotal role in this bridging work. While they are often positioned as implementers, they are in reality critical agents of system-wide learning, occupying the space between national vision and school-level realities. As Hayward et al. (2022) emphasises, achieving coherence in education systems depends on the extent to which all actors are engaged in system-wide learning, not just about curriculum content, but also about how the system itself functions. This demands inclusive processes that value local expertise, promote shared meaning-making and enable feedback loops across levels of the system. Evidence suggests that, in the Irish system, the absence of robust meso-level support often leaves school leaders to undertake this connective work in relative isolation, interpreting and mediating policy without coordinated structural supports (Looney, 2011; Walsh, 2024).

The development of a more competent and coherent education system, according to recent scholarship, depends on establishing meaningful opportunities for dialogue and learning between national policymakers, intermediary bodies, and school communities (Urban et al., 2011; Van den Akker, 2018; Walsh, 2024). A growing body of research also highlights the need to move beyond viewing principals as passive recipients of reform and instead to recognise them as active co-constructors of educational change, whose leadership shapes how curriculum policy is interpreted and enacted in schools (Chapman, 2019; Priestley et al., 2021; Hayward, 2022). In this view, the vision of a competent system is understood not as a fixed technical blueprint but as a dynamic, relational process that relies on coherence, reciprocity, and sustained collaboration across all levels of the educational ecosystem.

3.5.4 Summary

The literature reviewed highlights that curriculum coherence is best understood as a dynamic, negotiated process shaped by interactions across macro, meso and micro levels of the education system. Rather than being achieved solely through top-down alignment, coherence emerges through the interpretive and relational work of educators and leaders embedded within complex policy and organisational contexts (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Priestley et al., 2021). Principals, in particular, are positioned as key mediators of curriculum change, drawing on professional judgment, values and leadership practices to align national policy with local realities (Ball et al., 2012; Coburn, 2005). In systems characterised by loose coupling, such as Ireland, the literature points to a lack of robust meso level structures to support this work, placing significant demands on school leaders to interpret and implement curriculum change with limited structural mediation (Looney, 2011; Walsh, 2024).

International examples illustrate how intermediary bodies and collaborative networks can foster greater coherence and capacity for system-wide learning (Van den Akker, 2018; Chapman, 2019; Priestley & Philippou, 2019). In such systems, formal meso level actors facilitate curriculum dialogue, professional learning, and reciprocal communication between policy and practice. Sense-making is also identified as a critical mechanism through which principals interpret reform messages, construct coherence, and lead school-based curriculum development (Weick, 1995; Pietarinen et al., 2017). This interpretive work is shaped by personal values, school culture, and professional networks, reinforcing the importance of contextually responsive leadership.

Taken together, the literature underscores that achieving curriculum coherence is not only a matter of strategic policy alignment but also of supporting the leadership and learning conditions through which coherence can be meaningfully constructed. While international research has explored the significance of meso-level infrastructure and sense-making in curriculum reform, there remains a need to better understand how these dynamics play out in the Irish context. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how principals experience and navigate the interpretive, relational and systemic dimensions of their role in shaping curriculum coherence. This gap provides a foundation for the present study.

3.6 Conclusion

This literature review has examined the evolving role of school leaders in curriculum development, mediation and enactment, drawing on national and international research to situate this study within a broader educational policy and leadership context. It began by outlining the theoretical framework underpinning the study, which combines Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, particularly the concept of self-efficacy. These theoretical tools support an exploration of how principals' beliefs, relationships and system interactions shape their curriculum leadership.

The review then traced how leadership in education has moved beyond narrow managerial functions toward more complex, relational and pedagogical roles, with principals increasingly positioned as key agents of change. Instructional, transformational, distributed and leadership for learning models were critically reviewed to understand how leadership is enacted in practice, particularly in support of curriculum work. The concept of agency was then explored, foregrounding its relational, situated and emergent nature, and highlighting the role of school leaders as mediators of curriculum policy within their schools and across system levels. Emphasis was placed on how agency is exercised within, and shaped by, the conditions and structures of the broader policy environment.

Building on this, the chapter examined the significance of curriculum coherence and policy alignment, identifying how principals interpret and integrate curriculum change in the absence of strong meso-level infrastructure. It showed that principals must not only navigate internal school dynamics but also engage in sense-making and system-facing leadership, often without the structured support found in more integrated education systems.

While international research has increasingly recognised the importance of school principals as active agents in curriculum change, a significant gap remains in the Irish context. To date, no empirical studies have specifically examined how Irish primary school principals engage with curriculum change or how they interact with meso-level actors and activities that support this work. This study responds to that gap by investigating the lived experiences of principals as they mediate curriculum change in a dynamic and often fragmented policy environment.

The theoretical and empirical insights outlined in this review provide the analytical foundation for the study's methodological approach, shaping the research design, methods and analytical strategies presented in the following chapter.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Understanding how primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment, particularly in the context of ongoing curriculum change and evolving policy expectations, requires a considered and coherent methodological approach. Methodology, in this sense, is more than a technical framework; it reflects the values, assumptions and philosophical stance that shape how research questions are explored and how knowledge is generated. In this study, the methodology was carefully selected to ensure that the voices of school leaders could be heard, interpreted and situated meaningfully within the broader policy landscape in which they operate.

What follows is a detailed account of how the study was designed and conducted, including the rationale for the chosen method, the processes of participant selection and data collection and the analytical strategies used to generate insight from the data. Attention is also given to the positionality of the researcher, the steps taken to ensure rigour and ethical integrity and the limitations of the study. Together, these elements form the foundation upon which the research findings are built.

3.2 Research design

The research design for this study was developed to address the central research question: How do primary school principals interact with broader meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment? The study responds to this question through a combination of empirical analysis and theoretical framing, drawing on qualitative methods to explore lived experience and meaning-making.

A qualitative design was chosen as it supports deep, context-sensitive inquiry into how individuals construct, interpret and act upon their professional roles. This design is particularly well suited to exploring the subjective experiences of school leaders operating within complex and evolving curriculum landscapes. Rooted in a constructivist paradigm and guided by an interpretive approach, the design positions knowledge as socially constructed and shaped by ongoing dialogue and reflection. It therefore allows for flexibility, responsiveness and iteration, features essential to understanding the nuanced realities of leadership in Irish primary schools.

Focus groups were selected as the principal method of data collection. This method enabled participants to engage in shared discussion around key topics while surfacing individual perspectives. The collective nature of focus groups made it possible to examine how principals co-construct meanings, challenge assumptions and reflect on their experiences in relation to curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Ethical safeguards, a reflexive research stance and attention to researcher positionality were embedded throughout, contributing to the rigour and authenticity of the overall design.

4.2.1 Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher is not a detached observer but a key instrument in the research process (Brodsky, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Acknowledging positionality is essential, as the researcher's beliefs, background and professional experiences inevitably influence both the collection and interpretation of data.

I am a qualified primary school teacher, currently seconded to NCCA, a statutory body responsible for curriculum and assessment development across all educational levels in Ireland. As an Education Officer with NCCA, I work directly on curriculum development and I am involved in designing and leading curriculum specifications. Prior to this, I was engaged in various stages of teacher education, including pre-service training, professional induction and professional learning through my work with the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT). These experiences provided me with insight into how school principals navigate policy enactment in practice.

My role affords a system-level perspective on curriculum development and has shaped my interest in how school leadership interacts with and responds to educational change. I enter this research with the belief that there is a genuine appetite for curriculum change at the school level. At the same time, I recognise that the loosely coupled nature of the Irish education system can contribute to miscommunication and fragmented messaging. This has informed my view that key messages and concepts relating to curriculum change are often interpreted in diverse, and sometimes contradictory, ways by principals.

Throughout the study, I maintained a reflexive stance, using a research journal to document my decisions, insights and potential biases. Ongoing supervision played a

critical role in helping me question assumptions and refine interpretations. By making my position transparent, I aim to strengthen the trustworthiness of the research and support the reader's understanding of how my role intersects with the research context.

4.2.2 Philosophical underpinnings of the study

The philosophical foundations of this study are shaped by an integrated worldview that aligns ontology, epistemology and methodology. Together, these commitments support a qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of principals engaging with curriculum development, mediation and enactment and system-level interactions.

Ontology – Social Constructivism

Ontology is mainly concerned with the nature of reality, of what exists and asks what really is? What is it possible to know? (Snape & Spencer, 2003). This study adopts a social constructivist mindset as the priority is to understand, interpret and make sense of participants' meanings. Social constructivism is an interpretative framework explaining a worldview in which people seek an understanding of the world they live in (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell (2014) outlines the need for the social constructivist researcher to pay particular attention to relative interaction, the subjective meanings of worldviews of others and the complexity of those views to focus on interpretation. The goal of the researcher is to focus on participants' views of the situation being studied. Hence the questions for this study are broad and general so that participants can construct meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This position is grounded in Vygotsky's social learning theory, which highlights the role of social interaction in sharing understanding (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Social constructivism aligns with the study's interest in how principals construct meaning around their roles, practices and curriculum engagement in response to evolving reform processes. It also acknowledges the interdependence between personal experience and organisational structures, providing a foundation for exploring meso-level dynamics.

Epistemology – Interpretivism

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and it questions what we know and how we come to know it (McNiff, 2010). Aligned with Creswell (2014), I see knowledge as something we generate all the time, it is a living process – something that does not stand still and is a reality that is constantly evolving and is unpredictable (McNiff,

2013). This study adopts an interpretivist epistemology, which asserts that knowledge is subjective and contextually situated. Interpretivism emphasises the importance of understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences and recognises that these meanings are shaped by cultural, institutional and relational factors (Bryman, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

This stance supports the study's focus on principals' interpretations of curriculum change, leadership and system engagement. It also positions the researcher as an active participant in meaning-making. Through sustained engagement with participants' accounts and careful interpretation of their values, perceptions and emotions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), the study aims to generate credible, grounded insights into how curriculum is developed, mediated and enacted in practice.

Methodology – qualitative approach

Saunders et al. (2019) and Creswell (2012) outline quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigms. Qualitative research is an emergent process that gradually accumulates knowledge without preconceived notions, whereas quantitative data's strength lies in numerical values, making it unsuitable for this study's emphasis on the how and why questions (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Quantitative methods can restrict subjective insights into human learning scenarios (Cohen et al. 2011). Thus, the study adopted a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research delves into a phenomenon, gathering and interpreting comprehensive information to derive meaning (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). The qualitative approach allows researchers to engage with participants and understand their perspectives (Corbin & Strauss 2015). This research focuses on understanding the experiences of primary school principals and their role in curriculum development, mediation and enactment and explores how meso-level activities may shape or influence this role. This information was gathered through focus groups. The aim isn't to provide population-level data but to illuminate a particular set of meaningful perspectives (Smith et al. 2009). The choice of a qualitative approach, specifically focus groups, is consistent with the study's interpretivist stance. This method enables in-depth exploration and interpretation of participants' experiences, generating rich, contextualised data aligned with the aims of this research.

Research methods – focus groups

Gathering data in qualitative research can take numerous forms, including interviewing, observation and mining data from documents and artefacts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Applying my social constructivist worldview and the qualitative

interpretive approach to the study, I chose focus groups as the most appropriate choice of data collection.

As a method of collecting data in qualitative research, a focus group is an interview on a topic with a group who have knowledge of the topic (Cohen et al., 2018). This data collection method is used to enhance and enrich the data gathered from the individual interviews. Hennink (2014: 2-3) elaborates:

'Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During a focus group discussion, participants share their views with others and perhaps refine their ideas in light of what they have heard.'

As the questions used in the focus groups ([Appendix A](#)) were not highly personal or sensitive, the collaborative setting made this method appropriate for eliciting participant feedback. The focus groups were designed to generate rich, detailed data relevant to the research aims. Attention now turns to the sampling strategy employed in the study to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

4.3 Data collection

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.

Focus groups were selected as a qualitative data collection method because they provide an opportunity for participants to discuss and explore their views and experiences collectively (Powell, 1996; Nyumba et al., 2018). I wished to create a setting in which school principals could engage with the research topic through facilitated prompts and questions. As Cohen et al. (2018) describe, focus groups enable discussion among individuals who share knowledge of a topic, allowing collective meaning-making to emerge. Bou and Sales (2022: 17) further note that participants often approach an issue from different standpoints, enriching dialogue as they "qualify, complement or interpret their narratives". Through this interaction, one person's reflection can prompt another's memory, leading to rich descriptive data.

The development of focus group questions was informed by an extensive literature review. Emerging themes including curriculum conceptualisation, school leadership, policy coherence and professional agency were identified and incorporated into the

question schedule to ensure alignment with current literature. For instance, one key theme that emerged from the literature was the importance of understanding perspectives in curriculum and curriculum making. Drawing on this insight, the question “*How do you define or conceptualise curriculum?*” was designed to elicit nuanced understandings of how principals’ perceptions shape responses to curriculum development, mediation and enactment ([Appendix A](#)). Incorporating insights from the literature on curriculum ensured that the questions were theoretically grounded while capturing principals’ subjective understandings of curriculum. This approach provided valuable insights into the diverse ways in which curriculum is interpreted within school environments and how such variation may influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment at the school level.

Drawing from my professional experience added a practical and contextual dimension to the questions. The integration of insights gained from hands-on involvement in the field of curriculum development, mediation and enactment provided a realistic and pragmatic foundation for the inquiries. This helped bridge theoretical concepts with the practical challenges encountered by principals.

In the process of refining the focus group schedule, a pivotal step involved conducting a pilot focus group as part of the schedule development process. This preliminary focus group served as a crucial testing ground for both the questions and the overall format intended for the study, as well as an opportunity to refine my group facilitation skills in managing discussion flow, participant engagement and the use of prompts. Three primary school principals who were not part of the main study participated in the pilot. Throughout the pilot focus group, attention was paid to the clarity and relevance of the questions, the appropriateness of the focus group format and the overall flow of the conversation. For example, as facilitator, I closely monitored the participants’ responses to assess their understanding of the questions and whether the questions elicited the desired information. Insights gleaned from the pilot focus group were instrumental in refining and finalising the focus group schedule. Adjustments were made to enhance question clarity, better address response nuances and improve the overall conversational flow. For instance, feedback from the pilot focus group highlighted certain questions that were perceived as overly broad or ambiguous by the participants. As a result, these questions were revised to provide more specific prompts or examples to guide the participants’ responses (e.g. clarifying the question “Given the range of organisations and agencies working at the meso level...” by adding the example “Who do you take your messaging from?”).

Moreover, observations on the pacing and sequencing of the focus group informed adjustments aimed at ensuring a more coherent and engaging experience for both the facilitator and participants alike. These refinements were essential in ensuring that the focus group schedule captured the intended information and facilitated meaningful discussions with participants, enhancing the study's rigour and reliability. The final schedule balanced consistency with flexibility, allowing adaptation to diverse participant responses. By synthesising information from the literature review, personal experiences and the pilot focus group, the resulting question schedule was designed to be versatile and comprehensive in gathering insightful and meaningful responses ([Appendix A](#)).

Initially, I considered individual interviews; however, on reflection, focus groups offered greater alignment with the research aims (Adams & Cox, 2008). While interviews yield detailed individual perspectives, focus groups encourage dialogue and the contestation of views, enabling participants to co-construct meaning (Bloor, 2001). I was aware of the challenges involved in using focus groups. While this method can be highly effective and efficient when executed correctly, it demands a particular skill set. I scheduled the focus groups to last between one and one and a half hours. This duration was selected to encourage uninterrupted discussion while ensuring that participants remained engaged and attentive, avoiding fatigue that could arise from longer sessions.

Another potential challenge of focus groups is an imbalance in contributions from participants, with some members dominating the discourse (Cohen et al., 2018; Gray, 2018). To mitigate against this, I planned prompts, probes and phrases to redirect questions to give all participants a chance to voice their opinion and experiences. At the same time, I was cognisant not to offend participants by moving away from their points, therefore my use of language was predetermined. I sent the topics and questions to all participants prior to the focus group, affording participants the opportunity to reflect on the topics prior to meeting in a group environment, which supported fuller participation. The focus groups were conducted over a four week period, with intervals between each allowing me to reflect on the questions and adjust my facilitation based on insights gained from the previous group.

The focus groups were conducted online to enhance accessibility for participants located across different regions of Ireland and to facilitate scheduling flexibility, which was particularly important given the time constraints and workload pressures faced by school principals. As a result, I decided that, since the focus group would be

running on Microsoft Teams, the number of participants was reduced from six to four. This was because research has shown that focus groups work more effectively in smaller groups in an online setting than 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 to contribute. In total, five focus groups were conducted, allowing for manageable group dynamics and meaningful participation from all involved.

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). It was hoped that this would occur as a result of participant dialogue, especially if I had overlooked or not considered 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 research that uses focus groups. 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, 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 focus groups place the attention of the group on participants not the facilitator (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). As a result, I chose to use a semi-structured method which aimed to pose questions 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, 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) posit that focus groups are useful in helping the researcher explore previously tacit or uncoded knowledge and this exploration might not always be linear in nature. With the sampling strategy in place and data collection complete, attention now turns to the analytical approach used to interpret the findings.

3.4 Sample selection

The sample selection was guided by the research question, the nature of the data being collected, the method of analysis and the resources available to the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, the focus is not on large numbers but on obtaining rich, in-depth insights from a small number of participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The aim is to gather meaningful data that can illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

In determining the sample size, I considered the concept of saturation. While the literature offers varying definitions, Creswell (2014) suggests that saturation is reached when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data. Rather than adhering to a fixed number, I focused on achieving reasonable coverage of the research question, ensuring that the data collected would be both substantial and insightful.

To facilitate participant access, I sought the assistance of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), who acted as a gatekeeper. In January 2024, a research invitation ([Appendix B](#)) was shared nationally through IPPN's E-scéal newsletter. Participation was based on self-selection, with interested principals confirming their involvement via email. Although no formal inclusion criteria were applied, the final group of nineteen participants reflected a diverse range of school types, sizes, patronage models and leadership experience, which enhanced the study's exploration of curriculum leadership across different contexts.

Following confirmation of participation, each principal received the University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee's approval letter ([Appendix C](#)) along with an information sheet and consent form ([Appendix D](#)). Participants were informed that they could raise any queries via phone or email; however, no follow-up queries were received. A total of 19 participants volunteered, and these were assigned to five focus groups.

It is acknowledged that the study does not aim to represent all primary school principals in Ireland. Instead, it seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how a group of self-selected principals perceive and shape their role in curriculum development, mediation and enactment and how they navigate and influence meso-level structures in doing so. This approach aligns with the study's interpretivist orientation and theoretical framework, which prioritise depth of understanding over broad generalisation.

Table 4.1 below presents an overview of the participants in the primary principals' focus groups. To protect anonymity, all names listed are pseudonyms. The table also outlines relevant contextual details, such as school type, leadership experience and geographical location, to illustrate the diversity of the sample.

Table 3:1: Participants for primary principals' focus groups

Participants	Gender	Years in principal role	Administrative Principal (AP) / Teaching Principal (TP)	Previous leadership experience
Alfie	Male	4 years	TP/ 6 teachers	None
Alice	Female	6 years	TP / 4 teachers	None
Anna	Female	3 years	AP / 25 teachers	AP1
Arlo	Male	7 years	AP / 26 teachers	Deputy principal
Chris	Male	5 years	TP / 4 teachers	Acting principal
Ciara	Female	6 years	TP / 2 teachers	None
Ciarán	Male	7 years	AP / 40 teachers	None
Claire	Female	7 years	TP / 7 teachers	None
Colin	Male	10 years	AP / 30 teachers	Senior leader in an International school abroad.
Dympna	Female	3 yeas	AP / 11 teachers	None
Elaine	Female	8 years	AP/ 28 teachers	AP2 AP1 Deputy principal
Jack	Male	9 years	AP / 59 teachers	Deputy principal
Laura	Female	6 years	AP / 18teachers	AP2
Lisa	Female	8 years	AP / 9 teachers	None
Ned	Male	5 years	AP / 18 teachers	Secondment
Peter	Male	8 years	AP / 20 teachers	Secondment
Rachel	Female	9 years	AP / 46 teachers	Deputy principal Teaching principal in 2 schools
Tim	Male	4 years	AP / 11 teachers	AP1
Trish	Female	5 years	TP / 6 teachers	AP2

4.5 Data analysis

4.5.1 Reflective thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020, 2022) outline a six-phase process that supports the conduct of thematic analysis, emphasising its value in identifying and addressing key aspects during analysis. From the outset, this study employed reflexive thematic analysis, which recognises the researcher's active and interpretive role in theme development. Reflexive thematic analysis views coding and theme construction not as passive acts of discovery but as deeply situated, reflective processes shaped by the researcher's lens and context (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis was conducted inductively, whereby codes and themes (Table 4.2) were generated from the data itself rather than imposed through a predetermined framework. This inductive stance aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2022) description of thematic analysis as a flexible method that allows meaning to emerge from participants' lived experiences. The process is illustrated in Figure 4.1, which outlines how raw data were developed into themes.

While these phases follow a logical sequence, the process is inherently iterative, allowing movement back and forth between phases as needed. This flexibility suits the evolving and interpretive nature of qualitative research and supports the complexity of understanding how school principals construct and make sense of curriculum change. As new insights emerged, earlier phases were revisited and refined. Thus, the six-phase process serves not as a rigid protocol but as an adaptable guide responsive to the research question, data and theoretical positioning.

Across their publications, Braun and Clarke have clarified misconceptions surrounding thematic analysis and reinforced the principles underpinning its reflexive form (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This is particularly valuable to this research as it ensures a more accurate and robust application of thematic analysis principles. The term reflexive thematic analysis emerged in response to these misconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It's recognised as an easily accessible, adaptable and theoretically flexible method that aids in identifying patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The reflexive nature emphasises the active role of the researcher in knowledge creation.

This research explores the experiences of primary principals in relation to curriculum development, mediation and enactment and investigates how meso-level activities

may influence, shape or potentially support their role. Reflective thematic analysis aligns with this study, emphasising the active role of the researcher in knowledge creation. Codes are viewed as the researcher's interpretations of meaning patterns within the data, shaped through engagement with both the dataset and the study's theoretical framing. Reflexive thematic analysis involves the researcher's interpretive analysis at the intersection of the dataset, the analytical skills and the theoretical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

While the analysis was conducted inductively, the study's theoretical framing around curriculum making and self-efficacy informed the interpretive lens through which the data were analysed. These concepts sensitised the researcher to patterns relating to how principals understood and enacted curriculum change, how they positioned themselves within curriculum processes, and how confidence, agency and professional judgement shaped their engagement with reform. The theoretical framing did not operate as a predetermined coding framework; rather, it informed the interpretation, refinement and naming of codes, subthemes and themes as patterns were developed across the dataset. In this way, theory functioned as an interpretive resource within the reflexive thematic analysis process, supporting deeper engagement with participants' experiences while remaining grounded in the data.

In this study, where the aim is to understand the experiences of principals in curriculum development, mediation and enactment, the reflexive nature aligns with the need for thoughtful engagement with the data. It is understood that these intersecting criteria will differ between researchers, meaning that codes or themes developed by one researcher may not be replicated by another (though it is possible). The understanding that codes represent the researcher's interpretations of meaning patterns within the data is particularly relevant to this study. It acknowledges the subjective nature of interpretation, which is crucial when exploring the nuanced and complex topic. The following figure identifies the six steps involved in reflective thematic analysis, provides a systematic framework for identifying and analysing patterns, themes and meanings within qualitative data.

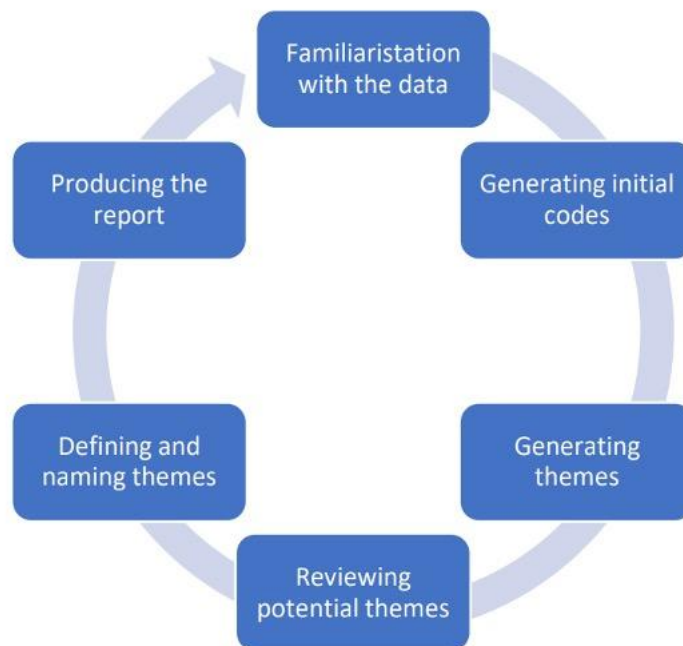


Figure 3.1: Six steps in the reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

4.5.2 Process of data analysis

Phase one: familiarisation with the data

Phase one involved becoming familiar with the data. This phase is essential for the researcher to immerse themselves in the raw data, gaining a thorough understanding of its content. Analysis began during data collection and transcription, then listening to the recordings and reading transcripts. According to Merriam “collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research” (Merriam 2009: 169).

A recognised challenge with transcript data is the difficulty in fully capturing the nuances of spoken communication in written form. To address this, the transcription process began with the auto-generated transcript provided by Microsoft Teams. This initial version was then carefully reviewed and edited while listening to the original audio recordings to ensure accuracy, correct omissions and address issues related to repetition, sentence structure, punctuation and inferred meaning. In addition, the availability of video recordings allowed for the observation of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone and body language, which informed interpretation during both transcription and analysis.

The data were transcribed orthographically, with attention paid to capturing inflections, pauses and emphases in the speech of both the researcher and participants, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). Equal attention was given to the entire dataset to avoid selective reading or overlooking any part of the transcription process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process formed part of Phase 1 of reflexive thematic analysis and laid the foundation for a rich, interpretive engagement with the data in subsequent stages.

Phase two: generating initial codes

Phase two involved generating initial codes. This phase built on the familiarisation with the data in phase one and focused on identifying and coding specific features or patterns within the dataset. Codes serve as the foundational elements in the formation of subsequent themes. They should be concise yet offer enough detail to independently inform about the shared elements within the data regarding the research topic (Braun & Clarke 2012; Braun et al. 2016).

In starting the process of systematically coding the data, I attached codes to segments of the data that represented meaningful concepts, themes or patterns. These codes served as shorthand representations of the content. A code symbolises interpreted meanings attributed to individual data points for later pattern detection, categorisation and theory building (Miles et al., 2013). It is a constructed representation of data.

Coding, as Miles et al. (2013) argue, forms the initial step toward a rigorous analysis and interpretation of research findings. During transcript reading and re-reading, I added comments and queries in the margins, known as open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moving to the next transcript, I continued the process by exploring interesting aspects that address the research questions, extracting new codes as necessary. I moved through each transcript using both digital and printed copies, extracting new codes as needed and allowing codes to emerge inductively from the data. The coding process was not static; it evolved as new insights emerged from the data. I actively undertook a dynamic and iterative process of reading, coding and extracting meaningful information from the transcripts.

Phase two involved the breakdown of the data into meaningful units through the generation of initial codes, laying the foundation for the identification and development of overarching themes in the later phases of thematic analysis.

Phase three: generating themes

Once all pertinent data had been coded, the analysis shifted from examining individual data points to interpreting broader patterns across the dataset. Labelled excerpts were reviewed to explore how they clustered together, forming initial themes and sub-themes. As this phase progressed, shared meanings and recurring ideas emerged across multiple cases, giving rise to a more interpretative account of the data. The development of themes was also informed by sensitising concepts drawn from the theory on curriculum making and self-efficacy, particularly in interpreting how principals positioned themselves within curriculum processes, negotiated external policy demands and understood their professional capacity to lead curriculum change.

This process involved an ongoing dialogue between myself as the researcher, the data and the wider context in which participants were situated (Smith et al., 2009). Developing connections between themes further enriched the narrative, which is explored in detail in the findings chapter.

Reflective commentary alongside each theme supported deeper analytical insights. Grouping codes into themes such as 'Curriculum leadership' or 'System level coherence' helped generate a coherent and nuanced picture of the dataset. While Braun and Clarke (2013) note that there are no strict rules for defining a theme, in this study themes were both distinctive and interconnected, working together to build a comprehensive understanding of principals' experiences. Each theme was cross-checked against the dataset to ensure alignment with the research question and to maintain analytical rigour.

Table 4.2 provides an overview of the initial themes and associated codes, illustrating how the data were organised during thematic analysis. These codes, drawn from patterns across the focus groups, capture the key concepts that underpin principals' engagement with curriculum development, mediation and enactment.

Table 3:2: Initial themes and associated codes

Theme:	Theme:	Theme:	Theme:
Conceptualising curriculum	Curriculum leadership	System level coherence	Leadership capacity

Codes	Codes	Codes	Codes
Fixed versus evolving views of curriculum	Curriculum enactment focus	Fragmentation and confusion in system messaging	Confidence and beliefs about leadership
Engagement constraints	Managing competing leadership demands	Stakeholder engagement / multiple stakeholders	Biographical and experiential influences
Disconnection from development	Supporting others to lead	Gaps in regional or local support	Contextual agency
Professional background influences	Emotional toll of curriculum leadership	Navigating mixed signals from meso-level actors	Professional isolation
Variation in curriculum interpretation	Balancing compliance and creativity	Lack of coordinated communication	Motivation shaped by experience

Phase four: reviewing potential themes

This stage involved conducting a thorough and iterative review of the emerging themes in connection to both the coded data and the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2020; 2022). After qualitative codes were identified, they were clustered based on conceptual similarities, forming preliminary categories. These categories served as an intermediate stage in the analysis, helping to organise related codes and identify potential patterns of meaning across the dataset. For example, codes related to “policy clarity” and “message consistency” were grouped into a category highlighting issues of system communication.

These categories were then reviewed and interrogated to develop broader themes, overarching patterns of shared meaning that captured key aspects of principals’ experiences in relation to curriculum development and meso-level interaction. The process involved both reasoning and intuitive judgment, involving multiple rounds of grouping and regrouping until coherent themes were developed (Miles et al., 2013).

Importantly, themes were selected not solely based on frequency, but on their interpretive relevance to the research aims and their resonance with key theoretical or professional concerns. For instance, one initial theme ‘Curriculum content

knowledge’ was ultimately discarded due to limited supporting data and overlap with another emerging theme, ensuring that only robust and distinctive patterns were retained.

Phase five: defining and naming theme

At this stage, the researcher’s role involved presenting a comprehensive analysis of the thematic framework. Each theme and sub-theme should be described in relation to both the dataset and the research questions. According to Patton’s (1990) dual criteria, every theme should offer a coherent and internally consistent representation of the data that cannot be conveyed by other themes. However, all themes should collectively construct a clear narrative consistent with the dataset content and aligned with the research questions. The names of the themes underwent a final revision to ensure they accurately reflected the underlying patterns of meaning. The final naming and refinement of themes were shaped not only by patterns within the dataset, but also by the study’s theoretical framing, ensuring that themes captured dimensions of curriculum interpretation, agency, professional confidence and leadership enactment evident across participants’ accounts.

The selection of Braun and Clarke’s six-step reflective thematic approach allowed for the identification and interpretation of themes, which proved crucial in understanding how principals perceive their role in curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Ultimately, I aimed to thoughtfully choose suitable examples for each theme, ensuring that they were reinforced by quotes from various participants (Smith et al., 2009). At this stage of the analysis, the themes and subthemes were refined further from those identified in Phase 3 (Table 4.2). The final set of themes and subthemes is presented in Table 4.3 below, illustrating how earlier codes and themes were consolidated and reconfigured through reflexive engagement with the data.

Table 4.3: Themes and subthemes

Theme 1:	Subthemes
Conceptualising curriculum	1. Curriculum as product versus curriculum as process 2. Role, position and external influences on curriculum engagement

Theme 2: Leading curriculum change	3. Curriculum development: centralised versus decentralised
	Subthemes
Theme 3: Creating the conditions for curriculum leadership	1. Sense-making in curriculum leadership 2. Distributed leadership in curriculum change 3. Competing leadership priorities 4. The emotional dimension of leadership
	Subthemes
	1. Professional leader agency 2. Navigating system coherence

Phase six: producing the report

The qualitative research write-up is deeply entwined with the entire analysis process, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2012). As the codes and themes shifted and developed throughout the analysis, the report writing also followed a recursive approach. This phase involved finalising the analytic narrative and presenting the themes in relation to the research question. While I took reflective notes throughout the process, the formal writing of the report was grounded in the completed thematic analysis. The order in which the themes would be presented was meticulously planned, aiming to create a cohesive and logical narrative of the data.

4.6 Credibility and trustworthiness

Ensuring the credibility and overall trustworthiness of this qualitative study was a central concern throughout the research process. There is considerable debate among qualitative researchers about how to evaluate research quality (Strauss 1998; Olmos-Vega et al. 2022). While some scholars have proposed broad frameworks or principles for qualitative rigor (Yardley 2000), there is no single universally agreed upon code for ensuring quality in qualitative inquiry (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). In this study, I aligned with the commonly cited trustworthiness criteria outlined by Creswell (2010): credibility, transferability and dependability, which correspond to the classic framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These concepts provided a focused framework for enhancing research quality, emphasizing that the findings are believable to others, applicable (with appropriate context) to similar settings and generated through a consistent and rigorous process.

4.6.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the findings. Several strategies were employed to ensure that the results accurately reflected participants' experiences. First, I adopted Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflexive thematic analysis framework, engaging systematically with the entire dataset. This involved prolonged immersion in the data and careful cross-checking of emerging themes against the transcripts to confirm that they genuinely represented participants' perspectives. I also maintained sensitivity to context by situating the analysis within the broader educational landscape and relevant scholarship. An extensive review of literature and policy ensured that interpretations were appropriately contextualised, producing more nuanced and valid insights. In addition, consistency in data collection and analysis procedures supported dependability, contributing to a stable and repeatable research process within the parameters of a qualitative study.

4.6.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts. To support this, I provided rich, detailed description of participants' perspectives and the contexts in which they work, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own settings. A key technique was the inclusion of participants' own words to illustrate themes and capture nuance, conflict and convergence within the data (King, 2004). By grounding each theme in verbatim examples, I provided transparent evidence of how conclusions were drawn, making it easier for readers to judge the relevance of the findings. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that the use of data excerpts enhances credibility and provides confirmation that the analysis authentically reflects participants' perspectives. Similarly, Boeije (2009) and Merriam (2009) highlight the value of providing evidence rich accounts that allow readers to make their own informed assessments of transferability. Although the study involved a relatively small number of participants, the depth of engagement and richness of the accounts provided enable meaningful consideration of how these insights might resonate in other similar contexts.

4.6.3 Dependability and confirmability

Dependability concerns the stability and consistency of the research process, while confirmability relates to the extent to which findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias. To enhance both, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the project. As an interpretivist researcher, I acknowledged that my personal values and professional role (my experience as a curriculum developer) could shape data collection and interpretation (Fleming, 2018: 315). I made my philosophical stance and positionality explicit in [Chapter One](#) and in [Section 4.2.1](#) so that readers are aware of the lens through which I approached the study.

A reflexive journal was maintained to document decisions, insights, and potential biases, while regular discussions with my supervisors further challenged my interpretations and ensured they remained closely tied to participants' accounts. For example, I recorded an early assumption that principals with more leadership training would demonstrate greater confidence in discussions of curriculum change. However, the focus group data revealed that confidence was often shaped instead by school context and collegial networks. Reflecting on this entry ([Appendix E](#)) encouraged me to re-examine my coding categories and remain open to alternative explanations, preventing my assumptions from narrowing the interpretation.

Transparency in the analytic process was also central. I clearly documented coding and theme development and openly acknowledged the study's limitations (small sample size, single data collection method). This audit trail enabled readers to trace how findings were derived. Finally, strict adherence to ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality and sensitivity to power dynamics helped foster a respectful environment in which participants could speak candidly, thereby enhancing the integrity of the data ([Section 4.7](#)). Together, these strategies ensured that the findings are both dependable and confirmable, offering a credible and trustworthy account of principals' perspectives.

4.7 Ethical framework

The ethical framework of this study is rooted in principles of research integrity, participant protection and professional responsibility. These principles align with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) guidelines, the Maynooth University Ethics Policy (2019), and the University's Research Integrity Policy (2021). Ethical approval was secured from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-committee prior to the commencement of data collection ([Appendix C](#)). Ethical

considerations in this study centred on informed consent, confidentiality and secure data management, each of which is discussed below.

4.7.1 Informed consent procedure

Upon expressing interest in participating, prospective participants were sent an information sheet and consent form via email ([Appendix D](#)). The document outlined the purpose of the study, participant roles, benefits and risks, confidentiality, data handling, right to withdraw and plans for data use and dissemination. Participants were encouraged to seek clarification and were given time to make an informed decision.

Consent was obtained through the completion and return of the signed form via email. No hard copy data were generated. The form included specific clauses addressing voluntary participation, audio and video recording, the right to withdraw and mechanisms for addressing concerns. This process ensured participants were fully informed prior to their involvement.

The nature of focus groups presents specific ethical challenges around consent. As Sim and Waterfield (2019) highlight, the unpredictable and co-constructed nature of group discussions makes it difficult to fully inform participants in advance. While the information sheet outlined anticipated topics, it was not possible to disclose the exact nature of all discussions. Nonetheless, the four essential elements of consent (Sim, 2010) were upheld:

- Disclosure: Participants received a detailed information sheet.
- Comprehension: All participants were practising principals and understood what was being asked of them.
- Competence: Each participant was capable of giving informed consent.
- Voluntariness: Participation was free from coercion or inducement.

At the start of each focus group, participants were reminded that their consent was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point during the session or up to two weeks afterwards, without consequence.

4.7.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was treated as a central ethical priority due to the group-based nature of data collection and the sensitivity of professional experiences being shared. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert, confidentiality involves safeguarding participants' identities while handling data with appropriate discretion and rigour.

While every effort was made to anonymise data in reporting, full anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the group format. Participants were informed of this limitation and were asked to respect each other's confidentiality. At the beginning of each session, participants were reminded not to share information disclosed during the group outside of that setting.

To protect identities, pseudonyms were assigned and any potentially identifying details were excluded from transcripts and reporting. All data were stored securely on the Maynooth University OneDrive system, in line with the data management plan approved by the ethics committee. Files were encrypted and password-protected and access was restricted to the researcher. This approach ensured compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and institutional data protection guidelines.

A further challenge identified by Sim and Waterfield (2019) relates to the risk of participants disclosing sensitive or personal information in the presence of others. While the topics discussed in this study were not of a highly sensitive nature, efforts were made to monitor the discussion, intervene if needed, and reinforce shared responsibility for confidentiality among group members.

4.7.3 Data storage and usage

A comprehensive data management protocol was implemented to safeguard the integrity and confidentiality of all research materials. Audio-visual recordings and transcripts were stored on the Maynooth University Microsoft 365 OneDrive account and deleted following transcription. Access to this data was restricted solely to the researcher via password protection and encryption.

The research adhered to all data protection and ethical standards, including those outlined in the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy (2019) and Research Integrity Policy (2021). Data will be retained securely for a period of ten years, as per institutional policy, after which it will be permanently destroyed using both digital and manual processes.

This structured approach to ethical procedures demonstrates a commitment to responsible research practice, transparency and participant wellbeing. By addressing the challenges of focus group research directly within the frameworks of consent and confidentiality, the study upholds its ethical responsibilities while enabling open and meaningful engagement with participants.

4.8 Limitations

All research designs have inherent limitations and it is important to acknowledge these when interpreting the findings. As Murray (2016) notes, limitations refer to aspects of a study's design, context or methodology that may affect the scope, depth or generalisability of its conclusions. In the case of this study, several limitations are worth noting in relation to sampling, data collection methods, researcher positionality and the evolving policy context.

4.8.1 Sampling and participant representation

Although nineteen primary school principals participated across five focus groups, the sample remains relatively small and self-selecting. It is acknowledged that those who volunteered to participate may have had a prior interest in curriculum matters or a particular willingness to engage in professional dialogue, which could have shaped the perspectives represented. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the breadth of views across the primary education sector. Furthermore, the group setting, while useful for encouraging shared reflection, may have limited the extent to which participants felt comfortable offering more personal, critical or dissenting views, particularly on sensitive or contested aspects of curriculum leadership.

4.8.2 Data collection methods

The study is grounded in an interpretivist framework and is concerned with how principals make meaning of curriculum change within their professional contexts. Accordingly, the data relied on participants' self-reported experiences, views and interpretations. While this approach is appropriate for exploring subjective understandings, it also introduces potential biases, such as selective recall or social desirability. Principals may have presented their practices in ways that align with perceived professional norms or expectations, particularly when discussing system level change within a peer group context.

The use of online focus groups also introduced certain constraints. While this format increased accessibility by enabling participation from geographically dispersed schools, it may have limited the quality of interaction. Online settings can restrict the flow of conversation, reduce spontaneity and make non-verbal cues harder to interpret, which in turn constrains the researcher's ability to gauge group dynamics and engagement (O'Connor & Madge, 2017; Archibald et al., 2019). Occasional technical issues, such as connectivity problems, also had the potential to disrupt discussion and reduce the richness of data generated.

4.8.3 Researcher positionality and potential influence

Although the researcher is not a principal, their role as an Education Officer with the NCCA positions me within the wider system of curriculum development. This insider status provided a deep understanding of the policy context, which enriched the analysis. However, it may also have influenced how participants framed their responses or what they chose to disclose during discussions. Conscious of this dynamic, The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the study, including the use of a research journal and regular supervisory dialogue to interrogate how personal and professional perspectives may have shaped the research process and interpretation of findings.

4.8.4 Evolving policy context

This study was conducted during an ongoing period of curriculum change in Ireland, with many developments still in progress at the time of data collection in February and March 2024. As such, the insights gathered represent a temporal snapshot of principals' perceptions, shaped by emerging policy documents, draft frameworks and evolving system messages. Understandings and interpretations may shift as curriculum change becomes more embedded in practice. A longitudinal study would be needed to capture how principals' roles, agency and engagement with curriculum evolve over time.

In acknowledging these limitations, the study remains transparent about the conditions under which the data were generated and interpreted. These considerations do not undermine the value of the findings but provide important context for their application and for future research directions.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations of the study and the rationale underpinning the research design. Informed by a social constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the study sought to explore how primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment within the wider context of meso-level policy activity. The use of qualitative methods, particularly focus groups, aligned with the study's aim to capture the complex, relational and context-dependent nature of leadership practice in Irish primary schools.

The chapter also detailed the strategies used to ensure rigour, trustworthiness and ethical integrity across all stages of the research process. In line with Creswell (2010) and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, credibility, transferability, and dependability/confirmability were addressed through systematic analysis, the use of rich description, reflexivity, and transparency in reporting. While limitations were acknowledged in relation to sampling, data collection methods, researcher positionality, and the evolving policy context, these were carefully considered and mitigated as far as possible, ensuring that findings are presented with appropriate caution and contextual awareness.

Ultimately, the methodological approach adopted in this research provides a strong foundation for the interpretive analysis that follows. The next chapter presents the findings generated through reflexive thematic analysis, offering a detailed account of how principals perceive and enact their roles in the evolving curriculum landscape and how meso-level dynamics may shape these experiences.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings obtained based on the data collection methods described in [Chapter 4](#). Beginning with a restatement of the aim and research questions, it progresses to a discussion on the themes and subthemes. Each theme and subtheme are presented using the data gathered which in turn is discussed through the lens of the relevant literature. All the data collected were qualitative and these results form an essential part of the overall study.

The purpose of this research is to explore how primary school principals in Ireland understand and engage with curriculum change, particularly through their interactions with the broader meso-level policy environment. It investigates how principals conceptualise curriculum and curriculum-making within their professional contexts and how they interpret and lead curriculum development, mediation and enactment at the school level. Central to the study is an examination of how principals interface with meso-level actors and activities such as support services, professional networks and policy initiatives and how these interactions shape both their leadership practices and the enactment of curriculum.

The literature highlights that while school leaders are key mediators of curriculum change, their agency is shaped by the ways in which they make sense of evolving policy expectations and by the structural, cultural and relational conditions within which they work (Priestley et al., 2015; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Walsh, 2024). Increasingly, research points to the role of meso-level interactions with networks, intermediaries and system supports in influencing how principals interpret curriculum messages and lead their enactment within schools (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Coburn, 2005; Pietarinen et al., 2017). This study responds to these insights by examining the lived experiences of Irish primary principals as they navigate the demands of curriculum change and the evolving landscape of meso-level engagement.

The dominant themes were developed through a careful distillation of the data using an iterative process of thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Insights from each analytic cycle were revisited, refined and integrated, resulting in the development of three overarching themes, each comprising several subthemes. Together, these thematic categories capture the complexity and nuance of participants' experiences, offering a structured lens through which to examine how

school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment and how they navigate and interface with the wider meso-level actors and activities that influence these processes.

Using my interpretivist and constructivist lens, the data were analysed and discussed against both my theoretical framework and the relevant literature. Therefore, the data are explored under the themes and subthemes listed below in Table 5.1.

Table 4:1: Themes and subthemes

Theme 1:	Subthemes
Conceptualising curriculum	1. Curriculum as product versus curriculum as process 2. Role, position and external influences on curriculum engagement 3. Curriculum development: centralised versus decentralised
Theme 2:	Subthemes
Leading curriculum change	1. Sense-making in curriculum leadership 2. Distributed leadership in curriculum change 3. Competing leadership priorities 4. The emotional dimension of leadership
Theme 3:	Subthemes
Creating the conditions for curriculum leadership	1. Professional leader agency 2. Navigating system coherence

5.2 Theme 1: Conceptualising curriculum

“How we understand the curriculum shapes everything, whether we see it as something to deliver or something to explore with our staff and students. That understanding changes how we lead, how we plan and how we respond to change.” (Tim)

This theme explores how Irish primary school principals conceptualise curriculum and how these understandings influence both their engagement with curriculum in practice and their perceived roles in curriculum development. The analysis reveals two dominant and often conflicting conceptualisations: curriculum as a product (a fixed set of outcomes and content to be delivered) and curriculum as a process (an evolving, context-sensitive practice shaped by teacher agency, learner needs and school culture). These views are not merely theoretical positions but are closely tied to how principals enact leadership, frame their responsibilities and respond to policy expectations. Importantly, they also reflect principals’ sense of professional self-efficacy, how confident and capable they feel in interpreting, adapting and leading curriculum within their schools.

Principals’ understandings of curriculum were shown to develop over time, informed by their professional experiences, access to professional learning and the strength of their collegial networks. For some, curriculum leadership was framed around compliance and consistency, often shaped by systemic pressures such as inspections and standardised planning expectations. For others, curriculum was understood more expansively, involving reflective dialogue, collaborative meaning-making and responsiveness to local context. These varying orientations also influenced how principals perceived their roles in curriculum development at a system level, ranging from passive implementation to critical engagement. Notably, these perspectives were often mediated by principals’ levels of self-efficacy, which developed through experience, support and opportunities for agency.

Through rich participant narratives, this theme surfaces a broader tension between centralised curriculum reform and aspirations for more decentralised, inclusive approaches. It highlights the multifaceted and contested nature of curriculum leadership and raises important questions about voice, agency, self-efficacy and the conditions necessary to support meaningful curriculum engagement at the school level. The analysis is presented through three interrelated subthemes that together

illuminate how principals conceptualise and engage with curriculum in practice: **curriculum as product versus process, the role, position and external influences on engagement and the balance between centralised and decentralised curriculum development.**

5.2.1 Curriculum as product versus curriculum as process

A significant finding emerging from the data was the marked divergence in how Irish primary school principals conceptualised curriculum. The data reveal two broad and often conflicting orientations: a product-based view, where curriculum is seen as a set of outcomes and content to be delivered, and a process-based view, where curriculum is understood as an evolving, lived experience shaped by teacher agency, learner needs and school context. Although both orientations were present, there was an initial predominance of product-based thinking, particularly when principals spoke about accountability, inspections and national expectations. This perspective often framed curriculum as a fixed entity to be implemented with fidelity. Several principals described curriculum leadership as ensuring compliance with official guidance, referencing documents, outcomes and timelines as central tools in their practice. As Elaine explained, “It’s all there in the curriculum documents. Our job is to make sure it’s covered and that the children meet the learning outcomes.” Her statement illustrates a compliance-oriented understanding, where curriculum is treated as a technical blueprint designed to guide delivery and ensure coverage.

Such a conceptualisation aligns with what Pinar et al. (2008) have critiqued as a technical approach to curriculum, one concerned with efficiency, standardisation and control. The curriculum, in this framing, becomes a mechanism for achieving measurable objectives rather than a context-sensitive educational process. As Kelly (2009) notes, this product model is grounded in the belief that education can be prescribed in advance and delivered uniformly. In the Irish context, this way of thinking is arguably reinforced by systemic structures, including standardised testing, planning regulations and inspection frameworks. “The Inspector looks for certain things,” noted Jack and “we have to show that the learning outcomes are being met, that the planning aligns with the curriculum. There isn’t much room for interpretation.”

Others expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that the pressures of accountability leave limited scope for innovation or teacher agency. Alice reflected, “Sometimes it feels like we’re just ticking the boxes, making sure we don’t get caught out.” This sense of performativity may reflect not just external pressure but also diminished

professional self-efficacy, where principals feel less confident in their capacity to exercise curriculum leadership beyond compliance. As Bandura (1997) notes, self-efficacy influences whether individuals feel capable of initiating and sustaining action in the face of constraints.

Here, the curriculum is conceptualised not only as external but also as an object of surveillance. Leadership, in this model, becomes primarily managerial, focused on oversight and alignment rather than collaborative curriculum work. Ciarán echoed this when he said, “I have to make sure everyone is on the same page. We use common templates, and I check in on plans to make sure the learning outcomes are being addressed.” The emphasis is on consistency and coverage, with principals positioned as quality controllers rather than curriculum leaders.

This view, while dominant in certain parts of the discussion, was not uncontested. Several principals expressed frustration with the limitations of a product-focused approach, questioning its relevance to their school communities and the lived realities of teaching and learning. “We’re not factories,” remarked Claire. “Consistency is important, but not at the expense of creativity or relevance.” The language used here suggests a dissonance between policy imperatives and pedagogical values. These moments of contestation revealed an undercurrent of resistance with principals who, while aware of external demands, sought to create space for more contextualised and responsive curriculum development and enactment.

As conversations progressed, more process-oriented views began to surface, often through reflections on classroom practice and professional judgement. For these principals, curriculum was not a static document to be delivered but a dynamic process shaped through interaction, reflection and adaptation. “It’s not just about ticking boxes,” said Peter. “The curriculum is a guide, yes, but what happens in the classroom is far more dynamic, it depends on the children, the context, even the energy in the room.” This framing reflects Stenhouse’s (1975) influential conception of curriculum as process, where educational experiences are emergent and grounded in the situated knowledge of teachers.

Such a view repositions the principal as a leader of learning, facilitating conditions for inquiry, adaptation and collaborative engagement. Ciara captured this well when she explained, “My role isn’t about checking if teachers are ‘delivering’ the curriculum word for word. It’s about supporting them to make it meaningful for our context and to reflect together, adapt and sometimes challenge what’s there.” This orientation is also closely aligned with Grundy’s (1987) notion of praxis, where curriculum arises

from the dialectic between theory and action, grounded in ethical judgement and professional agency. It also signals the presence of strong curriculum leadership self-efficacy, as these principals exhibit confidence in navigating ambiguity and supporting others through change.

Participants who adopted this view often described efforts to make space for shared sense-making within their schools. “We looked at the new framework and asked, what does this mean for us? Not just what it says on paper, but what it looks like in our school, with our learners,” said Laura. These reflections speak to an interpretive stance, one that treats policy as a resource rather than a prescription. The process of curriculum making, in this view, is collective, grounded in the expertise of teachers and the needs of learners. Arlo noted, “We have curriculum conversations in staff meetings. Not to check up on people, but to learn together about what’s working, what’s not and how we can adapt.”

This orientation resonates with Pinar’s (2008) concept of *currere*, which frames curriculum as a reflective and autobiographical journey through which educators and learners make sense of their experiences over time. It shifts attention away from outcomes and toward subjectivity, dialogue and the cultivation of understanding. Similarly, Biesta (2010) argues for an educational approach that values judgement and purpose over technical compliance, warning against the narrowing effects of outcome-driven policy. The reflections of participants in this study suggest that many principals are aware of these tensions and are actively negotiating them within their leadership practice.

Still, these more interpretive approaches were often expressed alongside an acknowledgment of structural constraints. “I’d love to do more co-constructive work with staff,” admitted Lisa, “but with inspections, managing the organisation, there’s only so much time we have.” This uncertainty points to what Spillane (1999) calls “zones of enactment,” the situated spaces in which policy is interpreted and mediated. It also highlights the systemic pressures that pull principals toward performativity, even when their instincts lean toward professionalism and care. Yet where principals demonstrated high self-efficacy, they were more likely to create opportunities for dialogue and adaptation despite such pressures, reinforcing the link between internal belief and external action.

This subtheme highlights a fundamental divergence in how Irish primary principals conceptualise curriculum as either a product to be delivered or a process to be shaped. Crucially, this divergence was not only evident between principals but also

within individual principals themselves, many of whom expressed conflicting views as they sought to reconcile systemic expectations of delivery with their own aspirations for more dialogic, process-oriented approaches. These orientations are not merely philosophical; they are deeply tied to principals' leadership practices, their responses to accountability pressures and their sense of professional agency. While systemic structures often reinforce product-based thinking, many principals actively seek space for more interpretive, collaborative approaches grounded in context and teacher expertise. Crucially, principals who expressed greater confidence in their curriculum leadership appeared better able to navigate these tensions, often positioning themselves not just as implementers but as meaning-makers and curriculum leaders within their schools.

5.2.2 Role, position and external influences on curriculum engagement

This subtheme explores the factors that influence a principal's understanding of and engagement with curriculum. Such understanding is not simply a function of positional authority but is shaped by an assemblage of external and experiential influences, including professional background, engagement in professional development and the quality of collegial interaction. These findings support Pinar's (2008) view of curriculum as a "complicated conversation," rather than a fixed text, and echo literature positioning curriculum understanding as relational, contextual and constructed through lived experience (Priestley et al., 2012).

Many participants reflected on how their earlier professional roles had shaped their current thinking. Rachel described how working across multiple schools opened her perspective: "My understanding of curriculum has evolved. It's no longer just about the documents, it's about how we approach teaching and learning each day and how we respond to the needs of both students and staff." Similarly, Tim explained that the transition from assistant principal to principal gave him time to reframe curriculum as responsive and contextual: "I became more attuned to the role of school context and learner needs. I no longer felt the need to 'cover' everything. That came from confidence and experience in my AP1 role and extended into how I now lead as principal." These reflections highlight that curriculum engagement is not uniform across school leaders; it evolves in response to career trajectory and exposure to different pedagogical environments. They also reflect how growing leadership experience can strengthen self-efficacy, supporting principals to exercise judgement and lead with confidence in uncertain or evolving curricular contexts.

As Biesta and Tedder (2007) suggest, professional agency is always situated; it develops through interaction with real-world constraints and opportunities. Principals who had worked in diverse settings or who had held pedagogical leadership roles before becoming principal were more likely to articulate curriculum as a process, a site of negotiation, rather than delivery.

Engagement in professional development further shaped how curriculum was conceptualised. For some, professional learning created moments of reframing. Anna described a Centre for School Leadership course as pivotal: “That was when I started to think about curriculum in terms of school culture, not just planning documents. That really changed how I lead curriculum conversations in the school.” For Ned, a Master’s programme challenged previous assumptions: “I used to think of curriculum as subject content and timetables, but through my thesis work, I began to see it as something deeply connected to values, pedagogy and the lived experience of students.” These examples demonstrate how relevant, in-depth professional learning can build curriculum leadership self-efficacy, offering both conceptual clarity and the confidence to act.

Yet not all professional learning was viewed as relevant. Dympna noted, “A lot of the continuous professional development (CPD) I’ve seen is geared towards teaching the curriculum, not leading it. What would be really helpful is support around leading change, how to bring staff with you, how to build capacity, that sort of thing.” This distinction surfaced repeatedly in the data, highlighting a systemic blind spot in the way professional learning is structured. When professional learning is focused solely on classroom delivery, it missed the opportunity to build leadership capability in curriculum enactment. Conversely, principals who had not engaged with professional learning in recent years, such as Ciarán, often retained a more technical view: “For me, curriculum is making sure we’re getting content covered and that plans are done properly.” This suggests that access to high-quality, leadership-specific professional learning plays a role in broadening principals’ conceptions of curriculum and their own responsibilities within it, while also enhancing their confidence in leading curriculum change.

Collegial dialogue also emerged as a powerful influence. Informal networks and conversations with other principals often served as sites of professional learning. Trish remarked, “I honestly learn more from talking to other principals than I do from any formal training. We share strategies, dilemmas and that’s where new thinking really happens.” For Ned, such dialogue was a regular feature of his leadership

practice: “When you sit down with another principal and they’re wrestling with the same questions, it makes you think differently. I’ve taken more from those moments than I have from most webinars.” These insights point to the importance of peer learning and the social dimensions of curriculum understanding. The concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) helps illuminate this dynamic by emphasising that learning is socially situated and occurs through shared engagement with authentic challenges rather than through isolated information delivery. Collegial engagement also appeared to strengthen self-efficacy by offering affirmation, alternative perspectives and mutual support, all of which helped principals build the confidence to take curriculum risks or lead interpretive work.

Some participants described their involvement in national dialogue as particularly impactful. Laura, who had participated in the NCCA’s Schools Forum, described the experience as transformative: “It made me realise that curriculum isn’t just a national policy thing, it’s something that evolves with input from schools like ours. That gave me a sense of ownership and made me more reflective in my role.” This sense of being a contributor, rather than just a recipient of curriculum policy, marked a clear shift in professional stance. It also revealed how national engagement can enable principals to see curriculum as an evolving, co-constructed endeavour, reinforcing their belief in their capacity to influence broader educational direction.

This sense of remove from curriculum development was particularly apparent among administrative principals, who tended to perceive curriculum as external to their daily responsibilities. Their role, often heavily focused on the operational and managerial demands of school leadership (such as compliance, staffing and organisational oversight) left limited time or perceived relevance for direct engagement with curriculum matters. For many, curriculum development was seen as the remit of policymakers or teachers, rather than something they were actively involved in shaping. This separation may reflect not only workload realities but also a conceptual framing of curriculum as something to be implemented rather than co-constructed.

In contrast, teaching principals who straddle both leadership and classroom roles often described a more immediate, embodied relationship with the curriculum. Their daily proximity to learners and learning gave them a grounded perspective on how curriculum unfolded in practice, enabling them to view curriculum as a dynamic and context-dependent process. Because they were actively involved in teaching, they were more likely to see curriculum leadership as an integrated part of their

professional identity, rather than as an abstract or external responsibility. This closer connection appeared to foster stronger curriculum leadership self-efficacy and a sense of legitimacy in engaging with curriculum interpretation and development. It also positioned them to bridge classroom experience with leadership insight, making them more inclined to advocate for contextual responsiveness and teacher agency in curriculum processes. As Maeve explained, “I can’t just hand teachers a document and expect it to work; I have to sit with them, talk it through, and think about what it means for our children here.” This kind of narrative illustrates how principals connected their leadership role with lived classroom realities, foregrounding collaboration and local adaptation.

This distinction between administrative and teaching principals highlights how structural role configurations can influence not only capacity, but also orientation and perceived legitimacy in engaging with curriculum leadership. It suggests that leadership proximity to practice (both physically and conceptually) can be a key enabling factor in how principals understand and act upon their role in curriculum development.

This subtheme illustrates how principals’ engagement with curriculum is shaped not simply by their formal role, but by a range of external and experiential influences. Professional background, leadership trajectory, and exposure to diverse pedagogical contexts were shown to significantly affect how principals conceptualise curriculum, either as a technical task or as a dynamic, contextualised process. Access to relevant professional development, especially programmes focused on leadership and reflective practice, was found to strengthen curriculum leadership self-efficacy. In contrast, CPD that focused narrowly on curriculum delivery rather than leadership often failed to shift principals’ thinking or build confidence. Informal collegial dialogue emerged as a powerful site of professional learning, offering opportunities for reflection, affirmation and knowledge exchange. Participation in national forums, though less common, fostered a sense of ownership and shifted some principals’ perspectives from passive implementation to active contribution. Structural role distinctions between administrative and teaching principals further shaped curriculum proximity and perceived responsibility. Overall, the findings reinforce that curriculum understanding is socially constructed, evolving and strongly influenced by professional agency, which is itself shaped by opportunity, support and context.

5.2.3 Curriculum development: centralised versus decentralised

Building on the previous subtheme, this section explores principals' perceptions of where curriculum development is situated within the broader educational landscape. The data indicate that a principal's engagement in curriculum development is not uniform, but closely tied to how they conceptualise curriculum itself, whether as a fixed product to be implemented or as a process to be shaped collaboratively. This framing surfaces a broader tension between centralised, policy-driven approaches and more inclusive, decentralised models that foreground local agency and professional judgement.

A number of participants expressed a belief that they had little or no role in curriculum development and several indicated that they were neither particularly interested in nor expected to be involved in the process. Instead, their primary concern was enactment. "That's their [policy actors] job to write the curriculum. Ours is to implement it," said Ciarán, reflecting a sentiment echoed by many. This perspective aligns with a product-oriented view of curriculum (Kelly, 2009), where curriculum is seen as a finished document authored by experts and handed down for delivery. For principals holding this view, curriculum development is understood as a top-down process, situated firmly within the remit of central policymaking bodies such as the Department of Education and NCCA. Some participants justified this stance through historical precedent. "It's always been done this way," remarked Anna. "The experts write it, we deliver it." Her comment suggests a deep-seated cultural norm around who holds authority in curriculum decision-making. This sense of remove from curriculum development was particularly apparent among administrative principals, who tended to perceive curriculum as external to their daily responsibilities. In contrast, teaching principals, by virtue of their classroom involvement, often expressed greater proximity to the curriculum and a stronger sense of responsibility in shaping it.

For some, the centralised model was not only familiar but preferable. Several principals described a level of trust in the system and reported feeling comfortable being guided by external experts. "Sometimes people don't want to engage," observed Lisa. "They just want to be told what to do. You trust the process and instead focus on your job in the school." While this view may reflect pragmatism, it also reveals how curriculum can be positioned as something beyond the scope of school-level leadership. It echoes Priestley et al.'s (2012) observation that many practitioners continue to see curriculum development as "someone else's job," a perception that limits local ownership and weakens the potential for grassroots innovation. It may

also signal lower curriculum leadership self-efficacy, where principals do not feel confident in their ability to contribute meaningfully to development processes beyond their immediate remit.

However, this was by no means a universal stance. Several principals argued strongly that they should have a role in curriculum development, even if systemic structures often made meaningful involvement difficult. A recurring theme in these accounts was a sense of tokenism in existing consultation processes. Alice was particularly critical of the current model: “It’s decentralised only in the sense that there’s more than one organisation involved but where are the people? Where are the school voices? Yes, teachers and leaders are asked for their voice, but it is all in their own time. Shouldn’t time be carved out to capture these voices if they are so important?”

This comment highlights a critical point: decentralisation in policy rhetoric does not always equate to decentralisation in practice. When consultation is presented as inclusive but fails to embed participation meaningfully into the process or timetable, it risks becoming performative. Several participants described feeling that the opportunities for input were inaccessible or overly abstract. “It felt like you really needed to know your stuff to contribute,” said Chris. “The way they asked for input was too high-level.” This sentiment was echoed by others who questioned the practical relevance of their involvement. “Even if you are asked,” said Ciara, “the decisions feel like they’ve already been made. Your voice doesn’t really change anything.” Such experiences may erode principals’ sense of efficacy in shaping curriculum change, leading them to disengage or focus solely on compliance.

These expressions of frustration and exclusion speak to a deeper issue: the perception that curriculum decisions are ultimately predetermined, with consultation serving as a symbolic exercise rather than a dialogic process. This aligns with Ball’s (2003) concept of policy performativity, which suggests that participatory structures can be used to create an illusion of inclusion while real decision-making power remains centralised. In such cases, professional engagement is reduced to ritual and any space for authentic curriculum co-construction is effectively closed off.

Importantly, these tensions were not only expressed in relation to formal consultation processes but also in terms of broader system dynamics. Participants often noted the dominance of organisational voices in national curriculum discourse. Alfie remarked, “You hear a lot from the big agencies. They’re in the room. But where are the classroom teachers? The principals? It feels like the people closest to the curriculum

aren't being heard." This comment points to a perceived hierarchy of influence, where national bodies are seen as the principal agents of curriculum development, while the voices of those working directly with children are marginalised (Sugrue 2004; Gleeson 2010).

Despite these challenges, some principals described efforts to assert greater local influence. Rachel, for instance, shared her experience of adapting national guidance to better suit her school's ethos: "We took the draft framework and sat down as a staff to ask, 'What does this mean for our learners?' That felt like curriculum development even if we weren't writing policy." Her reflection suggests that localised curriculum making is possible but it requires deliberate leadership and a willingness to engage in interpretive practice. Crucially, it also reflects a strong sense of curriculum leadership self-efficacy, a belief that one's professional voice and judgement matter in shaping educational direction. Indeed, several participants indicated that their strongest experiences of curriculum development occurred not through formal consultation but through internal school processes, staff meetings, shared planning days and reflective conversations. These local curriculum practices reflect what Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) describe as "curriculum making," where policy is not simply implemented but reinterpreted and recontextualised by practitioners. Yet the burden of this work often falls entirely on schools, with little time or structural support built into the system. As Lisa observed, "We're expected to engage, but there's no space or time given to do it properly. It's always extra, never part of the job." This last point raises a crucial concern. While Irish curriculum reform discourse increasingly promotes ideas of teacher and school leader agency (NCCA, 2023; DES, 2015), the practical structures to support meaningful engagement remain limited. Without protected time, professional recognition or access to inclusive discussion spaces, principals are unlikely to feel empowered or even invited to shape curriculum direction in any substantial way.

In summary, principals' perceptions of curriculum development reveal a persistent tension between centralised control and decentralised aspiration. While some are comfortable with a delivery-focused role, others express a desire for greater involvement though often within systems that limit their influence or visibility. The findings show that while policy discourse may promote inclusivity and partnership, principals continue to feel positioned as implementers more than collaborators. This disconnect has implications for curriculum ownership, relevance and sustainability. For curriculum development to be truly inclusive, school leaders must be supported not only to participate, but to shape and lead the conversation in ways that reflect the

realities of their communities. As the data illustrate, the conditions for such leadership are currently uneven, and until they are addressed, decentralisation may remain more promise than practice.

5.2.4 Theme 1: Summary

Principals' conceptualisations of curriculum fundamentally shape how they engage with it as leaders, as learners and as participants in broader reform processes. Those who view curriculum as a technical product tend to adopt leadership practices focused on monitoring, alignment and policy fidelity. In contrast, those who see curriculum as a lived process engage in deeper forms of inquiry, collaboration and contextual adaptation. These orientations are not fixed, but are influenced by prior teaching experience, leadership pathways, the availability and relevance of professional learning and access to peer dialogue and national-level consultation.

Across these dimensions, self-efficacy emerges as a key enabling condition. Principals who demonstrate confidence in their ability to lead curriculum work whether through professional learning, peer collaboration or system-level engagement are more likely to interpret curriculum flexibly, support staff development and contribute to broader policy conversations. Where self-efficacy is low, principals are more likely to default to compliance, avoid curriculum dialogue or view leadership as detached from teaching and learning. These findings suggest that building curriculum leadership capacity requires more than information; it demands investment in the conditions that foster professional confidence and agency.

Despite recent policy emphasis on agency and co-construction, many principals in this study felt distanced from curriculum development at the national level. Some described engagement opportunities as inaccessible, tokenistic or disconnected from the realities of school life. This disconnect risks reinforcing a compliance culture and diminishing the potential for contextually rich curriculum practices to emerge from within schools. This is particularly significant in the context of the Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum, where the new framework provides broad guidance but requires further work at school level to shape rich and relevant learning experiences for pupils.

At the same time, the data reveal a strong appetite among many principals to engage more meaningfully with curriculum as thinkers, contributors and leaders. When principals were supported through professional networks, reflective spaces and

inclusive policy structures, they enacted curriculum leadership in expansive and generative ways. These findings suggest that for curriculum change to be both effective and authentic, school leaders must be supported not just to deliver curriculum, but to shape and interpret it in ways that align with the needs of their school communities. Ultimately, conceptualising curriculum is revealed here as a deeply relational and political act, one that intersects with questions of trust, professional identity, self-efficacy and system design. The role of the principal, then, is not only to implement change, but to lead and make meaning within it.

4.3 Theme 2: Leading curriculum change

“You’re expected to drive change, but you’re stuck translating it into something that makes sense for your school. That’s the real gap.” (Tim)

This theme explores how principals perceive and enact their role as curriculum leaders within their schools. The findings suggest a nuanced and evolving understanding of curriculum leadership, shaped by both professional intent and the realities of their working contexts. The data reveal that many principals perceive their leadership as centred on enabling others to mediate and enact the curriculum. They focus on creating the organisational conditions necessary for effective curriculum enactment, emphasising structures, relationships and school culture as levers for change. Distributed leadership often emerges as a key strategy, allowing principals to share responsibility and build leadership capacity among staff. At the same time, the emotional dimension of curriculum leadership is deeply felt, as principals navigate the tensions, demands and values that shape their day-to-day experiences. The following subthemes **sense-making**, **distributed leadership**, **competing priorities** and the **emotional dimension of leadership** illustrate the practical and emotional realities of leading curriculum change. Together, they highlight the opportunities and challenges principals encounter as they navigate the tension between policy expectations and the everyday demands of school life.

5.3.1 Sense-making in curriculum leadership

The data reveal a multi-dimensional understanding among principals regarding their role in mediating and enacting curriculum change. In contrast to earlier findings from the data, where curriculum development was viewed as largely the responsibility of others, there was broad agreement among participants that school leaders play a pivotal role in leading curriculum change. However, significant variation emerged in how this role was understood and enacted. Discussions consistently highlighted the importance of sense-making in curriculum leadership, emphasising that curriculum enactment is an ongoing rather than a one-off process. Yet, principals differed in how they viewed their own involvement. Some believed active participation in sense-making was essential to leading curriculum change effectively. Others saw their

primary responsibility as creating the structural and logistical conditions necessary for teachers to engage with the curriculum themselves.

For example, Jack emphasised the importance of creating the necessary conditions for teacher engagement, noting that "once I put the time and space in place, the teachers could get into the details of it themselves." Similarly, Lisa reflected on the limitations of her role in the sense-making process, stating "I honestly don't have the time to make sense of the changes and to be honest I don't see it as part of my responsibility. The teachers are the ones who are working with the curriculum. I will do my best to support them with what they need to do." Alfie also expressed a strong reliance on teacher expertise, suggesting that "the teachers don't need me, nor would I be able to make sense of these changes. They bring the magic." These principals positioned themselves primarily as facilitators, focusing on practical supports such as timetabling, allocating time for collaborative planning and facilitating access to CPD opportunities. In doing so, they often conceptualised curriculum as a process to be engaged in by teachers, while they prioritised managerial tasks such as "dealing with the paperwork," "policies" and "school builds". While they distanced themselves from the deeper interpretative work of curriculum leadership, their expressions of overload and frustration suggested an underlying tension between their current capacity and the expectations placed upon them, both by policy discourse and their professional values, to engage more meaningfully with curriculum enactment. These expectations might be more realistically realised if greater time and systemic support were in place to empower them to lead change.

In contrast, some principals adopted a more epistemic stance, viewing direct engagement with curriculum sense-making as fundamental to their leadership role. During focus groups, a noticeable tension emerged between these differing perspectives, with moments of hesitation, subtle disagreement and careful negotiation of views highlighting not only contrasting interpretations of leadership but also the sensitivity involved in discussing professional responsibilities among peers. Arlo articulated the importance of deep personal engagement with curriculum, stating that "if I don't understand the curriculum deeply myself, how can I support my staff in navigating it?" Similarly, Colin reinforced this position, emphasising that "if I don't understand it myself and if I don't go deep with it, how can I expect the staff to?" Ned, however, offered a more assertive interpretation of leadership responsibility, arguing that "if the teachers don't see me taking responsibility and making sense of the changes, they won't take it seriously. The change will be surface level." For these principals, engaging in professional conversations was both a symbolic signal of

commitment and a substantive means of shaping collective understanding. Their leadership reflected a move from managerial oversight towards pedagogical leadership (Priestley et al., 2015), aligning with Biesta's (2010) view of education as a value-laden, interpretative practice.

These findings align with Spillane and Anderson's (2014) view of principals as embedded sense-makers, whose interpretations are shaped by prior beliefs, school culture and the wider systemic context. The data suggest a continuum of engagement from principals who see their role as primarily structural, to those who adopt a more pedagogical role in fostering deeper collective understanding. This continuum reflects the heuristic model proposed by Priestley et al. (2021), which positions curriculum leadership as emerging from the interplay between professional agency, cultural norms and structural conditions. Principals' varying levels of engagement illustrate how individual beliefs, institutional cultures and system-level factors intersect to shape leadership practices. This variation highlights how principals' beliefs about leadership and curriculum shape not only their actions, but also the extent to which they position themselves as curriculum leaders capable of leading curriculum enactment at a deeper level.

Collective sense-making surfaced as a central dynamic in how principals engaged with curriculum leadership, aligning with literature on the social construction of curriculum meaning (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002). Principals who promoted ongoing, collaborative staff conversations described more profound engagement with curriculum change. Reflecting on the introduction of the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* (DE, 2023), Arlo illustrated this approach, explaining that staff meetings were deliberately structured to be "open-ended," and focused less on compliance and more on dialogue: "staff meetings aren't about 'have you done it yet?' but 'what's coming up for you as you work through it?'" This emphasis, he suggested, made "people more willing to engage honestly." Such reflections underline the importance of peer motivation and psychological safety in enabling authentic curriculum engagement. Creating secure, dialogical spaces helps teachers navigate uncertainty and emotion, a critical element in collaborative sense-making (Bryk et al., 1999). Principals who actively cultivated and participated in these spaces emerged from the data as key enablers of meaningful engagement, moving the work beyond mere implementation.

As Van den Akker (2018) reminds us, successful curriculum change hinges on changes in classroom practice. Principals, as school leaders, serve as important

mediators in this process, interpreting, filtering and shaping policy messages into day-to-day realities, thereby actively "authoring" the curriculum as it is lived and experienced. Reflecting this view, Ciara observed that principals are "not just delivering what comes down from above," but are instead "co-constructing what it looks like here, for our students, in our context." This perspective highlights a shift in curriculum leadership from a peripheral role in policy implementation to a central function in shaping curriculum enactment. Principals emerge not only as facilitators but also as co-constructors of meaning, bridging the gap between policy intentions and classroom practice. In doing so, they could be seen as assuming a role similar to that of meso-level organisations, interpreting, translating and mediating policy to ensure it is meaningful and workable within their specific school contexts.

Nevertheless, all principals encountered systemic barriers that limited their ability to prioritise teaching and learning. Even those who recognised the importance of their role in sense-making found it difficult, and at times stressful, to create the necessary time and space for this work. While teachers often engage in curriculum sense-making within the classroom, grounded in pedagogical decisions and learner needs, principals take on an additional leadership layer which involves interpreting policy, guiding whole-school understanding and creating the organisational conditions for curriculum to take root. This leadership-oriented sense-making is not just about understanding curriculum content, but about shaping the professional culture, supporting teacher learning and aligning school-level practices with broader policy direction. As Datnow (2020) argues, principals play a central role in fostering collaborative professional learning environments by enabling shared sense-making and building internal capacity for curriculum enactment.

Such work requires not only professional judgement, but also time, trust and systemic support, resources that many principals felt were in short supply. During the focus group discussions, this was often conveyed through expressions of frustration, long pauses and reflective tones, as principals spoke candidly about competing demands and the emotional toll of trying to balance curriculum leadership with managerial responsibilities. Many carried the emotional weight of these constraints, offering only partial engagement in the work of curriculum leadership. Others, acknowledging the impossibility of "doing it all," consciously disengaged from sense-making to focus on logistical support. Many expressed frustration at the impossibility of being "everything to everyone," with the phrase "you can't do it all" capturing both the emotional burden and the practical limitations of their role which will be further discussed in the next subthemes.

In summary, this subtheme highlighted the diverse ways in which principals approached curriculum sense-making, ranging from structural facilitation to epistemic engagement in professional dialogue. While collective sense-making emerged as central to meaningful curriculum leadership, principals' efforts were often constrained by systemic pressures, time limitations and emotional demands. Recognising these constraints, many principals sought to share responsibility more widely, turning to distributed leadership as a potential mechanism for supporting curriculum change. The next subtheme explores how principals attempted to enact this approach and the challenges it presented.

5.3.2 Distributed leadership in curriculum change

Distributed leadership therefore emerged in the data as both a practical response to principals' sense of overload and as a policy ideal promoted at system level. The following subtheme explores how principals sought to distribute responsibility for curriculum leadership, the challenges they encountered and the implications for collaborative sense-making. Efforts to leverage distributed leadership emerged as a potential solution to this dilemma, with some principals drawing on the wider leadership team to support curriculum mediation and enactment. This approach also broadened the locus of sense-making, enabling it to happen not just at the level of the principal, but across leadership teams and within professional conversations among colleagues. Such collective sense-making reflects the reality that curriculum leadership is not a single or uniform process, but a layered activity involving interpretation, negotiation and collective meaning-making at various points in the school.

However, this approach also presented challenges, particularly for principals who had adopted an epistemic stance. These individuals often felt compelled to provide clarity and direction to other members of the leadership team, a task that required them to first make sense of the changes themselves. Colin captured this tension, explaining that while he tried "to involve [his] APs in leading it," they "always come back to [him] for answers that [he doesn't] have yet," adding that he needed "to get [his] own head around it first before [he could] expect them to lead others." He further noted the broader complexity, observing that "leading others is not an easy task for someone to do." Such reflections highlight the additional emotional and cognitive demands placed on principals attempting to distribute leadership meaningfully in the context of curriculum change.

These reflections also point to the challenges of building curriculum leadership capacity within leadership teams, where teachers may not yet feel equipped or empowered to take on interpretive or leadership roles. Rather than acting as co-constructors of meaning, Colin's APs appear to defer to the principal for clarity, potentially signalling an underlying lack of middle leadership agency in curriculum matters. This dynamic reinforces the burden on principals to be the primary source of certainty and direction, a role that is both unsustainable and counterproductive to building collective ownership of curriculum change. As Fullan (2016) argues, sustainable reform depends not on individual heroism but on developing the collective capacity of leadership teams. This underscores the need for sustained professional learning and system-level support to enable leadership teams, not just individuals to engage confidently and collaboratively with curriculum change.

This highlights the complex dynamics of distributed leadership in contexts of curriculum change. While sharing leadership responsibilities can alleviate some pressure, it also introduces new demands, particularly where coherent direction and strong pedagogical leadership are required. Ultimately, the findings suggest that effective curriculum leadership is not merely a matter of distributing tasks, but of developing shared understanding and collective capacity for sense-making across the leadership team. When the topic of distributed leadership arose in discussion, several principals acknowledged that the concept was often misunderstood or ambiguously interpreted. Although it was frequently referenced by the Department of Education as a desirable model for school leadership, participants noted that there was little guidance on what distributed leadership actually looked like in practice. As Alfie commented, it is "something we're told we should be doing, but no one really tells us how it works day to day or what 'good' distributed leadership even looks like." Similarly, Rachel reflected on the uncertainty many principals experience, admitting that "sometimes I feel like I'm trying to tick the distributed leadership box, but I don't actually know if I'm doing it right or if it's even working." Such remarks illustrate the gap between policy messaging and lived experience and the challenges principals face in enacting distributed leadership in meaningful and sustainable ways.

These reflections resonate with critiques in the literature that highlight how distributed leadership is often promoted as a policy ideal, yet suffers from conceptual vagueness and inconsistent enactment in practice (Harris, 2004; Gronn, 2009). While the model is intended to foster collaboration, professional agency and shared responsibility, its implementation can be hindered when principals lack the time, training or organisational structures to develop it meaningfully (Spillane, 2006). In this context,

distributed leadership risks becoming a performative exercise rather than a genuine shift in leadership practice, particularly when it is externally driven rather than internally developed.

As the discussions revealed, this ambiguity complicated efforts to use distributed leadership as a mechanism to support curriculum mediation and collective sense-making, especially for principals who felt compelled to provide clarity and direction without having first made sense of the changes themselves. These findings highlight the need for more targeted system-level support that not only clarifies the principles of distributed leadership but also creates the enabling conditions (such as time, trust and structured opportunities for collaboration) that allow principals and their leadership teams to make sense of change collectively, navigate its complexities and align their actions with shared curricular goals.

As Pietarinen, Pyhältö and Soini (2017) note, successful curriculum reform depends on creating spaces for collective sense-making and professional agency at the school level. Similarly, Harris (2019) emphasises that distributed leadership must be actively supported through system-level structures and investment; without this, it risks becoming superficial or fragmented. Coherent reform, therefore, requires not only distributed responsibility but also distributed understanding that is grounded in relational trust, shared purpose and sustained engagement (Datnow & Park, 2020; Fullan, 2021). Importantly, the data reveal that working through these complexities is significantly challenging for many and if this crucial step is overlooked or if there is a lack of awareness and acceptance that change is inherently complex, efforts at meaningful curriculum change risk becoming superficial or fragmented.

In summary, this subtheme examined how principals engaged with distributed leadership as both a practical response to workload pressures and a policy expectation promoted at system level. While some found value in broadening sense-making across leadership teams and staff, many encountered challenges linked to role ambiguity, uneven capacity and a lack of clear guidance. Instead of enabling shared ownership, distributed leadership often reinforced reliance on principals themselves, highlighting the fragility of middle leadership agency in curriculum matters. The findings suggest that without targeted professional learning, time and systemic support, distributed leadership risks becoming performative rather than transformative. These tensions fed into a wider dilemma for principals: how to balance the competing priorities of curriculum leadership with the managerial and operational demands of school life, an issue explored in the next subtheme.

5.3.3 Competing leadership priorities

A recurring and powerful subtheme across the focus groups and indeed a persistent backdrop to all discussions, was the tension principals experienced in balancing the managerial demands of their role with their responsibility to lead curriculum. Participants consistently expressed a sense of conflict between what they perceived as their core purpose, leading teaching and learning and the day-to-day managerial tasks that consumed their time and energy.

Early in each discussion, when asked about their engagement with curriculum leadership, participants often responded with laughter or wry smiles, signalling a shared recognition of the gap between aspiration and reality. Trish aptly captured this sentiment by remarking that "there's a collective sigh when we mention curriculum, what does that say?" This prompted candid reflections on how managerial demands had come to dominate principals' professional lives. Chris, for example, observed that while "teaching and learning is supposed to be at the heart of what we do," the reality was starkly different, "if you saw my to-do list on a Monday morning, you'd understand why it rarely gets to the top." Similarly, Ciarán highlighted the divide between professional values and lived experience, noting that "if you asked me what matters most, I'd say teaching and learning. If you looked at my diary, you'd think it was everything but that." Arlo offered a particularly stark summary, reflecting that "leading learning is what I signed up for. Managing crises is what I actually do," while Lisa illustrated the daily pressures more concretely, explaining that "curriculum leadership sounds great in theory, but in practice, I'm buried under admin, staffing issues and managing a new build." Claire added that "there are only so many hours in the day," describing how she was "fighting most of the time from staff absences, health and safety, buildings... the curriculum takes a back seat."

These insights suggest a potential disconnect between principals' professional values and the lived realities of their roles, as well as between their day-to-day practices and what the system assumes they are doing, which may contribute to gaps in curriculum enactment. There was a strong sense of frustration and displacement expressed. While participants clearly understood their role in shaping and supporting curriculum, systemic and organisational demands often prevented meaningful engagement. This aligns with Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane's (2019) assertion that school leaders are increasingly "putting out fires" rather than leading sustained improvement. All participants articulated some version of this struggle, highlighting the need to make

difficult choices about what to prioritise. Many spoke of the necessity of “letting go” of certain established practices to create space for new curriculum priorities, efforts that were often undermined by external pressures.

A significant concern and frustration emerging from the data was the impact of curriculum policy overload, exacerbated by a lack of coherence with other initiatives such as inclusion, wellbeing and school self-evaluation. As Anna explained, the “sheer volume of overlapping policies created confusion, diluted focus and made it difficult to sustain momentum around any one area of change”. Rather than feeling supported by a clear and integrated policy environment, principals often found themselves navigating fragmented policies that competed for attention and resources, further exacerbating feelings of overload and impeding meaningful curriculum leadership. Alfie vividly captured this sense of fragmentation, explaining that principals are “constantly responding to new policies,” each of which “demands time and energy.” He further noted that the policies “are not always aligned,” resulting in a situation where leaders “end up just layering one initiative on top of another,” without the opportunity to step back and critically consider “how does this fit with what we’re already doing?” Such experiences highlight how policy incoherence not only creates practical challenges but also undermines principals’ capacity to lead curriculum change in a thoughtful and sustained way, resulting in growing frustration with the wider system.

Such reflections echo Stosich’s (2018) warning that competing policies can undermine school improvement efforts, pushing educators into a cycle of short-term responses rather than enabling sustainable change. Participants described this experience as “initiative fatigue,” as Ned put it, and “constantly playing catch-up,” in Anna’s words, highlighting how the cumulative weight of policy demands left little opportunity for strategic or reflective leadership. Ciarán summarised this tension, explaining that “it’s not that we don’t value curriculum, we do,” but the reality is that principals are “being pulled in so many directions,” with “no coherent message, no breathing space to reflect or really lead.” These experiences mirror findings from the IPPN (2022), which highlight the intensification of workload and the dominance of managerial tasks as key pressures eroding the capacity and wellbeing of school leaders. The issue lies not simply in the volume of initiatives, but in their complexity and disconnection, often resulting in superficial or symbolic changes. As Coburn et al. (2016) observe, in such contexts educators may default to existing routines rather than engage in meaningful enactment. Tim reflected on this dynamic in relation to curriculum, admitting that “sometimes you’re implementing something and you’re not

even sure why. You just know it's the next thing that has to be done. So you do it, but it doesn't really change anything."

This sentiment underscores how fragmented policy demands can dilute the intended impact of change and perpetuate a cycle of compliance rather than genuine engagement. This sense of disconnection often rendered curriculum change as something externally imposed, rather than a co-constructed process within schools. Honig and Hatch (2004) argue that policy coherence should be viewed as a dynamic, negotiated process, one requiring space, time and support for school leaders to make sense of curriculum changes in relation to their local context. The absence of this interpretive space emerged as a recurring concern, underscoring the need for stronger meso-level supports to bridge policy and practice and empower principals in this role.

Despite these challenges, many principals expressed a strong desire for support structures that would help them navigate the tensions they faced. Dymna emphasised that principals "need support not just in managing the workload, but in making sense of it all," questioning, "how do the pieces fit together? Where does the curriculum sit in all of this?" Her comments highlight a need for supports that extend beyond administrative relief to include sense-making and strategic alignment. This finding is reinforced by Stosich (2018), who emphasises the importance of external supports and professional learning in fostering coherence and enabling deeper, more meaningful engagement with curriculum changes.

In summary, this subtheme reveals a structural misalignment between the espoused aims of curriculum change and the conditions under which school leaders are expected to lead it. The principals in this study were not resistant to curriculum leadership. Indeed, they identified strongly with it but their capacity to enact it was systematically constrained. The day-to-day reality of their roles was dominated by managerial and operational tasks, leaving limited time and space for strategic or reflective curriculum work. Participants consistently described the emotional and professional tension of holding curriculum at the centre of their values while feeling unable to prioritise it in practice.

Curriculum leadership was frequently displaced by fragmented and overlapping policy demands, resulting in what participants described as "initiative fatigue" and "constantly playing catch-up." Rather than enabling meaningful engagement, the sheer volume and incoherence of reform agendas diluted focus and led to superficial or symbolic implementation. These conditions not only drained capacity but also

undermined principals' ability to lead others through curriculum sense-making, a process many saw as essential but largely unsupported.

Importantly, the findings point to the need for deliberate, system-wide strategies that reduce fragmentation, enhance professional agency and provide the time and structures necessary for collective curriculum sense-making and sustained leadership engagement (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Stosich, 2018). Addressing this misalignment will require not only policy clarity but also a cultural shift that values and enables the interpretive and strategic work of school leaders as central to successful curriculum change.

5.3.4 The emotional dimension of leadership

The emotional dimension of leading change, while presented here as a subtheme, emerged as a powerful and recurring thread throughout the data in this study. Principals described leadership as a deeply emotional undertaking, often marked by stress, burnout and emotional labour. The emotional toll was particularly evident in principals' reflections on leading curriculum change, a process they described as both personally and professionally demanding.

One of the dominant emotional experiences reported by participants was the challenge of managing resistance and supporting staff through periods of uncertainty and overwhelm associated with curriculum policy change. This emotional labour often required significant resilience, particularly as principals found themselves caught in the tension between policy directives and the lived realities of school life. Alice captured this complexity, explaining that "it's not just about managing change, it's about managing people's feelings about change," adding that "it's exhausting." Her comment sparked immediate recognition among others, with several participants nodding in agreement or responding with remarks such as "yes, every single day" and "that's what drains you, not the paperwork, the people part." These reflections underscore the intense interpersonal demands of leadership, highlighting that the emotional burden of supporting staff often outweighed the technical demands of administrative tasks. As Crawford et., (2021) argues, the emotional labour of leadership, (navigating staff needs, sustaining morale and holding relational space) is frequently more demanding than the managerial aspects, yet remains under-recognised in system-level expectations.

Throughout the focus group discussions, participants frequently returned to this emotional dimension of their role. Claire described it as “carrying the emotional temperature of the school,” while Colin shared that “you’re trying to move the agenda forward, but you’ve got people who are scared, overwhelmed, even angry and you can’t ignore that. You have to meet them where they are.” These exchanges highlighted the often unacknowledged emotional and relational work required to sustain momentum during periods of change, where trust-building, empathy and constant negotiation formed the backbone of effective leadership. One principal observed that “it’s like being an emotional sponge. You soak it all up because if you don’t, it spills over.”

In addition to this, many principals described the feeling of being a mediator, caught between external expectations and internal realities. “You’re the middle person,” said Rachel, “trying to keep your staff on board while also answering to the Department or the Inspectorate. Sometimes it feels like you’re pulled in two directions.” Another participant noted that “it’s not just about implementing change, it’s about translating it into something meaningful for your staff and that’s where the challenge lies.” (Jack). These data align closely with the work of Park and Datnow (2022), who argue that emotional responses in educational reform are often shaped by the interpersonal relationships and contextual dynamics that leaders must navigate. They found that the burden of managing staff dynamics and implementing externally imposed reforms commonly results in both frustration and a sense of emotional strain.

The emotional weight of leadership was also discussed in relation to buy-in and motivation. Securing staff engagement with curriculum change was described as emotionally taxing, particularly when compounded by limited support and increasing administrative expectations. Chris reflected that “you’re trying to bring people with you, but you’re already on your knees yourself.” This emotional labour of gaining commitment from staff echoes Weddle, Lockton and Datnow’s (2019) findings, which highlight the tensions that emerge from misaligned expectations in collaborative reform. Their study showed that collaboration, while potentially rewarding, can lead to emotional imbalances that leave both teachers and leaders feeling frustrated and isolated.

The sense of emotional exhaustion expressed by many principals is consistent with international and national findings on leadership burnout. Studies by Denecker (2019), Riley et al. (2021) and IPPN (2022) collectively point to an intensification of workload and a growing dissatisfaction among school leaders. This was particularly

evident in Alice's reflection when she commented that "there's just too much. The admin never stops. You don't get to do the work you care about." This echoes Mahfouz (2020) and Wang (2022), who both link excessive administrative demands to escalating stress and diminished professional satisfaction. Burke and Dempsey (2021) similarly highlight the struggle leaders face in balancing administrative and pedagogical responsibilities, a challenge that featured heavily in participant narratives.

A notable finding from this study is the experience of loneliness and isolation in leadership roles. Participants described curriculum leadership as an isolating experience, characterised by a sense of being solely responsible for driving change, with limited avenues for emotional or professional support. Laura articulated this powerfully when she commented, "you're trying to be supportive, to lead well but it's very lonely. You're in it on your own." Several principals echoed this sentiment, describing how the demands of curriculum change often rested heavily on their shoulders, even in schools with distributed leadership structures. Claire shared, "you're carrying it all; expecting yourself to know, to lead, to support and sometimes it feels like no one sees how hard that is." Others described the absence of meaningful dialogue with peers as compounding this isolation, with Arlo noting, "there's not really space to talk about the emotional side of it. Everyone's busy, everyone's firefighting."

As noted in the literature (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Hüsrevşahi & Şahan, 2021), leadership isolation is shaped by systemic and organisational factors rather than individual shortcomings. The findings from this study echo these concerns, revealing that the isolation principals experienced was not just logistical but also emotional and professional, linked to a deeper sense of responsibility without adequate support. This finding resonates with previous research on the emotional dimensions of leadership. Hüsrevşahi and Şahan (2021), for example, describe organisational loneliness among school leaders in Turkey, identifying both emotional and social dimensions rooted in hierarchical power dynamics and accountability pressures. Similarly, Spillane and Lee (2014) found that principals often feel professionally isolated when navigating reform agendas, while Hansen (2018) reported that such experiences contributed to Canadian principals' intentions to leave the profession, particularly in rural or under-resourced contexts. Taken together, these studies help situate the experiences of Irish principals within a broader international pattern, suggesting that leadership isolation is not simply personal but structurally and culturally produced. This has important implications for principals' wellbeing,

professional sustainability and their capacity to engage deeply and reflectively with curriculum leadership

Yet, the emotional toll of leadership was never far from the surface. In one focus group, a principal became visibly upset while reflecting on the cumulative pressures of leading change, sharing that she felt "drained from carrying it all" and questioning whether she was "really making a difference." The room fell quiet, and several participants nodded in solidarity, signalling a shared understanding of the emotional weight involved. These moments underscore the depth of feeling associated with curriculum leadership and the urgent need for systemic recognition and support.

The emotional burden of leadership was often so profound that several participants contemplated career changes or secondments as a way to manage burnout. While these reflections touched on a range of challenges, they frequently emerged in response to conversations about curriculum change, highlighting how the pressures of leading change in an already overloaded system can become overwhelming. One principal reflected on this experience, admitting that she had "thought about stepping back" and at times was "not sure [she] could keep going," following yet another wave of policy updates she felt unprepared to lead. Others spoke about the emotional toll of trying to support staff through curriculum change when they themselves felt uncertain, isolated or under-resourced.

This resonates with research by Mannix-McNamara et al. (2021), who explore how uncivil behaviour and toxic school cultures often intensified by accountability pressures and stress can lead to burnout and the consideration of exit strategies. In contexts where emotional strain goes unrecognised or becomes normalised, the role of the principal becomes increasingly challenging, particularly when leading complex change agendas like curriculum reform. These findings suggest that persistent emotional strain, especially when tied to the pressures of leading curriculum change without adequate support, may prompt principals to consider stepping back from the role. This underscores the urgent need for more sustainable, emotionally literate leadership supports, ones that recognise not only the technical but also the relational and emotional demands of curriculum leadership.

Although self-efficacy was not directly measured in this study, many participants appeared to draw on internal resources such as confidence, mindset and accumulated leadership experience to manage emotional strain and navigate the complexities of curriculum change. Across multiple focus groups, principals consistently discussed how working in different schools or progressing through

various leadership roles had equipped them with valuable perspective and greater adaptability. Tim reflected that having "been through a few schools now" helped him to "get better at knowing when to push and when to pull back," while Claire highlighted the insights gained through experience, noting that "experience teaches you that not everything has to happen at once," and that over time, "you start to see patterns in how people respond to change." These reflections suggest that leadership experience contributed to a developing sense of self-efficacy, enabling principals to approach curriculum change with greater resilience and strategic judgement. Their confidence seemed to stem less from abstract theory and more from a cumulative sense of "having been here before," reflecting a shift toward more emotionally attuned and relationally grounded curriculum leadership (Goleman, 1995; Crawford et al., 2021).

Several principals also emphasised mindset as a key component of their resilience. Anna explained that "you need a certain positivity," adding that "if you go into every [curricular] change thinking it's going to be a disaster, it will be." Others, however, expressed frustration and fatigue, noting that persistent curricular and policy pressures had eroded their initial sense of hopefulness. As one principal put it, "it's hard to stay positive when it feels like you're constantly responding, rather than leading." This divergence highlights that while mindset and experience can nurture self-efficacy and adaptability, sustained systemic pressures continue to challenge principals' capacity to remain optimistic. These findings underscore that leadership self-efficacy exists alongside emotional labour and that both shape how principals engage with complex reform, echoing the work of Bandura (1997), Paglis and Green (2002) and Bandura and Locke (2003).

To summarise, the emotional dimension of curriculum leadership reveals a role that is personally meaningful yet strategically complex. Principals must navigate not only managerial demands but also the emotional challenges inherent in leading change. Their work involves supporting staff, building trust and maintaining momentum, often under challenging conditions. This interpretative and relational engagement suggests that principals do more than enact curriculum; they shape how change is experienced and understood in their schools. Their ability to translate policy, balance external and internal demands and create conditions necessary for change aligns them with responsibilities typically assigned to actors at the meso level of education. These findings suggest that principals operate beyond traditional micro-level definitions, inviting a more nuanced understanding of their role as a critical link in the curriculum change process.

5.3.5 Theme 2: Summary

This analysis surfaces several tensions between the data and the literature. While policy and scholarship often position principals as instructional leaders and promote distributed leadership as a solution, the data revealed important differences. In the subtheme on sense-making, principals varied in how they understood and enacted their role, ranging from structural facilitation to epistemic engagement in professional dialogue. In the subtheme on distributed leadership, principals sought to broaden responsibility for curriculum leadership, but often encountered conceptual ambiguity, uneven capacity within leadership teams and a lack of systemic support.

Taken together, these findings highlight that while policy discourse assumes principals can both lead sense-making and distribute leadership effectively, many feel ill-equipped or unsupported in doing so. The emotional labour involved in leading change is rarely acknowledged in policy discourse, despite being a central and draining aspect of the role. Furthermore, the research emphasis on curriculum as a value-laden, interpretive practice is at odds with the practical realities of principals who feel compelled to prioritise organisational demands over deep curriculum engagement.

These tensions highlight the need for system-level coherence, greater emotional and structural support for school leaders and a rethinking of how curriculum leadership is conceptualised and enacted in policy and practice. Central to this rethinking is the recognition that principals do more than mediate change; they are expected to lead it, shaping how it is understood, experienced and sustained within their school communities. This form of leadership is not only crucial to meaningful and sustainable curriculum enactment, but also deeply challenging and often under-recognised.

These findings illustrate Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic framing, where agency is not a fixed personal trait but an emergent capacity shaped by cultural, relational and structural conditions. In this study, principals' capacity to lead curriculum was shown to be deeply influenced by these interlocking factors, both enabling and constraining their practice. At the same time, the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) offers a valuable lens through which to understand how principals navigate these demands. The data suggest that confidence in one's ability to manage change and influence outcomes, often developed through experience and reflection, was critical to sustaining engagement with curriculum leadership despite systemic pressures. For principals to fulfil this role effectively, the data suggest that it must be explicitly acknowledged, valued, and supported within the wider education system.

4.4 Theme 3: Creating the conditions for curriculum leadership

“We’re ready to lead, but leadership needs space to breathe. Without time, trust, and clear support, agency just becomes another expectation.” (Ned)

This theme examines how school principals navigate the relationship between professional agency and system-level coherence in the process of enacting curriculum change. Drawing on principals’ reflections, this theme explores how their professional agency, in interaction with the wider educational landscape, shapes the ways in which they lead and respond to curriculum policy within their schools. The data explore how principals understand their leadership role in relation to curriculum, including the strategies they use to create conditions for meaningful engagement and the constraints they face in doing so. It also highlights how external factors, such as time, trust, support structures and the alignment of system messaging, influence their capacity to lead this work confidently and effectively.

Across the theme, attention is given to both the internal and external conditions that shape curriculum leadership: from the day-to-day realities of working within schools, to navigating a complex educational landscape that involves engaging with multiple organisations and system actors. The findings consider how principals experience agency in practice, how they engage with messages from the wider system and how coherence or the lack of it, impacts their ability to lead curriculum change in a locally responsive way. The discussion is organised around two interrelated subthemes, **professional leader agency** and **navigating system coherence**, which together illustrate how principals interpret their leadership roles within an evolving policy context.

5.4.1 Professional leader agency

In the context of leading curriculum change, school principals conveyed a consistent sense of professional responsibility and ownership over decision-making in their schools. They articulated a commitment to their role as curriculum leaders and a clear desire to lead change in ways that were meaningful for their school contexts. However, as conversations deepened, their understanding of agency revealed itself

to be more bounded and conditional than policy rhetoric might suggest. Participants frequently equated agency with the permission to act or make decisions. Ciarán, for instance, described agency as simply “being allowed to make decisions,” reflecting a view more aligned with traditional notions of school agency than with more comprehensive scholarly understandings of professional agency. This interpretation echoes Department of Education narratives that have positioned schools as self-managing organisations with devolved responsibilities (DES, 2016c). Yet, Jack challenged this assumption, noting that while schools may appear autonomous, “just because we can make decisions doesn’t mean we have the space or support to make the right ones.” This distinction is important. Wyse and Manyukhina (2019) draw a clear line between autonomy as formal permission and agency as a situated capacity, shaped by institutional culture, material resources and professional confidence and trust. The data from this study reflects this perspective, showing how enabling conditions like time, coherence, collaboration and relational trust were unevenly distributed across schools. Often, these conditions depended more on a principal’s creativity and resilience than on systemic support, an issue that is examined further on in this subtheme.

The limitations of formal autonomy and their implications for principals’ capacity to exercise agency were particularly evident in discussions about school self-evaluation (SSE). Some participants viewed SSE as a meaningful tool for learning and reflection. For example, Tim noted that “when we started using SSE properly, it became a tool for learning, not just reporting. We could ask, what’s really working here?”. This perspective highlights the potential of SSE to support genuine inquiry and school-based improvement. In contrast, others perceived it as externally driven and performative. Lisa remarked that “we’ve reached a point where SSE is done for someone else. It’s about showing what we’re doing, not why we’re doing it,” reflecting a sense of disconnect between the intended and experienced purposes of the process. These divergent perspectives reveal that even when schools are afforded autonomy, the capacity to exercise professional judgement depends heavily on contextual enablers particularly time, relational trust and shared professional dialogue. This echoes findings from Irish research on school self-evaluation, which highlights that authentic engagement with SSE is contingent on a supportive professional culture and opportunities for collaborative reflection (O’Brien et al., 2020). Similarly, Hallinger and Heck (2011) argue that school improvement is most effective when grounded in internal capacity building rather than external

accountability, while Fullan (2018) and Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) emphasise the centrality of relational trust and professional collaboration in sustaining change.

Many principals described the everyday pressures of policy initiatives that constrained their ability to engage meaningfully with curriculum change. The practical-evaluative dimension of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), the ability to respond to the immediate demands of the present was dominant in their accounts. Principals frequently used language such as “firefighting,” “coping,” and “juggling” to describe their leadership reality. Jack noted that “there’s a constant stream of policies and expectations. You start one thing and before you’ve made progress, something else lands on your desk.” This sense of disruption was echoed by Elaine, who explained that “you want to give time to curriculum work but you’re pulled into operations: staffing, inspections, wellbeing, it all becomes reactive.” These accounts strongly echo Honig and Hatch’s (2004) critique of policy incoherence, where overlapping initiatives undermine rather than support leadership capacity.

Despite these constraints, participants offered compelling examples of agentic practice, particularly in contexts where leadership was more distributed and staff engaged collaboratively in curriculum planning. Colin described how his school approached the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023) with initiative and clarity of purpose, noting that as a staff they “mapped out what the new curriculum means for our school, what fits, what doesn’t, what we’d need to make it work. It wasn’t about waiting for someone to tell us.” Similarly, Ned reflected on the power of collaborative curriculum sense-making, explaining that “it was the first time in ages we felt like we were shaping something, not just responding to it.” These reflections suggest that when staff are given the time, trust and professional space to interpret curriculum changes collaboratively, a deeper level of engagement is possible. one that moves beyond compliance to co-construction.

This aligns with Priestley, Biesta and Robinson’s (2015) ecological view of agency, which conceptualises agency not as a fixed attribute of individuals, but as something that is achieved in particular contexts through the interplay of professional knowledge, relational trust, cultural norms and structural affordances. In the cases described above, agency was enacted through collaborative dialogue, shared leadership and a proactive orientation towards change, rather than passive acceptance. The principals’ accounts illustrate that, even in the face of systemic constraints, curriculum leadership can be reimagined as a collective process of professional inquiry where sense-making is distributed and deeply contextualised.

Wyse and Manyukhina (2019) argue that professional agency is not simply about individual will or autonomy, but is structurally mediated by factors such as workload, collegiality and system-level coherence. This framing helps to interpret the findings of this study, where even examples of strong agentic and collaborative leadership were often described as fragile or exceptional. While some principals created enabling conditions for staff engagement such as collaborative curriculum planning, these efforts were frequently portrayed as difficult to sustain. Arlo acknowledged the effort involved, remarking, “I’ve had to be really creative to carve out the time and space for this [collaboration]. We’ve shifted things around, doubled up roles, but I know that’s not realistic for everyone.”

This tension between formal autonomy and lived constraint surfaced repeatedly. Ciara reflected that “in some ways, we have the freedom, but not the bandwidth. You’re autonomous, but exhausted.” Although the focus group included examples of strong leadership agency, it was also clear that this often came at a personal cost. While principals valued the ability to act with professional discretion, many noted that such agency depended on personal creativity, resilience or sacrifice, rather than being supported by system-level structures. As Peter put it, “agency means space to think. Without that, autonomy is just more responsibility.” These findings suggest that unless systemic conditions change, professional agency may continue to be the exception rather than the norm; present in pockets, but difficult to scale.

Within these professional conversations, principals also revealed subtle and situated enactments of professional agency, small acts of interpretation and adaptation that responded to local needs. These were not framed as resistance or full compliance, but rather as micro-level decisions grounded in professional judgement. This reflects Priestley et al.’s (2012) characterisation of agency as “situated and nuanced,” emerging from real-time negotiation with material, relational and cultural conditions.

These dynamics also echo Ball’s (1993; 2006) conception of curriculum policy as discourse, not merely a collection of official texts, but a process through which meanings are produced, identities shaped and actions legitimised or constrained. In this sense, curriculum policy is not simply implemented, but enacted through processes of interpretation and recontextualisation in everyday school practice.

The professional conversations among principals in this study became important sites of such recontextualisation. During one focus group, Trish reflected, “you’re trying to hold on to what makes sense for your school, even if the policy isn’t clear yet,” while Colin noted, “we had to kind of read between the lines of the new curriculum and

decide what that actually meant for us.” These comments reveal how school leaders worked to mediate the intended meanings of curriculum reform through collaborative dialogue and context-specific interpretation. In some instances, this resulted in quiet acts of professional adaptation. Ned shared, “we’ve taken bits that we think will work and we’ve held off on parts that don’t yet make sense. It’s not that we’re ignoring it, we’re shaping it to fit our school.” Such examples illustrate how policy discourse was both echoed and subtly reshaped in these conversations, as principals exercised agency not only by interpreting policy, but by actively influencing how curriculum change was understood and enacted in their schools.

Tensions also surfaced in discussions around the Inspectorate’s evolving role in the policy landscape, particularly in relation to how it supports or constrains principals’ professional agency in leading curriculum change. While some welcomed a more collaborative stance, this shift was not universally experienced. Colin appreciated the change, noting that “it’s more collaborative now. You can actually have a conversation,” suggesting a move toward more open and dialogic relationships. However, others remained cautious. Alfie expressed scepticism, commenting that “they say it’s supportive, but the evaluation piece still dominates.” Similarly, Ciara reflected on the emotional impact of this dual messaging, adding that “it’s hard to be open when you know you’re being assessed.” These comments highlight the importance of relational conditions, particularly trust and psychological safety, which Soini et al. (2018) identify as essential enablers of curriculum leadership and professional agency.

Ultimately, participants were clear that meaningful agency requires more than permission to act. It requires alignment, support and leadership capacity. As Anna aptly summarised, “You can’t build curriculum from the ground up if the foundation is constantly shifting.” This points to a systemic contradiction in which curriculum policy promotes school-led development, but often assumes ideal conditions that do not exist in practice, conditions like coherence across initiatives, protected time for planning and opportunities for sustained professional dialogue

In summary, these insights highlight a critical tension as school leaders expressed professional commitment and a desire to lead curriculum change meaningfully, yet their ability to do so was deeply contingent, shaped not by autonomy alone, but by the structural, temporal and relational conditions of their work. This reinforces Wyse and Manyukhina’s (2019) view that agency is embedded within, and mediated by, broader system design and educational infrastructure. The uneven experience of

agency, ranging from collaborative innovation to frustrated withdrawal, suggests that professional agency cannot flourish without greater systemic coherence. This forms the focus of Subtheme two, where the attention turns from the internal conditions of agency to the wider policy landscape, and the extent to which policy structures enable or constrain school-level leadership and professional agency.

5.4.2 Navigating system coherence

As school leaders engage with curriculum change, their experiences are shaped not only by what policy says, but also by who communicates it, how it is communicated and the conditions under which it is interpreted. The data reveal how principals navigate the complex organisational landscape that surrounds curriculum change in Ireland, drawing attention to issues of visibility, alignment, legitimacy and the relational dynamics that underpin systemic coherence.

A consistent pattern in the data was the identification of a small number of central actors seen as shaping curriculum change: the Department of Education, the Inspectorate, the NCCA and Oide. These were repeatedly referenced by participants as influential and visible. In contrast, organisations such as the IPPN, INTO, NCSE, and Education Centres were mentioned infrequently or perceived as peripheral. Education Centres, for instance, were viewed more as infrastructural hubs than as strategic contributors to curriculum development. This narrow identification suggests that many organisations are either less visible to school leaders or that their roles are not communicated in ways that resonate with leadership practice. As Anna noted, “there are just a few that really shape what we do. Others might be there, but they’re not really part of the conversation on the ground,” indicating a sense of selective engagement and a perceived hierarchy of influence. Colin echoed this sentiment, expressing a desire for simplification: “that’s enough organisations to be hearing from. I don’t want to know of any more.” This tendency to engage only with perceived key players reflects what Honig and Hatch (2004) describe as “buffering,” where schools insulate themselves from external demands to maintain internal coherence. It also resonates with Walsh’s (2024) characterisation of the Irish system as a “crowded space” marked by overlapping mandates and blurred boundaries.

Principals frequently spoke about the challenges posed by inconsistent messaging across system actors. While many acknowledged the good intentions of those involved, they described a proliferation of guidance that often duplicated or conflicted with other sources. Trish observed, “sometimes you get the same idea from three

different places, just packaged differently,” while Ned reflected, “we’re left trying to figure out what it all means at ground level.” Such accounts point to a lived experience of fragmentation, where the burden of interpretation falls heavily on schools. In these circumstances, policy coherence becomes not a given but an outcome that must be actively constructed. As Jack noted, “you can’t just drop another framework in and hope it sticks. We need someone walking alongside us, helping us see how this connects to what we’re already doing.” This underscores the importance of relational support, contextual alignment and time for reflective integration, all of which are often lacking. These findings align with Coburn et al. (2016), who argue that when policies arrive in disconnected or ambiguous ways, they are typically interpreted through the lens of existing routines, often reinforcing the status quo rather than promoting change. Similarly, Stosich (2018) stresses that without structured and aligned supports, schools struggle to integrate multiple initiatives into coherent action.

As discussions deepened, some participants raised concerns about perceived competition and a lack of collaboration among system actors. Several noted that agencies seemed to operate in silos or pursue their own agendas, leading to confusion and duplication. Tim remarked, “there’s definitely a sense that different bodies are working in silos, sometimes even contradicting each other,” while Colin commented, “it feels like some organisations are trying to put their own stamp on things.” Such reflections highlight organisational dynamics marked by distributed authority, unclear leadership, and, at times, a lack of mutual recognition. Laura noted that “it’s hard to know who’s leading what at times. There’s not always a sense that the different parts of the system respect each other equally.” These concerns reflect the need for stronger collaboration, shared direction and parity of esteem among system actors. Without these relational conditions, policy initiatives risk being experienced as fragmented and transactional rather than as part of a coherent, purpose-driven reform. This mirrors the work of Pietarinen, Pyhältö and Soini (2017), who argue that coherence depends not just on structural alignment but on trust and mutual recognition. One principal summarised this by saying, “It’s not about cutting people out, it’s about working together better.” This aligns with Looney’s (2011) application of Weick’s (1976) concept of loosely coupled systems to the Irish context, where lack of coordination across system levels can inhibit shared learning and responsiveness. Participants were not calling for fewer actors, but for more strategic connection, both horizontally across agencies and vertically between policy and practice.

The Inspectorate featured prominently in participants' accounts as one of the most visible and influential system actors. Principals pointed to its proximity to schools and formal authority through evaluations and published reports. However, while recognising its legitimacy, they expressed a desire for a more dialogic and empathetic approach. Trish reflected, "we know they're a key part of the system, but it would be great to see more connection with the day-to-day realities we're facing." The Inspectorate was viewed as uniquely positioned to shape discourse, given the weight its messages carry. Alice observed, "realistically, they're the only group teachers and principals really listen to," while Arlo remarked, "if inspectors say something about the new curriculum, it carries more weight than any amount of circulars or CPD." Rather than viewing this influence as a threat, participants saw it as a potential asset. Rachel suggested, "they have a powerful voice. If they used it to back us up during this change, it would make a big difference." These insights reinforce Fullan's (2016) argument that system actors must support as well as hold leaders accountable. They also reflect Stosich's (2018) view that external agencies can play a crucial role in bridging policy and practice, especially when they adopt advisory rather than evaluative roles. While some noted a shift toward a more supportive stance within the Irish Inspectorate, many felt further progress was needed to position it as a partner in enactment rather than merely a mechanism of compliance. As evaluations and school visits are often irregular and inconsistent in the Irish context, many principals in this study drew on previous experiences of formal inspection, rather than the more supportive role the Inspectorate has sought to portray in recent years. To facilitate this shift, the Inspectorate may need to consider more regular and relationship-oriented visits that emphasise support, dialogue and partnership.

Finally, the discourse of curriculum policy itself emerged as a significant factor shaping principals' experiences. Participants frequently critiqued the language used in policy documents, describing it as abstract, technical and disconnected from everyday school realities. Ciara noted that "sometimes the language gets in the way, it's hard to bring staff along when things are so jargon-heavy," while Lisa remarked, "it feels like curriculum policy is written for policy people, not for schools." These concerns were exacerbated by the absence of a clear implementation roadmap, with principals describing a sense of ambiguity and vulnerability in their leadership role. As Jack reflected, "we're being asked to lead something we're still trying to understand ourselves." These frustrations echo Pietarinen et al. (2017) and Van den Akker (2018), who stress that successful curriculum enactment depends on communicable, context-sensitive messaging and co-constructed meaning between

policymakers and practitioners. Despite the challenges, several principals expressed hope that curriculum change could be framed in ways that affirm existing strengths and professional creativity. As Ned put it, “if we frame this around creativity and what’s already working in schools, people will feel more confident to lean in.” Yet such optimism was tempered by the continued dominance of accountability pressures. As Lisa remarked, “it’s a lovely idea, but we’re still being judged on how fast we tick the boxes.” This tension between aspirational rhetoric and performative accountability risks undermining genuine engagement, a concern echoed by Coburn et al. (2016), who warn that when systems reward surface-level compliance, meaningful sense-making can be sidelined.

Overall, this subtheme illustrates that school leaders encounter curriculum change not only through formal documents and implementation timelines, but through a complex, relational system where coherence must be actively constructed. The findings challenge system-level assumptions about organisational synergy, revealing a landscape of uneven visibility, interpretive burden and fragmented messaging. Coherence, in this context, is not a technical end-state but a social process, built through communication, trust and alignment across actors and levels (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Walsh, 2024).

5.4.3 Theme 3: Summary

This analysis highlights the complex and conditional nature of school leadership in the context of curriculum change. While principals demonstrated strong professional commitment and a desire to lead curriculum development in ways that are meaningful for their school communities, their agency was shaped by a range of enabling and constraining factors, most notably time, relational trust and system coherence.

The data suggest that principals do not simply implement curriculum policy but act as mediators who interpret, adapt and negotiate curriculum changes in context-specific ways. Their position within the system reflects a hybrid role, operating at the intersection of school-level practice and broader policy structures. This indicates the potential to recognise principals as meso-level curriculum leaders, contributing to curriculum making alongside meso-level actors. Realising this potential depends not only on developing leadership capacity within schools, but also on fostering system conditions that support coherence, collaboration and trust. In doing so, principals' agency can be more effectively sustained and aligned with the broader aims of curriculum change.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed analysis of how Irish primary school principals engage with curriculum development, mediation and enactment, framed through the lens of their interactions with the wider meso-level policy environment. Drawing on rich qualitative data, the findings illustrate that principals occupy a pivotal and increasingly complex role in navigating curriculum change, one that blends leadership, interpretation, emotional labour and systemic negotiation.

Across the three themes: Conceptualising curriculum, Leading curriculum change and Creating the conditions for curriculum leadership, a nuanced portrait emerges of principals as both constrained and enabled actors. Their conceptualisations of curriculum deeply shape how they lead, with those viewing it as a process-oriented, collaborative endeavour more likely to foster professional dialogue and adaptive practice. Yet, these understandings are not formed in isolation; they are shaped by professional experience, access to meaningful professional learning and opportunities to engage in reflective peer and system-level dialogue. Principals' capacity to lead curriculum change meaningfully is frequently curtailed by structural constraints, competing priorities and emotional demands. Despite strong professional commitment, many find their agency compromised by policy incoherence, limited time and underdeveloped meso-level support structures. The findings also highlight a growing tension between the rhetoric of distributed leadership and the realities of unsupported delegation, with principals often shouldering the weight of change without the systemic scaffolding needed to sustain it. Nonetheless, this study reveals promising examples of curriculum leadership grounded in relational trust, reflective practice and collaborative meaning-making. Where principals experienced higher levels of self-efficacy, often built through lived leadership experience and professional support, they were more likely to interpret, adapt and lead curriculum in ways that were both contextually responsive and pedagogically meaningful.

In sum, this chapter has demonstrated that principals are not merely implementers of curriculum change but are critical mediators and potential co-constructors of change. However, their ability to fulfil this role depends on the presence of supportive conditions at the school and system levels. These insights set the stage for the final chapter, which draws together the study's conclusions, outlines its contributions to research and practice and offers recommendations for policy and future leadership development.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the findings and their implications for curriculum theory, policy development and leadership practices. It revisits the central research question: How do primary school principals interact with broader meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment? Guided by Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making and Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, the study has illuminated the interpretive, relational and often emotionally demanding work that principals undertake as they lead curriculum change within a loosely coupled system. By exploring principals' curriculum conceptualisations, leadership practices and experiences of system engagement, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the principal's role in curriculum making, one that moves beyond implementation to encompass their active involvement in curriculum development, mediation and enactment as interconnected and sense-making practices.

The chapter begins by synthesising the main findings into five key insights. These insights offer a conceptual bridge between the inductive themes developed from the data and the broader literature. Together, they present a coherent picture of how principals make curriculum actionable in context, how their leadership is shaped by curriculum beliefs and how their agency is both enabled and constrained by system conditions. The discussion then turns to the theoretical contribution of the study, showing how the findings build on and refine existing frameworks of curriculum making. In particular, this research contributes a refinement to current curriculum frameworks by repositioning school leadership as a key site of meso-level curriculum activity, particularly in loosely structured systems. Following this, the chapter outlines a series of recommendations for policy and practice. These recommendations speak to the need for stronger meso-level supports, more coherent system messaging, deeper investment in leadership development and greater attention to the emotional and professional sustainability of principals' work. The intention is not only to inform practice, but to foster a more coherent and connected approach to curriculum change, one that recognises principals as central actors in meso-level activities and intentionally positions them within the meso layer of curriculum making. Finally, the chapter identifies key areas for future research. These include exploring the roles of middle leaders in curriculum enactment, examining meso-level structures in other systems and investigating the emotional dimensions of leadership at a broader scale.

Taken together, these proposals aim to build on the insights generated here and support the ongoing development of a system that is responsive, trust-based and anchored in shared curriculum purpose.

Throughout, the chapter affirms the study's central argument: that principals in Ireland are not simply recipients of curriculum policy, but active mediators of meaning, coherence and change. Their work is essential to the success of curriculum change and supporting that work must be a shared responsibility across all levels of the education system.

6.2 Key insights

This study set out to explore how primary school principals interface with wider meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Guided by this central research question and three core aims, the study examined principals' curriculum conceptualisations, their lived experiences of leading curriculum work and the opportunities and challenges they face in engaging with the broader curriculum support system.

The key insights presented in this chapter were developed by drawing together and building upon the themes that emerged from the inductive analysis of focus group data. While the initial themes captured recurring patterns in participants' accounts, these insights reflect a further stage of analysis that involved connecting themes, identifying shared ideas and highlighting the most conceptually significant aspects of the data. They also incorporate perspectives distilled from the wider literature, allowing the insights to be situated within broader theoretical and policy debates. In doing so, the insights offer a coherent account of the main findings and demonstrate how the research question and aims have been addressed through critical engagement with both empirical evidence and existing scholarship. These insights are summarised in Figure 6.1 below, which visually represents how the key findings align with the research aims and wider theoretical context.



Figure 5.1: Key insights

6.2.1 Principals as emergent meso-level actors

The study was theoretically framed by Priestley's (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making, which repositions the macro, meso and micro levels not as static tiers, but as overlapping sites of curriculum activity. This framing enabled a fine-grained analysis of how curriculum work unfolds in practice, particularly in loosely coupled systems where boundaries between levels are porous. In such contexts, actors

routinely engage in boundary-crossing work, navigating conceptual, organisational and policy spaces to make curriculum meaningful and actionable.

This study has shown that primary school principals in Ireland are increasingly performing emergent meso-level curriculum work. Far from acting solely as school-based implementors of curriculum policy, principals are translating national frameworks, negotiating competing priorities, leading collective sense-making and constructing internal coherence within their schools. In effect, they are operating as curriculum mediators, filling a space in the system that is often under-recognised, but central to successful curriculum enactment. This work can be understood as emergent meso-level curriculum making, an interpretive, relational and sense-making activity that arises not from formal system design but in response to structural gaps within a fragmented or loosely coupled policy landscape. Unlike traditional depictions in the literature that position principals primarily at the micro level of curriculum enactment (Goodlad, 1979; Van den Akker, 2010), this study shows that they are engaging in boundary-crossing work that aligns more closely with the meso level, shaping how curriculum is understood, translated and enacted within their schools.

Ireland's education system offers a compelling example of this dynamic. As Looney (2011) and Walsh (2024) have observed, the Irish system is marked by fragmentation across policy, support and implementation structures. While schools are afforded significant professional agency, that agency can quickly translate into incoherence and initiative overload when not accompanied by coherent system messaging. The findings of this study reinforce and extend Looney's analysis, showing how this structural looseness plays out in the daily work of school leaders who are increasingly stepping into meso-level roles to make coherence from fragmentation.

This insight also builds on and expands the international literature on meso-level curriculum making. Scholars such as Chapman (2019) highlight the importance of middle-tier actors including networks, curriculum bodies or local authorities in mediating policy. However, this study identifies a more embedded and often informal meso role carried out by school principals. In the absence of strong structural meso infrastructure, principals become the relational and conceptual bridge between policy and practice, often with limited support or guidance.

Theoretically, this research repositions school leadership as a key site of meso-level curriculum activity especially in loosely structured systems. This perspective broadens the principal's role beyond traditional managerial or operational duties, highlighting the importance of relational engagement. It emphasises the principal's

involvement with the curriculum as a dynamic process involving sense-making, negotiation and context-sensitive leadership. Their work is central to the enactment of a more open, process-oriented curriculum, not simply as implementers, but as co-constructors of curriculum change.

This study proposes a refinement of curriculum making frameworks by identifying school-based leadership as a key site of meso-level activity, especially in loosely structured systems. Practically, it underscores the need for policy coherence and the development of structures that recognise and support this emergent leadership. If curriculum change is to be sustained and meaningful, principals must be supported not only as school managers but as curriculum leaders with access to aligned messaging, conceptual clarity, professional learning and trusted meso-level networks. Without such supports, the system risks relying on principals to create coherence without adequately resourcing and supporting that work.

6.2.2 Curriculum conceptualisations shape leadership

A second key insight emerging from this research is that principals' conceptualisations of curriculum significantly shape their leadership practice and their engagement with curriculum development, mediation and enactment. How principals understand the nature, purpose and function of curriculum is not a neutral or secondary matter. Instead, it forms the basis upon which they prioritise initiatives, frame pedagogical decisions and lead conversations around teaching and learning in their schools.

Across the data, participants revealed a diverse range of curriculum understandings, some viewing curriculum as a fixed set of prescribed content and outcomes, others seeing it as a dynamic, evolving process constructed in and through interaction between teachers, children and context. These differing conceptual stances had observable consequences for how principals led curriculum change. Those who adopted a more process-oriented view of curriculum were more likely to frame leadership as an act of collective sense-making, to foster teacher agency and to embrace a longer-term developmental view of change. In contrast, principals with a more product-based view often prioritised procedural compliance, policy alignment and outcome-focused monitoring. These findings reinforce the argument that curriculum leadership cannot be divorced from curriculum conceptualisation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Biesta & Priestley, 2013 & Deng, 2017).

This study aligns with international research that highlights the centrality of curriculum sense-making in shaping school-level leadership. Priestley and Philippou (2019: 233) argue that “the way in which curriculum is conceptualised informs not only what leaders prioritise, but how they engage with the professional agency of others”. Similarly, Fullan (2021) emphasises the need for curriculum reform to be grounded in values, vision and a shared professional language, conditions that are shaped by how leaders interpret the purpose of education. Deng (2022) suggests that curriculum as an educational project must be viewed not simply as content, but as a cultural and pedagogical expression of what is worthwhile to teach and learn. This perspective was echoed by several participants in this study, who expressed a desire to reclaim curriculum from its “over-instrumentalised” framing and to lead curriculum change in a way that is rooted in purpose, dialogue and professional judgement.

Importantly, this insight also speaks to the interplay between leadership agency and system coherence. In loosely coupled systems, where multiple actors and policies compete for attention, a principal’s conceptual clarity becomes even more critical. As Walsh (2024) notes in the Irish context, the absence of a singular, coherent narrative of curriculum places an increased burden on school leaders to make sense of changes and to protect core educational values in the process. When curriculum is perceived as “just another initiative,” it becomes dislocated from the core work of teaching and learning. When, however, it is understood as the central organising principle of education, it acts as an anchor, a way for school leaders to filter demands, build professional capacity and shape a coherent learning culture. This dynamic was visible throughout this study, where participants described the emotional and intellectual challenge of holding onto core curricular values amid competing initiatives and system fragmentation.

This insight also has implications for leadership development. Building on Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy, it is clear that principals’ belief in their capability to influence curriculum outcomes plays a vital role in how they engage with change. When leaders possess strong conceptual clarity and feel successful, they are more likely to take initiative, persevere through challenges and lead change with conviction. If principals are to lead curriculum change with confidence and depth, they must be supported to engage with curriculum not only as a technical framework, but as a philosophical and educational construct. As curriculum frameworks become more open and co-constructed, conceptual fluency becomes an essential leadership capacity. What this study suggests is that investing in the conceptual development of school leaders through rich professional learning, reflective dialogue and cross-

school networks, may be as important as structural changes. Curriculum making, in this view, is as much about shaping professional understanding as it is about designing systems or documents.

In sum, how principals conceptualise curriculum directly informs how they lead it. Their beliefs about what curriculum is and what it is for, ripple outward into leadership actions, school culture and teacher engagement. Recognising this relationship offers a more nuanced account of curriculum leadership, one that foregrounds meaning, purpose and agency alongside system design and policy fidelity. It also signals the importance of creating the conditions for school leaders to engage deeply with curriculum as the core of educational practice.

6.2.3 Enabling professional leader agency

A third key insight arising from this study is that effective curriculum enactment depends on enabling principals to exercise professional agency, that is, to engage with curriculum change through situated judgment, adaptive leadership and reflective decision-making within organisational and policy structures that support rather than constrain this work. In the context of an increasingly complex and evolving curriculum landscape, principals need not only guidance and frameworks but also the trust, conditions and flexibility to lead curriculum meaningfully in their own school contexts.

This finding aligns strongly with a growing body of international literature that positions professional agency as central to educational change (Pyhältö et al., 2014; Priestley et al., 2015). As Priestley et al. (2015) argue, agency is not simply the autonomous will of individuals, but a temporally situated and contextually conditioned capacity to act in ways that matter. In other words, agency is shaped by professional knowledge, the affordances and constraints of the environment and the resources, including expertise, relational trust and time, available to educators.

In the case of this study, principals described their capacity to lead curriculum change as directly influenced by the coherence (or incoherence) of policy messaging, the flexibility of professional space within their schools and the relational trust they experienced across system layers. This research indicates that agency must be anchored within a coherent and trust-based policy environment if it is to translate into meaningful curriculum leadership. As several principals observed, curriculum change cannot be sustained through fragmented mandates or compliance-driven

approaches; it must be nurtured through shared purpose, professional dialogue and reciprocal respect and trust among system actors.

What emerged clearly from the data was that principals do not resist curriculum change *per se*. Rather, they are deeply committed to it when it aligns with their professional values and when they are given the scope to interpret and enact it in a meaningful way. However, initiative overload, policy duplication and conflicting messages from the system often undermined their capacity to lead with clarity. Several participants expressed a desire to move beyond compliance-driven leadership towards a form of curriculum engagement rooted in purpose and local relevance, as Biesta (2010) might describe it - an education based not only on effectiveness but also on meaningful educational aims. Notably, this aspiration closely aligns with the principles underpinning the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum in Ireland, which emphasises child-centredness, agency and curriculum as an open and dynamic process.

Agency is also shaped by the emotional and professional confidence of school leaders. As Day and Leithwood (2007) and Crawford et al., (2021) note, effective leadership is not simply technical or procedural but deeply emotional work. This resonates with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to organise and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. In this study, principals' sense of efficacy was closely tied to their confidence in navigating curriculum demands, particularly when supported by relational trust and professional affirmation. This study found that enabling professional agency requires attending to the emotional conditions of leadership by creating space for reflection, dialogue and affirmation of professional identity. Leadership development for curriculum change must therefore go beyond technical capacity-building to include opportunities for principals to reconnect with their values and develop the confidence to lead with intent.

Importantly, this research also underscores that agency is not exercised in isolation, but is relational and dialogical. Principals who felt connected to trusted networks through formal clusters, peer partnerships or meso-level structures were more confident in their curriculum decisions. This finding aligns with Priestley et al.'s (2021) argument that agency is shaped through ecological and relational conditions, including opportunities for collaborative action, and with calls by Looney (2011) and Chapman (2019) for meso-level infrastructure that enables collaboration, coherence and distributed leadership. When professional trust and system alignment are

present, principals are better positioned to lead curriculum not just within their schools, but across the broader educational landscape.

In sum, this insight foregrounds the importance of enabling principals' agency as a foundational condition for meaningful curriculum change. It shifts the focus beyond notions of capacity-building towards a deeper recognition of the systemic, relational and emotional conditions that influence leadership practice. When principals are afforded trust, clarity and the professional space to exercise judgment, curriculum change becomes not only implementable, but also sustainable, contextually responsive and educationally purposeful. Crucially, a principal's ability to act with agency is closely tied to their belief in their capacity to effect change, a belief that lies at the heart of Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy.

6.2.4 Building a coherent trust based system

A fourth key insight emerging from this study is that principals' ability to engage meaningfully with curriculum development, mediation and enactment is heavily shaped by the degree of systemic coherence within the broader educational landscape. The findings highlight how a fragmented policy environment, marked by initiative overload, misaligned messaging and a lack of a unifying curriculum narrative, presents significant challenges to principals in their efforts to lead curriculum coherently and connect with meso actors and activities.

Participants frequently described the reality of initiative overload: a steady accumulation of curriculum demands across domains such as literacy, numeracy, wellbeing, inclusion and digital learning. While none of these initiatives were viewed as unworthy in isolation, principals voiced frustration at the cumulative weight of overlapping priorities. "You can't disagree with any single one," one principal noted, "but the totality is too much." The sheer volume, when delivered without sufficient integration or sequencing, left leaders overwhelmed and uncertain where to focus their efforts. This mirrors international concerns that fragmented policy layering creates confusion, encourages surface compliance and reduces opportunities for deep, sustained curriculum change (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Fullan, 2007 & Ball et al., 2012).

Participants also highlighted the lack of national-level coherence between agencies, departments and initiatives. Policy messaging was often perceived as uneven or contradictory, a phenomenon that Walsh (2024) describes as institutional overgrowth

resulting from uncoordinated reform agendas. In the absence of consistent alignment, principals are forced to interpret and reconcile diverse and sometimes conflicting signals from curriculum frameworks, support services, inspectors and professional learning providers. Walsh argues that such conditions turn school leaders into “coherence-makers”, a role corroborated by the data in this study.

This fragmentation also manifests in how curriculum is positioned within the wider system. Several principals expressed concern that curriculum is increasingly treated as one initiative among many. From the perspective developed in this study, the curriculum should not be peripheral but central, serving as the anchor around which other educational policies are aligned and made meaningful. When initiatives are launched in isolation from the curriculum, coherence suffers, and so too does the ability of schools to understand how various policies contribute to meaningful learning. As one principal put it, “we need curriculum to become the anchor, not the add-on.”

These findings echo Van den Akker’s (2010) model of curriculum as a multi-layered framework and Deng’s (2022) argument that curriculum should represent the unifying logic of educational purpose. The issue is not only about volume but about the relational and structural disconnects that prevent principals from acting as curriculum leaders across the system. In a coherent system, meso-level structures such as collaborative networks, clusters or intermediary supports help bridge the macro and micro levels of curriculum change. But in Ireland’s loosely coupled system (Looney, 2011), these bridging structures remain underdeveloped.

Building a more coherent, trust-based system will therefore require more than clarifying policy or enhancing leadership capacity. It demands structural and cultural shifts: developing mechanisms for sustained dialogue and shared sense-making across system levels; positioning principals as system actors rather than policy recipients; and treating curriculum not as a technical delivery mechanism but as a shared and relational endeavour. Drawing on Priestley’s heuristic model of curriculum as a multi-level relational practice, this study suggests that coherence is not simply a matter of alignment, it is a matter of purpose, trust and dialogue. When curriculum is treated as the organising principle of the education system and when principals are supported through collaborative infrastructures, curriculum leadership becomes not only more possible but more purposeful and sustainable.

6.2.5 The emotional demands of curriculum leadership

A final key insight arising from this study is that leading curriculum change places significant emotional demands on primary school principals. While much of the policy discourse around curriculum change tends to focus on structures, strategies and timelines, this research found that the emotional dimension of curriculum leadership (managing stress, uncertainty, relational tensions and competing expectations) constitutes a substantial and often under-recognised aspect of the principal's work. These emotional dimensions are not incidental; they are integral to how principals engage with curriculum and interface with the wider system.

Throughout the focus groups, principals spoke candidly about the emotional challenges of leading change in a policy environment that is simultaneously ambitious, diffuse and frequently incoherent. They described the weight of responsibility in translating policy expectations, the uncertainty associated with ongoing change and the relational tensions involved in managing staff wellbeing while trying to build shared professional direction. For many, this emotional work was not visible within formal leadership frameworks, but it shaped their capacity to sustain curriculum conversations and hold space for teacher agency amid a shifting landscape.

This insight aligns with a growing body of literature that recognises the emotional labour of educational leadership. As Crawford (2009; 2018; 2021) has consistently argued, leadership is inherently emotional and relational, involving the constant negotiation of feelings, both one's own and those of others. Crawford points out that emotional understanding is essential for effective leadership, particularly in times of change, as leaders are required to model resilience, empathy and clarity even when they themselves feel uncertain or overwhelmed. Similarly, Day and Leithwood (2007) emphasise the importance of emotional intelligence in sustaining leadership effectiveness, noting that emotional exhaustion and burnout are real risks in policy-heavy environments. The findings of this study echo these insights: principals are not only navigating complex changes but doing so while holding the emotional climate of their schools.

Curriculum change intensifies these emotional pressures, particularly when change is framed as both urgent and long-term. Participants in this study described feeling caught between the demands of immediate implementation and the desire to foster deep, meaningful engagement with the evolving curriculum. A sense of isolation compounded this emotional tension; principals often felt they had to carry the change

agenda alone, especially in the absence of clear messaging or accessible meso-level supports. Some leaders expressed frustration that their emotional investment in leading change was rarely acknowledged by national actors or policy structures. Others spoke about the personal strain of trying to balance strategic leadership with relational care in staffrooms and classrooms.

The emotional burden was also linked to the absence of systemic coherence, as previous insights in this study have shown that initiative overload and policy fragmentation place significant interpretive demands on principals. However, these are not only cognitive challenges but also affective ones. Having to make decisions in the face of ambiguity, mediate tensions between staff expectations and system pressures and maintain morale while managing uncertainty all contribute to what Hargreaves (1998) calls the “emotional geographies” of school leadership. These emotional geographies are shaped by the quality of relationships between principals and others in the system (teachers, inspectors, policy actors) and influence how leaders experience their roles.

This insight also has implications for how we understand professional agency. As Priestley et al. (2015) argue, agency is not simply a matter of capacity or opportunity but is shaped by emotional and identity-related factors. The findings of this study suggest that principals’ sense of agency in curriculum leadership is inextricably tied to their emotional well-being, confidence and sense of professional purpose. When reform is experienced as fragmented, unsupported or disconnected from values, principals may disengage, not from a lack of will, but from emotional depletion.

From the perspective developed in this thesis, emotional resilience is therefore not a soft skill or personal trait, but a structural condition for leading curriculum change. Supporting principals in this regard will require more than individual coping strategies, it demands attention to the creation of relationally supportive meso structures. Trust, clarity, shared understanding and peer connection emerge as protective factors that can sustain emotional engagement with curriculum leadership. When principals feel emotionally held within the system through aligned supports, respectful relationships and shared purpose, they are better positioned to lead sustained curriculum change.

In summary, this study highlights the emotional work of curriculum leadership as a critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of how principals engage with meso-level activities. Recognising and responding to this emotional dimension is essential if principals are to be supported not only as instructional leaders, but as people navigating the lived complexity of leading change in schools.

6.2.6 Summary of key insights

This study set out to investigate how primary school principals in Ireland interface with wider meso-level actors and activities in order to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment. The findings presented across the five key insights provide a rich and multi-dimensional answer to that question. The evidence presented in this study points to a clear conclusion:

Primary school principals in Ireland are not merely implementers of curriculum policy at the micro level; rather, they are increasingly performing a meso-level role in a system where structural meso supports are limited or underdeveloped. This role is not formally assigned but emerges out of necessity in a loosely coupled and fragmented system, where boundaries between policy levels are porous and where coherence must often be constructed rather than received.

Principals interface with the meso level through five key modes of engagement:

1. *Acting as curriculum mediators and coherence-makers:*

Principals step into a bridging role between macro policy and micro practice. They interpret national frameworks, lead collective sense-making and construct internal coherence in their schools. In doing so, they effectively occupy an emergent meso space within the system, responding to structural gaps and making curriculum actionable in context.

2. *Bringing their conceptual understandings of curriculum into leadership practice:*

How principals conceptualise curriculum influences their approach to leadership. Those who adopt a more process-oriented view are more likely to lead collaboratively, foster teacher agency and see curriculum as a living educational project. These conceptual frames shape how they engage with system-level messages and how they filter, translate and prioritise initiatives.

3. *Exercising and enacting professional agency within and across system layers:*

Principals' engagement with curriculum is shaped by their sense of agency, which in turn depends on system conditions such as policy coherence, professional trust, time and relational infrastructure. Where trust and

conceptual clarity exist, principals are more confident and effective in navigating curriculum change. They interface with meso-level activity not just through compliance, but through adaptive, values-based leadership.

4. *Contending with system fragmentation and making coherence locally:*

Principals are often forced to act as translators of curriculum policy due to initiative overload, overlapping mandates and inconsistent messaging. This work of 'making coherence' places them at the centre of meso-level curriculum mediation. However, without coordinated policy and structured meso supports (such as networks, intermediary bodies or aligned professional development), this bridging role is unsupported and emotionally costly.

5. *Managing the emotional labour of curriculum leadership:*

Finally, principals interface with the meso level not only through organisational and conceptual work, but through emotional labour. They sustain curriculum conversations, navigate relational tensions and foster the emotional climate of their schools amid ambiguity and change. Their capacity to do this work is shaped by relational conditions across the system, making emotional resilience and systemic trust core enablers of meso-level engagement.

Collectively, these insights not only answer the central research question but also illuminate the complex and relational nature of curriculum leadership, underscoring the pivotal role principals play in shaping how curriculum is understood, developed, mediated and enacted in schools. Rather than passive recipients of policy, principals are revealed as active mediators interpreting frameworks, fostering coherence and leading professional dialogue in the face of fragmentation and competing demands.

This study argues that for curriculum development, mediation and enactment to be meaningful and sustainable, principals must be intentionally positioned within the meso level of the education system. While they already undertake significant mediating and translational work, this role is often under-recognised and under-supported. Their presence therefore needs to be formally acknowledged as part of the meso layer, with principals placed at the centre of meso-level activity. Only by providing such recognition and support can principals be enabled to mediate effectively and contribute to curriculum making; without this, enactment may risk remaining fragmented. This requires creating opportunities for all principals to engage

directly with key curriculum messages, to collaborate with policy actors in developing shared understanding and to participate in collective sense-making processes that build the conceptual clarity necessary to lead with confidence and depth.

Ultimately, supporting principals in this way requires a coherent, trust-based system that values curriculum leadership as a shared and dialogical endeavour. It requires shifting from a view of leadership as technical delivery to one that embraces principals as integral actors in shaping curriculum meaning and purpose, not just within their schools, but across the broader educational landscape.

6.3 Aligning key insights with the theoretical framework of the study

This study is theoretically grounded in a dual framework that combines Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model of curriculum making and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy within social cognitive theory. This combination enables a nuanced exploration of the central research question: How do primary school principals interface with wider meso-level actors and activities to support and influence curriculum development, mediation and enactment? Priestley and colleagues' framework reframes curriculum making as a dynamic, social and relational practice that occurs across multiple, overlapping sites (supra, macro, meso, micro and nano) rather than through a top-down, hierarchical chain of production and implementation. Crucially, this model positions the type of activity rather than the actor as the defining feature of each site. This conceptual shift was foundational to the design and analysis of this research, which found that Irish primary principals are increasingly engaging in meso-level curriculum making through mediating national frameworks, translating curriculum change priorities and constructing coherence within their schools, even though they are not formally recognised as meso actors.

In making sense of these findings, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy offers vital insight into how principals perceive their own capacity and motivation to engage in curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to organise and execute action, emerged as a key factor influencing principals' leadership behaviours. This theoretical lens enabled the study to explore how principals' engagement with the wider meso system is shaped not only by structural conditions, but also by personal judgement, emotional resilience and past experiences. Principals' sense of efficacy in leading curriculum change was most evident when shaped by experiences of enactive mastery; for instance, successfully leading a whole-school curriculum initiative or managing a complex change process,

which in turn reinforced their belief in their ability to do so again. Similarly, verbal persuasion such as affirmation or encouragement from inspectors or system actors served to validate their leadership capacity and strengthen their confidence in engaging with change. These sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) supported a shift from reactive implementation to more proactive and confident curriculum leadership and enactment. Conversely, initiative overload, misaligned messaging and a lack of conceptual clarity often undermined self-efficacy, producing hesitation or surface-level compliance. This is particularly significant in a loosely coupled system like Ireland's where principals often find themselves acting as informal coherence-makers without direct access to curriculum networks or first-hand messaging. In this way, Bandura's social cognitive theory reinforces the need to consider how the emotional and psychological dimensions of leadership intersect with broader system structures.

Together, these two theoretical perspectives offered an integrated lens through which to explore the core phenomenon at the heart of the thesis: how principals experience, navigate and contribute to meso-level curriculum making. Priestley's framework provided the conceptual and structural scaffolding to identify meso-level interactions, while Bandura's theory illuminated how principals' belief in their ability to operate within that space affected their actual engagement. This is particularly evident in findings related to conceptualisations of curriculum, emotional demands of leadership and the role of professional agency. Principals who viewed curriculum as a process of sense-making rather than a fixed product were more likely to exhibit confidence and agency in engaging with meso-level activities. Their sense of self-efficacy enabled them to take up leadership roles in shaping curriculum meaning, rather than simply implementing changes. This aligns with Priestley et al.'s (2015) view of the iterational dimension of agency, which recognises how professional beliefs, values and accumulated experience shape individuals' capacity to act. In this way, self-efficacy can be understood as an enabling condition of professional agency, rooted in principals' past experiences and confidence in their professional judgment, which empower them to navigate and influence curriculum change.

Importantly, this study also surfaced dimensions of collective efficacy, where principals' engagement in curriculum leadership was strengthened by trusted relationships with in-school management teams, teacher leaders and peer networks. Confidence was often described not only as a personal capacity but as a shared belief in the school's ability to engage meaningfully with curriculum change. In schools where leadership was distributed and curriculum was discussed collectively,

principals reported greater clarity, reduced isolation and a stronger sense of shared purpose. This echoes Bandura's (2000) work on collective efficacy as a group's shared belief in its capability to organise and execute courses of action required to produce desired outcomes and connects with Priestley et al.'s (2021) emphasis on collaborative and dialogical curriculum agency.

The study contributes a distinctive perspective by linking a system-level understanding of curriculum making with insights into how both individual and collective forms of leadership agency shape that process. It shows that principal engagement at the meso level is not just a function of system design, but also of belief, trust and emotional sustainability held both individually and collectively. In doing so, it provides a deeper, more holistic understanding of how curriculum development, mediation and enactment are lived and led by primary school leaders in Ireland.

6.4 Contribution to new knowledge and practice

This study offers contributions to both educational scholarship and professional practice. Situated within the context of an EdD, its significance lies not only in advancing theoretical understanding but also in informing policy design, leadership development and curriculum enactment in practice. It provides a layered contribution across the macro, meso and micro levels of the education system, deepening understanding of curriculum as it is conceptualised, mediated and enacted across contexts. In particular, it highlights the need to formally recognise principals' meso role while also strengthening local and regional infrastructures such as school clusters, education centres and professional networks to support coherence and collaboration. In this way, the study extends curriculum theory and leadership scholarship while also illuminating the conditions, supports and system behaviours needed to sustain curriculum leadership in schools.

This research demonstrates that principals in Ireland, though not formally positioned within the meso layer, frequently act as de facto meso-level actors. Their work as relational and interpretive bridges between macro policy and micro practice emerges not through mandate but through necessity, exposing a structural blind spot in how curriculum change is currently designed, resourced and led. In this way, the study foregrounds the significance of principals' contributions within the meso space, bringing greater clarity to a dimension of their role that has not been fully recognised in curriculum reform debates previously. The central contribution of this study is to

argue for the formal recognition and systemic support of principals' meso work, positioning them as anchors of coherence, sense-making and sustained leadership within curriculum change at the meso level.

In doing so, the study brings into sharper focus the emotional and relational dimensions of curriculum leadership. While Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model powerfully highlights the social and relational nature of curriculum making as a distributed endeavour, this research deepens the model's scope by showing how principals' engagement is also shaped by their self-efficacy, emotional labour and lived experiences. Curriculum making therefore emerges not only as a structural and relational process but also as a deeply human one, dependent on confidence, resilience and sustained professional dialogue.

This insight refines existing curriculum literature. Whereas scholars such as Chapman (2019) emphasise the role of formal meso actors including curriculum bodies, local authorities and regional networks, this study demonstrates that in loosely coupled systems such as Ireland's, principals themselves often become the meso actors. At the same time, the findings also point to the potential of local and regional infrastructures such as school clusters, education centres and professional learning networks to share the work of coherence-making and to provide principals with the collaborative spaces needed to mediate and enact curriculum change more sustainably.

Supporting principals as curriculum leaders does not require new structural layers, but rather a cultural and relational reconfiguration of system behaviour. The implications of this are significant, as it reframes how leadership is understood and supported within curriculum change. The findings from this research make clear the imperative for curriculum bodies, inspectors, support services and professional learning providers to engage principals as co-constructors of curriculum change, while at the same time strengthening the connective tissue of the system through regional networks and collaborative clusters. Only by recognising and resourcing principals' meso role while also enabling them to work within supportive local infrastructures can the Irish education system realise its vision of curriculum as a genuinely shared endeavour.

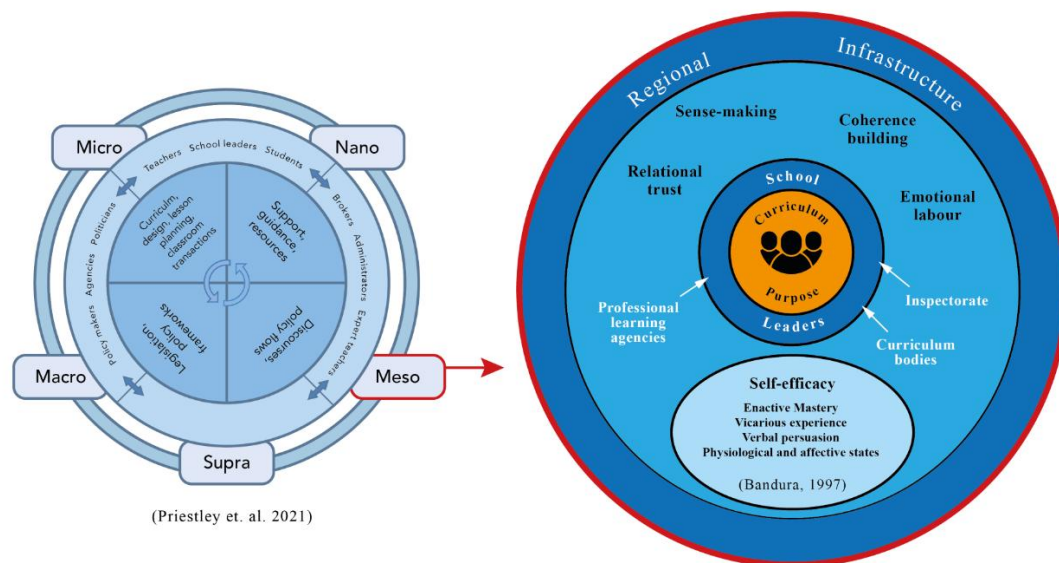


Figure 5.2: Reframing the meso layer

Extending Priestley et al.'s (2021) heuristic model, this study reframes the meso layer by foregrounding principals as informal curriculum mediators in Ireland's loosely coupled system. The reframed meso layer, illustrated on the right, foregrounds this zone as a dynamic and relational space where curriculum leadership is enacted through sense-making, trust-building, emotional labour and coherence-making. These dimensions emerged clearly in the findings, where principals described the challenges of interpreting policy messages, managing the emotional demands of leading change, and working to sustain trust and coherence in fragmented conditions. Within this space, principals are formally positioned as key meso actors, leading "from the middle out" and supported by both formal and informal infrastructures that connect schools to the wider system. Such connections are particularly important in Ireland's loosely coupled system, where gaps in coordination across levels risk constraining shared learning and responsiveness. By formally recognising and engaging principals in this meso role, the system can begin to mitigate these risks and foster stronger coherence.

This meso space is shaped by systemic structures such as the inspectorate, curriculum bodies and professional learning agencies, but also, as this research makes clear in a new way, by individual agency informed by principals' lived experience. Drawing on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, the model

developed in this study highlights how principals' confidence to lead curriculum is influenced by enactive mastery, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and affective states. These personal dimensions intersect with wider system conditions, such as the availability of professional supports, the coherence of policy messaging and the alignment of curriculum reform with school-level values. At the centre of this meso space lies a shared curriculum purpose, anchoring the work and signalling the need for coherence across policy, guidance, professional learning and school-level enactment. This study argues that the curriculum should not be positioned as one initiative among many, but rather as the core anchor around which all other policies, supports and system initiatives cohere.

In sum, this reconceptualisation of the meso layer makes an original contribution by formally positioning principals as active mediators who lead curriculum through relational, interpretive and emotionally situated practices. It deepens Priestley et al.'s model at the meso level by integrating self-efficacy into the dynamics of curriculum making and by emphasising the emotional and relational conditions of meso work. It also offers practical insight into cultivating a more coherent, trust-based system that enables curriculum leadership from the middle out, supported by local infrastructures such as school clusters and education centres.

6.5 Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings of this study suggest a set of interrelated recommendations to support more coherent, sustainable and values-driven curriculum enactment in Irish primary schools. These recommendations emerge directly from participants' experiences and reflect the broader need for systemic responsiveness to the evolving role of school leaders, the centrality of curriculum purpose and the emotional and professional conditions necessary for meaningful curriculum change.

6.5.1 Reframing inspection as advisory and learning-oriented

A recurring theme in this study was the influential role of the Inspectorate in shaping how school leaders engage with curriculum change. Participants described a persistent sense of evaluative pressure, particularly the fear of being judged for "getting it wrong", that could displace the deeper, values-based intent of the curriculum. In response, the findings support a reframing of the Inspectorate's role from one understood in practice as primarily evaluative to one that is more advisory,

dialogic and grounded in trust. While the Education Act (1998) positions the Inspectorate as both advisory and evaluative (with advisory listed first), the findings suggest that principals experience the balance as weighted towards evaluation, creating a need to realign the role with its intended framing.

There is already evidence of this shift in practice, with inspection evolving toward a more supportive stance. This study affirms and encourages that trajectory, aligning with approaches such as those advocated by Hayward (2022), where system actors engage in learning together rather than positioning evaluation as a top-down compliance exercise. By adopting a more collaborative, capacity-building orientation, the Inspectorate can work alongside schools to interpret curriculum policy, plan for change and embed new practices in a way that supports innovation, reflective leadership and sustained professional growth.

Such a reframing of inspection would also contribute to emotional sustainability for principals, helping to reduce high-stakes pressure and enabling them to lead with confidence and purpose. Clear communication about the intent and ethos of this advisory role can help maintain accountability while signalling a broader cultural shift toward a more coherent, supportive and trust-based system of curriculum change that values professional agency, risk-taking and the freedom to innovate for school leaders.

6.5.2 Recognise and resource principals as meso-level curriculum leaders

This study highlights the emergent role of principals as meso-level curriculum actors that mediate policy, lead sense-making and construct internal coherence within their schools. Yet this vital work remains under-recognised in the Irish system. Policy and system structures should formally recognise principals not only as curriculum leaders, but as active mediators engaged in curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Systems must genuinely value their contributions by carving out dedicated time and resources to include their voices in shaping curriculum practice.

This includes investing in meso-level infrastructure, such as local clusters, designated time for curriculum leadership and access to peer learning networks. Without such supports, principals are left to "make coherence" in isolation, performing bridging work across policy and practice without the systemic scaffolding to sustain it. Recognising this leadership as curriculum work is essential to any vision of meaningful curriculum enactment.

Realising the potential of principals as curriculum leaders requires coordinated action across the education system. This means recognising their role at policy level, while ensuring they are supported through time, structures and collaborative networks that allow them to lead curriculum with confidence and clarity.

6.5.3 Centre curriculum purpose in policy messaging

A strong theme across this study was the need to reposition curriculum as the central organising principle of educational policy. When curriculum is treated as one initiative among many, school leaders struggle to prioritise and well-intended changes can become weakened. Participants expressed concern that competing initiatives, often well-intentioned, detract from the deeper work of curriculum enactment by fragmenting school focus and overwhelming staff.

It is recommended that all national policies and initiatives cohere around a clearly articulated curriculum purpose. This involves aligning messaging, timing and guidance from the Department of Education and Youth, NCCA, the Inspectorate, support services and other agencies and groupings to reflect a common understanding of curriculum as the foundation of educational work. Such alignment ensures that curriculum is not marginalised but instead becomes the reference point through which other policies, whether related to wellbeing, inclusion or digital learning for example, are integrated and made meaningful.

While challenging in a decentralised system, this coherence is essential to reduce initiative fatigue and to enable principals and teachers to engage in curriculum change as a purposeful and connected process, rather than a series of disconnected initiatives.

6.5.4 Develop structures to enable professional agency

Effective curriculum leadership depends on principals having the professional space, trust, and flexibility to engage with change meaningfully. This study affirms international research showing that agency is not simply an individual trait, but a system-conditioned capacity shaped by time, relationships and structural affordances. Professional agency cannot thrive without the right conditions; school leaders require time, support and relational trust to lead adaptively and meaningfully within their own contexts.

The development of curriculum-focused professional communities of practice, both virtual and in-person, is central to sustaining this agency and reducing isolation. Local clusters and regional Education Centres can play a key role in facilitating these networks, bringing leaders together to share expertise, reflect on practice and co-construct localised approaches to curriculum. Networks are most impactful when supported by facilitation, shared purpose, and opportunities for joint inquiry. Their success, however, depends on dedicated resourcing, facilitation and integration into the wider system of curriculum change and support.

System actors therefore need to invest in structures that enable (rather than constrain) agency, such as protected planning time, collaborative inquiry models, cross-school peer learning and coordinated regional networks. These structures should also support adaptive leadership, recognising that contextual decision-making is essential for curriculum coherence. A risk remains, however, that agency without clear guidance may lead to uneven enactment. Enabling agency must therefore be paired with conceptual clarity and a shared curriculum narrative, consistently reflected in national messaging and guidance, to reduce fragmentation and help schools prioritise what matters most.

In short, fostering curriculum-focused networks alongside supportive system structures can sustain leadership agency, reduce isolation and strengthen coherence across schools.

6.5.5 Reframe leadership development to include curriculum conceptualisation

A central insight of this study is that how principals understand curriculum, whether as fixed content or an evolving process, shapes how they lead. Those with a strong conceptual grasp of curriculum as a dynamic, dialogic and purpose-driven process were better positioned to lead meaningful change. Leadership development and professional learning must therefore extend beyond technical skills to foster deep engagement with curriculum purpose and philosophy.

To achieve this, professional learning opportunities for leaders should provide spaces for reflective dialogue, theory-informed discussion and exploration of values, cultivating what Priestley and Philippou (2019) describe as “curriculum sense-making” as a central leadership task. Models such as inquiry-based, dialogic and networked learning should be prioritised and systematically evaluated for their impact on developing curriculum leadership capacity.

This reimagining of professional learning requires close collaboration between leadership providers, Initial Teacher Education institutions, and curriculum bodies to design, pilot and embed programmes that position curriculum thinking at the heart of educational leadership. While this shift may demand significant redesign and facilitation, the long-term benefits to system coherence and leadership agency are substantial.

6.5.6 Support emotional sustainability and self-efficacy in curriculum leadership

Leading curriculum change is not only an intellectual and organisational challenge but an emotional one. This study found that principals experience curriculum leadership as emotionally taxing, especially in the context of policy ambiguity, competing demands and responsibility for staff wellbeing. Participants described the invisible labour of sustaining morale, managing uncertainty and holding space for pedagogical growth. These emotional demands, when left unacknowledged, risk disengagement and burnout.

Supporting emotional sustainability must therefore become a structural and cultural priority. This includes embedding emotional intelligence and relational supports into leadership programmes, providing access to mentoring and coaching and fostering school cultures of empathy and shared purpose. Beyond general wellbeing, targeted support should aim to build leaders' self-efficacy and their belief in their capacity to lead curriculum change with impact. As research shows, self-efficacy is central to leader motivation and resilience and can be cultivated through reflection, modelling and supportive peer networks (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Attention to emotional sustainability not only protects principals' wellbeing but also strengthens their ability to lead curriculum work with consistency, confidence and moral clarity. It is essential to create conditions where leaders feel held by the system, not left to carry change alone.

If principals are to lead curriculum change with conviction and resilience, the emotional and relational demands of their work must be acknowledged and supported. A system-wide approach that embeds mentoring, reflection and peer support is essential.

6.5.7 Build a coherent, trust-based education system

This study points to the need for a fundamental rebalancing of the Irish education system: from fragmented, initiative-driven change to a more coherent, trust-based model of curriculum change. In such a system, coherence is not imposed, but cultivated through mutual dialogue, shared purpose and respect for professional judgement among all stakeholders.

This entails both cultural and structural change. Culturally, it means treating principals not as implementers of policy, but as partners in curriculum development, mediation and enactment. Structurally, it requires alignment across agencies, support services and inspection systems to ensure consistent messaging and coordinated action. The creation of platforms akin to the Education Forum dedicated exclusively to curriculum and cross-level dialogue could help institutionalise these relational practices.

While building such a system is undoubtedly a long-term endeavour, it represents the most sustainable path forward. When school leaders feel trusted, connected and clear about their role in curriculum change, the system moves closer to realising its educational vision. Achieving this coherence will require both cultural and structural alignment across all levels of the system, grounded in sustained dialogue, coordination, and mutual respect and underpinned by parity of esteem among organisations that share a collective responsibility and vision to support schools in enacting curriculum change.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

Building on the recommendations for policy and practice, this study also identifies key areas where further research is needed to deepen understanding and inform future system development. These recommendations reflect the evolving nature of curriculum leadership and the complexity of supporting coherent, meaningful curriculum change.

6.6.1 Examine the role of middle leaders in curriculum enactment

While this study focused on principals, many participants referenced the potential of middle leaders and teacher leaders at a classroom level to support distributed curriculum leadership within schools. Future research could explore the conditions under which middle leadership flourishes, the professional learning required to

enable it and how middle leaders interpret and mediate curriculum alongside principals and teachers.

6.6.2 Explore meso-level curriculum structures in more depth

Given the central argument of this thesis, that principals are stepping into informal meso-level roles due to structural gaps, there is a clear need to investigate the nature, function and effectiveness of intentional meso-level structures in other systems. Comparative case studies from countries or regions with well-developed meso-level infrastructure, whether in education or other sectors such as health or policing, can offer valuable insights for designing a more coherent and supportive curriculum system in Ireland.

6.6.3 Study longitudinal impacts of leading curriculum change on school leadership

Curriculum change unfolds over time, often in phases marked by different challenges and leadership responses. Longitudinal research tracking principals' experiences over the course of curriculum enactment would yield richer understanding of the evolving demands of curriculum leadership, including shifts in emotional labour, identity and agency. Such studies could also capture the sustainability of policy initiatives and the durability of system coherence.

6.6.4 Investigate emotional labour and leadership wellbeing at scale

The emotional dimensions of curriculum leadership emerged as a significant theme in this study yet remain under-researched in Irish educational literature. Quantitative or mixed-methods research exploring the prevalence and patterns of emotional labour, burnout and resilience among school leaders would help build an evidence base for policy intervention. This could include investigating links between leadership self-efficacy, emotional climate and curriculum engagement.

6.6.5 Investigate system coherence as experienced by other actors

While this study focused on the principal's perspective, coherence is a systemic phenomenon that affects and is affected by multiple actors. Future research could

explore how coherence is experienced by teachers, support services, inspectors and policymakers. A multi-perspectival study could map where alignment and coherence is working, where it is breaking down and what conditions support shared understanding across levels.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter brings together the findings of this study and considers their implications for curriculum theory, policy and leadership practice. It has revisited the central research question and demonstrated how principals in Irish primary schools are increasingly engaged in curriculum development, mediation and enactment, not merely as school-level implementers, but as emergent meso-level actors operating in a loosely coupled and often fragmented system.

Looking to the future, this research provides a foundation for reimagining how curriculum leadership is understood, developed and enacted across the Irish education system. By making visible the interpretive and emotional labour of principals, it calls for a more dialogical, human-centred and structurally supported approach to curriculum change, one that recognises curriculum leadership as a shared responsibility that spans across school, regional and national levels.

If embraced at the system level, the insights offered here have the potential to reshape how we think about the meso layer, not as a fixed organisational tier, but as a dynamic, relational and meaning-making space where coherence is constructed through leadership and trust. In this space, principals are not simply managing change; they are shaping the future of education through their everyday acts of interpretation, negotiation and care. Supporting this work is not only a matter of sustainability, it is central to ensuring that curriculum change remains anchored in purpose, guided by values and coherently aligned across the system.

In that sense, the ultimate contribution of this research lies not only in what it reveals, but in what it invites: a renewed commitment across the system to shared sense-making, regional collaboration and curriculum leadership that is recognised not only for what it delivers, but for what it enables, sustains and makes possible. As one principal aptly put it, *"We're not just delivering what's handed down, we're making sense of it, shaping it, trying to make it real for our schools. That's curriculum work too."*

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Question Schedule

Please find below questions that may be drawn upon during the focus groups:

Conceptualisation of curriculum

1. When we use the word curriculum, what does that mean to you?
2. What about curriculum making? What do you understand by that phrase?
3. Do you think that changes like the introduction of curriculum frameworks and outcome-based specifications have changed how curriculum is understood in schools?
4. Where do you take your understanding of curriculum from?

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment

1. How do you think the Primary School Curriculum is developed in Ireland?
2. What has been your involvement in the process of curriculum development in general?
3. What is your role in adapting the curriculum for your school? More specifically, what is your role in translating key messages of curriculum to the school level?
4. What has been your involvement in the process of curriculum enactment in school?
5. Curriculum making happens across multiple layers of the education system and is undertaken by different stakeholders for different purposes. Who, in your opinion, are the key stakeholders/ main organisations involved in supporting schools with curriculum development, mediation and enactment?
6. What do you believe your main role is in supporting your school with curriculum development, mediation and enactment?
7. Do you believe you have agency in the system to carry out your brief as school leader?

8. Do you think that the views of certain individuals/organisations are considered more strongly than others in the curriculum development process? Why do you think their views are considered stronger than others?

Opportunities and challenges of meso-level curriculum making

1. Given the range of organisations and agencies working at the meso level of the education system, what advantages and challenges does this present for you and your school?
2. What factors, do you believe, contribute to the success (or lack thereof) of curriculum enactment in Ireland?
3. What will be the main challenges for you as a school leader in supporting the mediation (translating key messages) and enactment of the redeveloped primary school curriculum?
4. If you had a magic wand, what key change(s) would you make to the current processes for curriculum development? Curriculum mediation? Curriculum enactment?

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH INVITATION

Screengrab from IPPN É-sceal

(issued on January 9th, 2025)

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment - Assistance required

Primary school principals are requested to participate in one online focus group. Sinéad Ruane is undertaking doctoral research for her thesis on *'Curriculum development, mediation and enactment: an exploration of the process of meso-level curriculum making from the perspective of primary school leaders in Ireland'*. This research will focus on how key messages from curriculum are communicated within, to, and from the meso-level of the education system to school leaders.

Contact Sinéad by email for further information or to express your interest - sinead.mcdermott.2022@mumail.ie

Previously Issued E-scéals

APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL CONFIRMATION

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics
Committee

14 January 2025
Sinéad Ruane
School of Education
Maynooth University

Re: Application for ethical approval for a Project entitled:
Curriculum development, mediation and enactment: an exploration of the process of meso-level curriculum making from the perspective of primary school leaders in Ireland.

Dear Sinéad,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 30/12/2025.

Please note: all projects now require an end of project report which is attached. Please complete and upload the end of project report to your RIS ethics record after the project end date.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary,
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX D: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM



Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study

I am Sinéad Ruane, a doctoral student in the Department of Education, Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for my doctoral degree, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University, and its title is:

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment: an exploration of the process of meso-level curriculum making from the perspective of primary school leaders in Ireland.

The central purpose of this research study is to investigate the process of meso-level curriculum making through the perspectives of school leaders and how this phenomenon is experienced and understood from a leadership perspective. The research is undertaken to better comprehend how principals position themselves within the educational landscape and to gain insights into how key messages from curriculum are communicated within, to, and from the meso-level of the education system and school leaders.

What is meso-level curriculum making?

Meso-level curriculum making can be described as the place where policy, support and guidance for curriculum making are provided, planned and communicated. Actors within meso sites of activity play a significant role in mediating, communicating and translating key curriculum messages flowing from the policy level to the school level and vice versa.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

What will participating in the study involve?

The study will involve participating in a recorded focus group lasting up to seventy five minutes with other school principals, reflecting on your experience of curriculum mediation and enactment, both in your context and also working with organisations at the meso-level to support this. Participation in the focus group will be online at a time that suits you using the Microsoft Teams platform. Please note that it is not possible to use audio recording only using Microsoft Teams as videorecording is automatic on this platform. You will receive a set of indicative questions one week in advance of the focus group to review.

What information will be collected?

The data collected aims to comprehend how principals position themselves within the educational landscape and to provide a detailed understanding of the communications process involved in curriculum development, mediation, and enactment as experienced by school leaders.

You have been asked because you work as a primary school leader in Ireland with responsibility for leading teaching and learning in your school.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. 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 be given a copy of this 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 two weeks after the interview has taken place.

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. The focus group session will be recorded, with your consent, and transcribed by me. Electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by myself, Sinéad Ruane or my supervisors. 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. Pseudonyms will be used for confidentiality purposes.

'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 on the MU server. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, I or my supervisor will destroy all data. Electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by me or my supervisors in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as part of my Ed D thesis. 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 in this research. However, if you do experience discomfort, please contact Spectrum.Life (formerly Inspire Workplace Services). Contact details include, Free Phone 1800 411 057. The contact details for SMS is Text 'Hi' to 087 145 2056 and for Whatsapp is 087 3690010.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Sinéad Ruane, sinead.mcdermott.2022@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 Sinéad Ruane's research study titled:

Curriculum development, mediation and enactment: an exploration of the process of meso-level curriculum making from the perspective of primary school leaders in Ireland.

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 Sinéad Ruane to be audio-recorded. ☐

I give permission for my online focus group with Sinéad Ruane to be video and audio and recorded on Microsoft Teams. ☐

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 data anonymization, which will be 2 weeks after the data has been collected. ☐

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

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

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

OR

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview. ☐

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: EXTRACTS FROM REFLEXIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL

As part of the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal to record assumptions, decisions, and reflections that arose during data collection and analysis. The following excerpts illustrate how reflexive practice shaped interpretation and supported the trustworthiness of the study.

Excerpt 1: Assumptions about Leadership Training (March 2024)

Journal note (typed extract):

I expected principals with formal leadership training to be the most confident in discussing curriculum change. In today's focus group, however, one of the strongest voices came from a principal without such training, who emphasised the role of collegial support. This challenges my assumption that training = confidence. Important to stay alert to how confidence might be context-driven rather than training-driven.

Commentary:

This reflection encouraged me to revisit coding categories related to “confidence” and to consider contextual factors such as school size, staff relationships, and peer networks. As a result, the analysis avoided overemphasising leadership training as the main determinant of confidence in curriculum engagement.

Excerpt 2: Insider Positioning and Policy Language (April 2024)

Journal note (typed extract):

One principal remarked that NCCA guidance often uses “jargon” that alienates teachers. I noticed myself feeling defensive, as my professional role is tied to curriculum development. I must ensure that my insider status does not lead me to dismiss or soften participants’ criticisms of policy communication.

Commentary:

This reflexive note reminded me to code and interpret critical comments on policy language with care. Rather than smoothing over such remarks, I recognised them as valuable insights into how principals experience the policy–practice interface. This helped strengthen confirmability by ensuring participants’ perspectives, even when challenging, were authentically represented in the findings.

Excerpt 3: Binary Coding of Curriculum Conceptualisations (May 2024)

Journal note (typed extract):

Initially coded references to “curriculum as product” as negative and “curriculum as process” as positive. On rereading, I realised some principals valued the ‘product’ for the clarity it provided. My binary coding risks oversimplifying their perspectives. Need to revise theme to reflect a spectrum rather than a dichotomy.

Commentary:

This entry prompted a restructuring of the theme on curriculum conceptualisations. Instead of a simple product–process divide, I developed a more nuanced theme capturing principals’ varied and sometimes ambivalent positions. This strengthened both credibility and dependability by ensuring that findings reflected the complexity of participants’ views.