The Evolving Model of School Self-Evaluation in Ireland:

How a Person's Perception of Purpose and Power Determines Practice

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this dissertation is to examine the impact of an evolving national policy of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) on a sample of school leaders and teachers in two second-level schools. Over the course of the 2012/2013 academic year, a series of focus groups (12 in total) with the school leaders (principal and deputy principal) and a sample of teachers in both schools were conducted. The research is situated within a social constructionist paradigm.

The research question can be sub-divided into three distinct parts concerning attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of the focus group respondents to SSE. The conceptual framework of the "4 P's" used in this dissertation to interrogate the research question in an academically rigorous manner is quite distinctive. The "4 P's" of the conceptual framework represent Purpose, Power, Person and Practice.

This dissertation explores the composition of various colliding contexts which set the parameters for the contemporary model of school self-evaluation emerging in Irish schools today. It examines the impact of an internalisation of the performativity and audit culture of New Managerialism along with advocating a deliberative democratic logic for SSE. The main finding is that a professional practitioner (school leader or teacher) perception of the purpose and power implications of SSE as a policy initiative will influence local practices which ultimately will determine levels of compliance. Those levels of compliance may be contrived (box ticking exercise) or committed (proactive engagement). The research findings would suggest that concerning SSE, the focus group respondents veered more towards a status of contrived compliance.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

4 P's	Purpose, Power, Person and Practice
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
CEE	Centre for Evaluation in Education
DCU	Dublin City University
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ECB	European Central Bank
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
(LFG)	Leader Quote taken from Focus Group Transcripts
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
M.Ed.	Masters of Education
MLL	Management, Leadership and Learning
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SDP	School Development Planning
SDPI	School Development Planning Initiative
SICI	Standing International Conference of Inspectorates
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Timing
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
(TFG)	Teacher Quote taken from Focus Group Transcripts
TUI	Teachers Union of Ireland
TY	Transition Year
WSE	Whole School Evaluation
WSE-MLL	Whole School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning
VEC	Vocational Educational Committee

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a rather new phenomenon in Ireland and it is still very much at an early evolving phase. It is however currently being rolled out on a national basis in all primary and post-primary schools. Research about school self-evaluation in Ireland is quite limited but is increasing due to its rising profile on the national radar. One of my main aims with this dissertation is to add to that growing body of research about SSE in Ireland and in particular to include the voice of the professional practitioner who operates at local level - in this case school leaders and teachers. This dissertation looks at the impact that this reform initiative is having on school leaders and a sample of teachers in two second-level schools. My research question revolves around the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of school leaders and teachers to school self-evaluation. I also provide some background information which is relevant to this study and I reference in this chapter some other recent studies and research that has been conducted about SSE in Ireland.

What is distinctive about this piece of research is that it explores school self-evaluation from the micro perspective of school based leaders and teachers with an affective focus rather than just considering SSE from a distant macro policy perspective. The emphasis of the research component of this dissertation is on the praxis relationship between policy and practice from the viewpoint of the school based professional practitioner and the main findings has implications for theory, policy and practice.

This piece of research makes a qualitative contribution to the growing body of knowledge in this domain and has broad implications for how SSE should continue to evolve at national policy level in Ireland and could incorporate a deliberative democratic logic based on the principles of deliberative democratic evaluations (House and Howe, 2000) coupled with the Habermasian concept of communicative action

(Habermas, 1984). The conceptual framework used in this dissertation suggests that concerning school self-evaluation, the professional practitioner perception of power and purpose has a major impact on implementation practices.

1.2 Research Question and Conceptual Framework

Research Question

The overall aim of this dissertation is to examine the impact of an evolving policy of SSE as it is being rolled out on a sample of school leaders and teachers in two second level schools. In order to achieve this objective, when designing my research question I sub-divided the question, into three distinct parts concerning attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of the focus group respondents to SSE.

The first part of my research question addresses what are the attitudes of school leaders and teachers in two post-primary schools to SSE. The second part of my research question examines what emotions are triggered in the same sample of school leaders and teachers by engaging with the current model of SSE which is being rolled out on a national basis in a formal manner since September 2012 when Circular 0040/2012 (Department of Education and Skills, DES, 2012b) was issued to all schools making SSE mandatory. There is a strong degree of interconnectivity between the first two parts of my research question. Attitudes and emotions are closely linked and interdependent on each other as attitudes can influence emotions and vice versa. By examining both the attitudinal and emotional impact of SSE on the respondents my intention is to get a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the school leaders and teacher respondents' perspectives on SSE. The third and final part of my research question concerns SSE implementation practices. The conventional way most policy initiatives develop is they start with idea conceptualisation. This is usually followed by a drafting phase which often involves a consultative process with relevant stakeholders. This happened with the national guidelines on SSE in Ireland which were devised 'in

collaboration with teachers, principals, parents, members of boards of management, patron and management organisations, teacher unions and other bodies' (DES, 2012a, 3). These earlier phases eventually led to the formal ratification of a policy which is often the precursor to the policy implementation phase. The effectiveness of any policy initiative in my view must take account of how it is implemented and does the policy initiative impact in such a manner that it leads to a change in practices. This is why I deem it worthy to be the third and final part of my research question.

The three parts of my research question of attitudes, emotions and implementation practices, I deliberatively chose as I believe in their totality they give deep and meaningful insight into what the local practitioners of school leaders and teachers think and feel about SSE. Regretfully the evidence in this dissertation suggests that the lack of wide scale consultation with school based personnel in the policy drafting phases of the current model of SSE has and continues to have some adverse implications. In particular my findings indicate that overall awareness and levels of engagement amongst the respondents about what the current SSE model envisages is quite minimal. While the sample size is small my emphasis is on depth and gaining rich insight. However if the findings in this piece of research are in any way representative of what is happening at national level this is worrying as these are the very people who are expected to implement school self-evaluation at grassroots or school level.

<u>Conceptual Framework</u>

In order to conceptualise SSE in such a way that would deepen insight to this evolving and emerging concept, I devised a conceptual framework of the "4 P's" for this dissertation. The "4 P's" of my conceptual framework represent Purpose, Power, Person and Practice. The concept of the 4 P's was first used by Jerome E. McCarthy to describe the four basic elements of the marketing mix of Product, Place, Price and Promotion (McCarthy, 1960). The idea of borrowing this concept and re-labelling the

4P's to use as the main structure of my conceptual framework emerged gradually when I started perusing the educational literature about SSE. I had already started conducting the field research of focus groups when following a discussion with my dissertation supervisor, I finally settled on the idea to use an adaptation of the 4 P's marketing concept for my conceptual framework. This meant my conceptual framework developed in tandem with the early days of my research and is inductive in nature. I believe reworking a conceptual framework from another discipline is appropriate as it offers a distinctive and appropriate structure. It enables me to interrogate the relevant literature I have selected for inclusion about SSE while also directly addressing all three parts of my research question. This conceptual framework also permits me to interpret the findings about SSE in a comprehensive manner which were generated from the series of focus groups conducted with the school leaders and teachers.

This conceptual framework offers the opportunity to explore the work of some of the main educational theorists about SSE. A significant example of this is MacBeath (1999) three logics of SSE, which are explored in greater detail in the conceptual literature chapter, are compatible with the "Purpose" dimension of my conceptual framework. A further example in relation to the "Person" element is that it enables a consideration of Evans (1996) typology of the emotional impact of change from a SSE perspective. I believe that the 4 P's of Person, Purpose, Power and Practice offer a comprehensive toolkit to analysing why some policy initiatives move beyond mere formulation while others falter at the implementation phase or fade away into obscurity. It offers a conceptual lens to gain deep meaningful insights into the various phases of policy formulation and implementation. By critically analysing what happens at these two critical phases using this conceptual framework, possible stumbling blocks between effective policy development and successful sustainable implementation are highlighted.

1.3 Implications for Theory, Policy and Practice

Theory

One implication of this dissertation for theory about school self-evaluation is it offers the conceptual framework described in detail in the previous section as a possible tool of analysis not just for examining SSE but which could also be useful for reviewing other new policy initiatives. Currently there are many initiatives underway in the education sector for example in the area of numeracy and literacy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011c) as well as a proposed revised junior cycle programme (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011) to name just two prominent educational reform strategies. This conceptual framework offers a mechanism that may be useful to analyse these and similar concepts in a fresh and academically rigorous manner.

A second implication of my research for theory is that it highlights that the application of policy should pay homage to the various contexts in which it is situated. I discuss in detail in this dissertation, the model of SSE which is currently under construction in Ireland is very much a product of the interplay between international trends and the perilous state of the nation's finances which required an international bailout in November 2010 (Department of Finance, 2010). I would assert that theory can never be divorced completely from the contexts in which it is to be applied particularly in a globalised world. Ireland is a small open economy and those various contexts can change quite rapidly even within a short timeframe and this needs to taking into account when applying theory about school self-evaluation to real life situations.

Policy

While policy can be drafted in a vacuum, it is only when the policy is implemented does it become apparent has adequate attention been paid to the impact of various contextual factors such as the necessary amount of time to allow the change to be internalised:

It seems that policy makers are unaware of the impediments to change. Often they push through change too quickly. When that happens, then it is quite likely that change will only be superficial because it is not internalised and assent (which is assumed) is not given. (Heywood, 2009, 281)

This piece of research suggests that there are significant shortcomings in the current top-down approach to school self-evaluation which is being rolled out countrywide. The research findings indicate that school leaders and teachers are not necessarily going to buy into SSE just because they are mandated to do so by a Department of Education and Skills national circular (DES, 2012b). This is not to be totally dismissive of the potential power of the use of external pressure as it is often a necessary component of any change agenda. There is an inherent contradiction at the heart of SSE as it can offer the possibility of both public accountability and professional autonomy often simultaneously. However if the balance is pushed too far in favour of accountability at the expense of autonomy this may manifest itself as passive resistance by school based professional practitioners. In this situation the possible professional autonomy benefits of SSE will not be realised and the conceptual commitment to SSE by local practitioners will not be realised jeopardising the long term prospects for SSE policy.

Practice

The implications for practice of my findings are that they suggest that in relation to SSE there is two different possible ways professional practitioners may exercise the craft of compliance. The current situation I label contrived compliance, as it contains strands of passive resistance. The second and I suggest probably more ideal situation is committed compliance which involves school based personnel proactively engaging with the school self-evaluation process in a more meaningful manner. While it is still very early days for SSE in Ireland, my interpretation of the findings suggest that the research respondents who participated in this study are situated on the contrived compliance side of the continuum. This box ticking approach to SSE is also evident in the educational literature as reflected in the following claim that 'despite rhetoric

extolling the virtues of self-evaluation and practitioner empowerment, such systems may in practice simply require schools and teachers to research their own processes and practices according to externally imposed templates and methods' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 28). The evidence presented in this dissertation suggests that ensuring SSE will unleash professional autonomy benefits that not only empowers school based personnel but lead to long term sustainable school improvement requires protracted commitment by professional practitioners.

To summarise the implications of the findings of this dissertation for theory, policy and practice, they suggest that the role of school leaders and teachers is pivotal in the SSE model that is currently evolving in Irish schools. The findings suggest that in particular this is not the current situation at national policy level. This means a lot of the theory about SSE while laudable is not manifesting itself in school based practices hence this may explain why there is such a gap between rhetoric and reality in relation to SSE.

1.4 Background and Significance of the Study

In November 2012 the Inspectorate division of the Department of Education and Skills issued guidelines on school self-evaluation to all second level schools (DES, 2012a). This was followed up with a circular making SSE a mandatory requirement for all schools (DES, 2012b). Both of these developments at national level meant that SSE had a more prominent profile and that all schools in the state had no choice but to engage with SSE at some level in a formal manner.

In September 2010 I enrolled in an Education Doctorate programme at Maynooth University. I had already completed a Master of Education (M. Ed.) postgraduate degree and submitted a dissertation which delved into some aspects of school self-evaluation (Harvey, 2009). This meant it was a topic which was now not only on the agenda for all schools, it was also an area in which I had already acquired some degree of specialist knowledge.

My rationale for choosing school self-evaluation as the focus of my research was influenced by the fact that it matched the terms of requirements of a professional doctorate concerning marrying theory and practice in the field. A combination of my personal and professional interest in the topic along with the praxis concerns I had about the manner in which SSE was been imposed on schools all give some background information to this study. I have worked in schools for more than two decades and I wanted to document the voices of school leaders and teachers about the imposition of a policy in a top-down manner and how this impacts on their everyday practices in schools.

I consider my research to be significant and timely because it is my considered viewpoint that SSE is at a critical crossroads in terms of its development and the vista for this policy suggests two possible likely scenarios or a continuum of both positions. Those two positions are contrived and committed compliance. The dream case scenario for SSE envisages a situation where SSE becomes seamlessly embedded into the daily practices of school leaders and teachers leading to long term sustainable school improvement. The second more pessimistic outcome is a situation where school based personnel view SSE as merely just another one of many box ticking exercises to be contended with as they discharge their daily duties. In this situation school leaders and teachers reluctantly engage with SSE processes in order to fulfil their compliance requirements. However the professional practitioner at school level does so with a minimum degree of personal and professional commitment. My research findings suggest the latter scenario is more likely and this is why I believe my research is pertinent. It explains why school leaders and teachers may be unwilling participants in many of the reform initiatives currently underway in Irish schools and therefore these initiatives are unlikely to have a meaningful and enduring legacy.

1.5 Current Research about SSE

A Senior Inspector with the Inspectorate, Deirdre Mathews has completed a doctoral dissertation titled *'Improving learning through whole-school evaluation: moving towards a model of internal evaluation in Irish post-primary schools'* (Mathews, 2010). While she interviewed a range of education personnel for her study she acknowledges that the absence of teacher voices in particular as a limitation of the study. One of the distinguishing features of this piece of research is that it is designed in order to give a platform to school leaders and teachers perceptions about SSE.

A trawl through academic literature about SSE in Ireland and the names of two authors come to the fore. These two academics are based at the School of Education Studies, Dublin City University, Gerry McNamara and Joe O'Hara and they have written a series of peer reviewed articles about school self-evaluation. They also published a book titled *'Trusting Schools and Teachers: Developing Educational Professionalism through Self-Evaluation'* (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a) which proved particularly useful to this author when working through the various stages of completing this dissertation.

The leading international author about school self-evaluation is John MacBeath who wrote what is considered by many to be the seminal text about SSE *'Schools must speak for themselves - the case for school self-evaluation'* (MacBeath, 1999). Since then he has written several peer reviewed articles and textbooks which make a convincing case for SSE. He also remains convinced SSE can be a positive development for schools (MacBeath, 2014). His work about SSE and in particular the logics for SSE, I will explore in more detail in the conceptual literature chapter.

One of the first major pieces of international research into school self–evaluation was by the Standing International Conferences of Inspectorates (SICI). They produced a report which gave a country by country guide (including Ireland) to SSE based on a two year *'Effective School Self Evaluation'* project (SICI, 2003). Recently this now

enlarged European transnational agency launched the '*Bratislava Memorandum*' (SICI, 2013) which 'seeks to make a direct contribution to education policy and practice as the drive to improve the quality of education gathers momentum' (SICI, 2013, 2). The other most recent international significant publication concerning SSE which is also referenced throughout this dissertation is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review project on '*Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes*' (OECD, 2013). This longitudinal study took 4 years to complete and it compares the experience of 28 OECD countries including Ireland. This study analyses the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, and offers policy advice on using evaluation and assessment to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of education.

In both the educational literature and the documentation emanating from transnational agencies about school self-evaluation there are some strong recurring themes. One such prominent theme often highlighted in the literature is the tension between public accountability and professional autonomy. This usually occurs as a by-product of schools engaging with SSE processes as 'it is gradually becoming apparent that as the two key policy goals of greater school and teacher autonomy and increased accountability are difficult to reconcile' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 2). What is unique about this piece of research is that it looks at these two competing objectives of SSE from the micro perspective of school based leaders and teachers with an affective focus, rather than just considering SSE from a distant macro policy perspective.

The literature explored in this dissertation is by no means an exhaustive list of all the research about SSE but it is very representative of its recent history and development. The combination of recent academic and official documentation gives a fresh contemporary perspective which informs the current status of school self-evaluation as it gains a greater profile in both the national and international educational domain. SSE

is probably still very much at the conceptual phase of its life cycle however it is becoming an increasing source of national and international research and hopefully this dissertation is a welcome addition to that growing body of knowledge.

1.6 An Outline of What Each Chapter Will Seek to Accomplish

The literature review section is split into two chapters, chapter two and chapter three. In chapter two, the contextual literature chapter, I clarify what the term school self-evaluation means. Following a perusal of various definitions (MacBeath, 1999, DES, 2012a) along with consideration of what the research participants perceive SSE to mean, I believe the following explanation encapsulates the main features of this elusive concept. SSE is a collaborative, inclusive, cyclical, continuous and reflective process of internal school review that involves collecting and analysing school data to bring about school improvement.

In this contextual literature chapter I also set out the various policy contexts for SSE. I do this by examining the national and international policy contexts of SSE. The design and model of SSE which is being rolled out in all Irish schools on a mandatory basis is governed by specific requirements set out in the Department of Education and Skills Circular 0040/2012 (DES, 2012b). I also in this chapter trace the pervasive impact on SSE of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) leading to 'in the past 15 years, a considerable buy-in by the DES into the ideology of new managerialism' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230). The current national policy context for school self-evaluation is that SSE is just one plank of an ambitious reform agenda underway in Irish schools. This may be a contributory factor towards a sense of weariness emanating from professional practitioners with new initiatives so I attend to the likely impact of reform fatigue on SSE.

In the second chapter of my literature review, chapter three, I delve into the concept of school self-evaluation using the 4 P's of my conceptual framework. I start off by

looking at the purpose of SSE and exploring the various logics it entails. I make the case for a deliberative democratic logic and 'the three requirements for deliberative democratic evaluation: inclusion, dialogue and deliberation' (House and Howe, 2000, 5).

I also in this conceptual literature chapter discuss the power implications of SSE and how power may inherently contains an element of passive resistance. I suggest that the exercise of power concerning SSE in Ireland is neither purely consensual nor conflictual. It is probably best understood as a blended combination of these two types of power as 'sometimes there is consensus, sometimes conflict and, most frequently there is both' (Haugaard, 1997, 137). The final two parts of this chapter deal with the "person" and "practice" elements of my conceptual framework and a feature of both elements which is self-surveillance. Self-surveillance with the conceptual significance of the panoptican, is a salient element of Foucault's notion of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), which is also discussed in the conceptual literature chapter. Consideration is also given to the impact of SSE on the person and how one can gain illuminating insights into SSE by interpreting implementation practices.

In chapter four, I explain my approach to all aspects of the research design used in this dissertation. At the start of this methodology chapter I state my philosophical assumptions underpinning the research because 'inquirers often overlook this phase, so it is helpful to have it highlighted and positioned first in the levels of the research process' (Creswell, 2013, 18). The philosophical assumptions section of the chapter commences with an exploration of my ontological experiences and my epistemological stance on what constitutes knowledge. It also includes an examination of the impact of reflexivity on myself and the research process along as well as detailing my approach to ethical issues pertaining to this piece of educational research.

My philosophical assumptions had a significant bearing on my decision to adopt a paradigm of social constructionism as 'individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences - meaning directed towards certain objects or things' (Creswell, 2013, 24).

I offer a rationale for why I chose focus groups and documentary research as my two main methods of gathering data. The use of focus groups is central to this piece of research. I therefore outline how and why I chose the two second-level schools and the actual school leaders and teachers which formed the four distinct focus groupings. I explain in detail the Braun and Clarke (2006) six step model, I used for coding the data. In the final part of this chapter, I describe the various strategies that I employed to analyse, interpret and validate the data.

In chapter five, I present the findings from the focus groups and I identify eight main themes. I separate the findings and discussion of findings into two stand-alone chapters as I wanted to highlight the viewpoints of the research respondents in a separate section of the dissertation with minimum interpretation from myself. The eight main themes that emerged are as follows:

> Theme 1 – Initial Impressions
> Theme 2 – Perceived Benefits
> Theme 3 – Perceived Barriers
> Theme 4 – Stakeholders Involvement
> Theme 5 – SSE Support Mechanisms
> Theme 6 – Tracking Changes of the Respondents about SSE
> Theme 7 – Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE
> Theme 8 – Going Forward - Practical Suggestions

An exploration of these themes is provided in chapter six, the discussion of findings chapter. These themes are explored in such a manner as to elicit knowledge and to deepen understanding and insight into all three parts of my research question. There are five main findings in this dissertation:

1.   Contextual factors both national and global have a significant impact on the model of SSE which is evolving in contemporary Irish schools.

2.   The attitudes of the respondents to SSE suggest greater emphasis needs to be put on clearly articulating its purpose and it should incorporate a deliberative democratic logic.

3.   SSE triggered in the respondents emotions ranging from fear to trust and strengthening cooperation between the various stakeholders with a vested interest in schools will help bridge this gap.

4.   The implementation practices of the school leaders and teachers concerning SSE suggest its current status is one of contrived compliance.

5.   Inductively inferred from the findings, there is a sequential order to the 4 P's conceptual framework designed for this study. A Person's perception of Purpose and Power determines Practice.

The concluding chapter highlights implications of my findings for theory, policy and practice. It also looks at the contribution of this study to SSE research and suggests areas for further research. I suggest that the implications of adopting a deliberative democratic approach to school self-evaluation means the views of pupils should be explored in future research about SSE as they have a vested interest in the schools which they attend. The same logic applies to their parents as they have a role to play in any meaningful and inclusive school self-evaluation process. I recommend that similar research should be carried out in other second-level schools as this piece of research was a small scale study only involving two schools. Additionally, I consider the relationship between school self-evaluation and new managerialism is also worthy of further investigation. My intention is that this study can contribute to a better understanding of processes such as SSE and similar studies at other schools would certainly enhance valuable knowledge about the evolving model of school self-evaluation in Ireland.

1.7 Conclusion

This introductory chapter set the scene for this dissertation about school self-evaluation. It highlighted the three parts to my research question about the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of school leaders and teachers in two second level schools to SSE. It situated my research within the context of research about SSE which has taken place both within Ireland and internationally. This chapter set out what is original about this study and how it adds to this growing body of knowledge. While there is a limited canon of research about SSE at present this is a situation which is likely to be remedied over time with its growing profile in Ireland and elsewhere.

There are five main findings of this dissertation which form the basis of chapter six, the discussion of findings chapter. Those findings highlight the importance of context in shaping the model of SSE which is evolving in Irish schools. They suggest a deliberative democratic logic for SSE and building trust as a necessary pre-requisite to ensuring committed compliance in relation to implementation practices. I also propose that there is a sequential order to the 4 P's conceptual framework designed for this study hence the subtitle of this dissertation "How a person's perception of purpose and power determines practice".

The journey of this dissertation from my research question to the summary of findings starts with a pair of contextual and conceptual literature review chapters about SSE. In the next chapter, I embark on that journey by examining the national, international and contemporary policy contexts of school self-evaluation.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTUAL LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The literature reviewed in this chapter was specifically chosen as it provides context and insight into the model of school self-evaluation currently being rolled out on a national basis in Irish schools. This chapter has three key sections. In the first section, I explore the policy context of school self-evaluation. As the concept of SSE is so central to this dissertation, I start by exploring various definitions of this elusive concept of SSE and what it means for the contemporary Irish educational second-level sector as 'all schools are required to engage in systematic school self-evaluation from the 2012/13 school year onwards' (DES, 2012b, 1). This initial exploration of SSE shows it to be a complex concept containing some paradoxical dilemmas inherent in the SSE process.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the national and international policy context for SSE. The world in which we are living constantly changes and schools have to adapt and reform to meet new challenges as they arise. Ireland as a small island on the periphery of Europe finds itself heavily dependent on international trade and deeply immersed in and subjected to global trends and events:

> In simple terms, Ireland went from being held up as a shining example of how a small, open economy could become successful in the modern, global marketplace to being a country on the brink of financial collapse. (European Commission, 2015, 1)

A qualitative piece of research such as this is rooted in a specific time and location. The timeframe in which this piece of research was conducted was eventful and unprecedented in the relatively short history of the Irish State. In November 2012, Ireland had to resort to an international financial bailout which was brokered by the troika of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Union (EU). In exchange for financial assistance from the troika, the Irish Government signed up to an agreement which imposed various stringent conditions on the Irish State (Department of Finance, 2010). This had a seismic impact on the

corporate governance of "Ireland incorporated". Therefore, any in-depth knowledge or understanding of SSE in Ireland needs to also explore the current economic and political contexts at play in twenty first century Ireland.

The role of two particular transnational agencies, the OECD and SICI is explored when I consider the international policy context for SSE. There is ample evidence of the influence of the OECD and SICI in official documentation concerning school evaluation:

> Most countries now see evaluation and assessment as playing a central strategic role, and are expanding their use … but the focus is now broader and includes greater use of external school evaluation. (OECD, 2013, 1)

Two of the key contemporary forces driving the model of SSE which is emerging in Ireland today are "neoliberalism" and "new managerialism". The impetus towards school self-evaluation in Irish schools is heavily influenced by both of these pervasive twin forces which are very much on the rise not just in Ireland but also in many other parts of the world at this time as 'the tone and pace of neo-liberalism was accentuated in the Celtic Tiger Era' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 5). I reference a raft of recent legislative changes which gives concrete examples of how neoliberalism and new managerialism has framed the parameters in which SSE has developed and continues to evolve in Ireland.

I examine some of the possible implications that the national and international policy context combined with contemporary forces may have on the evolving model of SSE in Ireland. Central to the debate about the future direction of SSE is the role of the Inspectorate division of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). As the chief advocate with primary responsibility for embedding at national level a SSE model, this statutory body is currently engaged in leading the approach to SSE in Ireland. As part of that process the DES has recently issued official guidelines about school self-evaluation to all schools in Ireland (DES, 2012a) which were backed up by a Circular

0040/2012 making engagement with SSE in all schools a mandatory requirement (DES, 2012b).

The overall aim of this chapter is to contextualise how within the parameters of globalised trends, over a relatively short period of time, school self-evaluation has emerged as an educational practice that all primary and second-level schools in Ireland must now engage with and implement into their school policies and practices in a formalised manner.

2.2 The Policy Context of School Self-Evaluation

Not only is school self-evaluation establishing itself as part of the educational lexicon of contemporary schools, the term itself is gaining currency quickly and successfully embedding itself into the vernacular of schools. However, school self-evaluation is an elusive complex concept, so it is a worthwhile exercise to look at various definitions of SSE and extract from these definitions the salient features which have relevance for the emergent SSE model in Irish schools.

I then proceed to examine, the national and international context in which modern day schooling take place. This facilitates an identification of some of the factors which have enabled school self-evaluation to become a prominent feature of the educational landscape in Ireland in such a short timeframe. Two of these factors are neoliberalism and new managerialism. While both these concepts are explored in more detail in the next section, they are international in nature and give an insight into the overt managerial discourse which must be given ample consideration when scrutinising the responses of the school teachers and leaders about SSE.

2.2.1 What is School Self-Evaluation?

School self-evaluation, as this dissertation illustrates is a multi-faceted complex process which does not lend itself to simple short one line definitions. The explanations below encapsulate for me the essence of what SSE entails. They also resonate with responses

elicited from the research participants when asked for their understanding of the term school self-evaluation during the initial round of the focus groups with the school leaders and teachers that took place in October 2012.

The Scottish Inspectorate breaks school self-evaluation down to just three basic questions which go to the heart of what SSE is about and concern 'How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do?' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, 2001, 7). This definition from 2001 represents one of the earlier references to SSE in official publications but still has relevance for the model of SSE currently evolving in Irish schools as it seems to be much more about professional autonomy rather than public accountability. Over the past decade the accountability dimension of SSE has become more prominent and is closely aligned with advocating an improvement agenda for SSE. The official logo of Ofsted, the English Inspectorate highlights this interlinking of accountability and improvement as it uses the by-line 'raising standards, improving lives' (Office for Standards in Education in England, 2015).

Improvement has moved centre stage as a rationale for SSE in Ireland. A very recent publication from the Department of Education and Skills is titled *'Evaluation for School Improvement – a guide to follow-through inspection'* (DES, 2014) indicates that school improvement is seen as pivotal to the evaluation process by the present day Irish Inspectorate.

All of the above definitions neglect to incorporate a reflective dimension to the SSE process as advocated by John MacBeath, one of the leading academic writers in this field. For the past fifteen years he has emphasised the importance of self-reflection concerning SSE stating 'its primary goal is to help schools to maintain and improve through critical self-reflection' (MacBeath, 1999, 1).

Elements of the above definitions are evident in the current official Irish definition of SSE taken from *'School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools'* issued in November 2012 as the field research component of this dissertation commenced. They state that school self-evaluation 'is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering information from a range of sources and making judgements with a view to bringing about improvements in students' learning' (DES, 2012a, 12).

There is nothing particularly unique about the Irish definition of SSE but regretfully in my opinion the self-reflection dimension is not more explicit. It is of no great surprise it advocates an 'evidence-based approach'. The use of the term "evidence-based" is frequently mentioned in the international literature about SSE and has a strong accountability connotation. Professor Bob Lingard from the University of Queensland highlights the problem with this approach when he argues that 'we must move away from evidence-based policy making instead focusing on evidence informed policy making … data should inform policy development – but policy should not be solely based on data which is the situation currently' (Lingard, 2014, 1).

The Inspectorate's SSE guidelines are 90 pages long (DES, 2012a) and as part of the research process for this dissertation, I elicited the views of the research participants about the usefulness of these guidelines during the middle session of focus groups which took place in January 2013. As will become clearer in the findings chapter, prior knowledge about the guidelines (DES, 2012a) amongst the research respondents was very limited and most were quite critical of their content and structure. They argued that they needed to be presented in a more user friendly structure which would make the guidelines more accessible to school teachers and leaders. As one of the sub-questions for this piece of research focuses on the degree of compliance amongst school teacher and leaders with implementing SSE, criticisms of the guidelines by the research respondents is an issue I will explore in the findings chapter of this dissertation.

These guidelines identify six steps to the school self-evaluation process which I mention below to give the reader a practical overview about what SSE means to the Irish Inspectorate and the model which they expect schools to incorporate into their management structures and remit:

1. Gather Evidence
2. Analyse the Evidence
3. Make Judgements about Strengths and Areas for Improvement
4. Write School Self-Evaluation Report
5. Devise School Improvement Plan
6. Implement and Monitor Improvement Plan.

(Department of Education and Skills, 2012a, 12)

The original SSE draft guidelines issued in September 2011 (DES, 2011a) had only five steps and did not include 'step 2 - analyse the evidence'. The ability to analyse evidence goes to the heart of the SSE process advocated by the Irish Inspectorate yet even the Chief Inspector questions whether schools have the necessary skills to implement such a methodology. This is evident when he states that 'we recognise that the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage in self-evaluation is yet to be properly developed' (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013, 16). The purpose of SSE along with the inherent contradiction built into an externally mandated SSE process, I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

2.2.2 National Policy Context

In this section, I wish to look at the national policy context for SSE and how a radically transformed educational landscape has shaped its development. The national context has historical, legislative, political and economic dimensions all of which interweave to create the climate that has enabled SSE to form part of the ambitious reform agenda now underway in Irish schools. I believe it is important to explore the various components of the national context in this dissertation as they form the backdrop to the scale and scope of changes operating in the contemporary educational environment. They also help explain how the school leaders and teachers with whom I conducted a

series of focus groups find themselves at the centre of a cauldron of change and how this has shaped their perspectives on the numerous policy initiatives including SSE that are underway in Irish schools at the moment.

<u>Historical and Legislative</u>

Twenty first century Ireland is almost unrecognisable from the economic, social and cultural landscape of just two decades ago. All societies evolve and change but what has been significant is the rapid rate of accelerated change in Ireland over this timeframe. A myriad of factors such as globalisation, employment opportunities, advances in information and communication technologies, multiculturalism, diversifying family structures, social networking and twenty four seven media coverage converged to transform the way we live our lives. As schools do not exist in a vacuum, these societal and cultural changes have impacted significantly on all aspects of school life, with wide ranging implications for school leadership and the way we manage schools.

A raft of legislation was passed in the late 1990s and the early part of this new century which has had a significant impact on our educational system. The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), Education Welfare Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), Teaching Council Act (Government of Ireland, 2001) and Education for Persons with Special Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) all placed teaching in a more prescribed legislative framework.

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) has had and continues to have major implications on the Irish educational system and not just because it places many legal obligations on schools such as School Development Planning (SDP). This raft of legislation over the past two decades actively promotes a partnership approach to education with an emphasis on evaluation:

> The evaluation and quality assurance culture now firmly embedded within the EU has been gradually incorporated as a key element of the national social

partnership agreements which have determined economic and social policy in Ireland for nearly two decades. (McNamara, O'Hara and Sullivan, 2008, 506)

What all these pieces of legislation enable is a delegation of tasks and responsibilities beyond the traditional stakeholders, placing education in a much broader setting. This has some potentially positive implications enabling schools to be a cohesive influence in strengthening and fostering bonds within a community setting as advocated in such an articulate manner by Robert D. Putnam. Putnam's (2000) research findings about social capital are based on data compiled in the USA, but they echo similar findings about the benefits of community by a Taskforce on Active Citizenship in Ireland (Department of the Taoiseach, 2007). The inclusion of voices from beyond the school can not only make school self-evaluation more rigorous but also act a conduit in forging positive community ties. In the focus groups sessions I conducted for this piece of research, several of the respondents mention the importance of involving the various stakeholders as a perceived benefit of SSE. There is evidence to suggest that SSE can do this by anchoring schools more in their local communities as 'a basic premise of this reform was that improving urban schools requires stronger social ties between local school professionals and the parents and community, whom they are responsible for serving' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 5).

Separation of Church and State powers is a recent development in the Irish education system. Traditionally, the Catholic Church has played a dominant role in the Irish education system over the past century since the foundation of the State. This is changing as reflected by the launch of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector on April 19th 2011 which notes that 'over the past two centuries, 95% of educational provision at primary level has been denominational largely under the patronage of the Christian Churches' (DES, 2011b, 1).

The recent announcement of new patron structures at primary and post primary level in Ireland (DES, 2011b) is just one example of how legislative reform along with some of

the other factors outlined above is radically altering the educational landscape and the education reform agenda. A broadening of the governance and patronage of second level schools has implications for SSE. The model of SSE which has emerged is quite secular in nature despite the fact most schools in Ireland are denominational and this is acknowledged in the foreword to the official guidelines on SSE. These guidelines thank many of the traditional stakeholders who collaborated in their drafting phase but also specifically mention external stakeholders groups such as 'the Equality Authority, the Ombudsman for Children and the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network' (DES, 2012a, 3). This illustrates the changes in Irish society and education, as recognition of equality issues, children's rights and specific minority groups like Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender is acknowledged.

The process surrounding the development of the contemporary SSE model is specifically mentioned in the Programme for Government 2011-2016 which states that 'a new system of self-evaluation will be introduced, requiring all schools to evaluate their own performance year on year and publish information across a range of criteria' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2011, 40).

It is important to acknowledge the involvement of two organisations that were instrumental in providing in-service support to school personnel and the development of resources concerning SSE. The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) was 'a support service established within the DES to help give effect to the statutory requirements in the Education Act 1998' (Fennell, 2011, 15). In 2009 it was 'subsumed into the generic Second Level Support Service' (Fennell, 2011, 16) and is now known as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The SDPI and PDST have organised numerous seminars about SSE.

The official guidelines about SSE highlight that they were drafted with the involvement of 'teachers, principals, parents, members of board of management, patrons and

management organisations, teacher unions' (DES, 2012a, 3). This recognises the role of an array of educational stakeholders in the collaborative process surrounding the development of the contemporary SSE model.

<u>Political and Economic Context</u>

Since the foundation of the State, the Irish economy has experienced the full spectrum of phases associated with macro-economic activity ranging from the highs of boom periods to the lows of protracted recessions. However, recent economic developments in the autumn of 2010 were particularly unusual and unprecedented from an Irish perspective. Following weeks of feverish speculation in November 2010, Ireland applied for an international bailout from three transnational agencies (Department of Finance, 2010). These transnational agencies of the IMF, EU and ECB it can be argued are 'adherents and practitioners of neoliberal ideas' (Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013, 39) and this is reflected in many of the conditions of the agreement which Ireland had to adhere to in return for financial assistance.

The extent to which this agreement between this troika of international agencies and Ireland resulted in a loss of national sovereignty is difficult to assess and goes beyond the scope of this research project. However, beyond the psychological impact one of the most significant practical implications of the arrival of the troika was the extensive scrutiny and monitoring on an on-going basis of the State's national finances. This meant that external bodies some with strong neoliberal preferences were in a position to influence all elements of the public sector including the education sector. SSE forms parts of an evaluative culture which is a policy strongly advocated by the OECD as 'most OECD countries now see evaluation and assessment as playing a strategic role and are expanding their use' (OECD, 2013, 1). Certainly the troika was very receptive to facilitating a deepening of an evaluative framework in Ireland by agreeing to provide 'quarterly disbursement of financial assistance … based on observance of quantitative

performance criteria … and a positive evaluation of progress with respect to policy criteria' (Department of Finance, 2010, 7).

The recent economic crisis is sometimes referred to as 'the great recession' (Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013, 38) and in many ways it has helped to shape the parameters around the present day debate about the degree of interaction between the state and society and the role of market forces in governing the relationship between the state and its citizens:

> We are living through the world's first full-scale neoliberal capitalist crisis – an existential crisis that calls into question the future of these peculiar and nefarious ideas and practices. The crisis has demanded attention from critical scholars because of the dominance of neoliberal ideas about how the capitalist economy and polity should be organised. (Fraser, Murphy and Kelly, 2013, 39)

Concerning the national context for SSE, it is also worth bearing in mind that there is not one standard size fits all model of school self-evaluation that various countries introduced as each individual country's SSE model is influenced by localised cultural, economic and political factors. The ongoing development of a SSE model in Ireland is no exception to this situation. In some ways what makes the Irish model quite distinctive is that it is strongly influenced by a coalition culture at national government level over the past 30 years that is complemented by a "partnership" approach between the State and various stakeholder groups. This has resulted in various national agreements starting with 'The Programme for National Recovery' (Department of Finance, 1987) right up to 'Public Service Stability Agreement 2013-2016' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013). This culture of compromise has and continues to have a significant impact at national policy level on SSE:

> Accommodation, compromise and consensus are key words in the political lexicon. A good example of this culture of compromise with regards to evaluation is provided by the emerging school evaluation process in Ireland. (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 11)

The convergence of the historical, legislative, political and economic contexts outlined above meant SSE emerged at a time when neoliberal policies were taking a firmer

footing in Ireland. This piece of research was conducted against the national context outlined above and recognition of this must be taken into account when looking at how SSE is perceived by school teacher and leaders. Uncertain and unprecedented times, coupled with an ambitious reform agenda has a significant bearing on the responses of the research participants about SSE as will become more evident in the findings chapter of this dissertation.

2.2.3 International Policy Context

Neoliberalism and new managerialism are perhaps the two most dominant global forces which have increased the prominence of school self-evaluation and prioritised it as an educational issue to be addressed by many Governments and States throughout the world. I examine the pervasive influence of these twin towering forces on Irish second-level schools in the next section of this chapter. One cannot understate the impact of both these policies in placing SSE centre stage in many schools throughout the globe over the past decade and therefore are worthy of scrutiny in this dissertation.

The roots of the increasing impact of internationalisation on Irish policy can be traced back to Ireland joining the European Economic Community in 1973 and it is probably the European Union as it is now known which has been the main conduit of embedding an evaluation culture into its public sector:

> The increased impetus for evaluation in Ireland during the nineteen nineties was largely driven by the EU which emphasised the need to assure accountability and measure the impact of significant EU Transfers. (Lenihan, Hart and Roper, 2005, 72)

In the past decade, a concrete example of the education sector in Ireland embracing this evaluation culture is the pro-active approach it has adopted to SSE. From 2007, the Irish Inspectorate was to the forefront in promoting SSE with the then Chief Inspector stating that the Inspectorate 'will facilitate the systematic implementation of school self-evaluation in all primary and post-primary schools' (Stack, 2007, 25).

Up until that time, School Development Planning (SDP) was in vogue in Irish schools and was facilitated by a dedicated national support service funded by the Department of Education. The emergence of SSE led to a gradual shift away from SDP and this aligned Ireland with international best practice concerning the evaluation culture within the education sector.

The OECD and SICI have a significant degree of influence in advancing the school self-evaluation project in Ireland. However, it must be made clear these agencies do not draft policy about SSE but provide an international forum for discussion amongst its members and make suggestions about best practice. They have however a substantial amount of persuasive power as 'an analysis of a number of previous policy recommendations focusing on the Irish sector in the Republic of Ireland indicates that the OECD has been very influential in framing national policy' (MacRuairc, 2010, 234). A very recent OECD publication presents an international perspective on the experience of 28 OECD countries using an evaluation and assessment framework and it tracks the factors driving the increased use of evaluation and assessment leading to 'a greater reliance on evaluation results for evidence-based decision making' (OECD, 2013, 1).

SICI was established in 1995 and has 33 European members including Ireland. While this association of national and regional inspectorates of education in Europe has a lower profile than the OECD, it probably is the other main transnational agency that has a significant influence on the model of SSE which is emerging in twentieth first century Ireland. In July 2013, it launched the "Bratislava Memorandum" which put forward ten propositions on inspection and innovation (SICI, 2013). Like the OECD it does not wish to be perceived as an autocratic organisation trying to dictate policy to individual members as SICI states that 'if and how it is adopted in the individual inspectorate is up to each of the members and depends on each member's circumstances' (SICI, 2013, 1).

SICI influence on SSE in Ireland can be traced back to over a decade ago with the set-up of what it called an Effective School Self-Evaluation framework 'to enable the collection of evidence and the formation of judgements about the effectiveness of the process of self-evaluation' (SICI, 2003, 1). Ireland was part of this project and interestingly rather than just making judgements about the effectiveness of self-evaluation in European countries, SICI also examined the 'effectiveness of the external support provided by individual countries/regions to school self-evaluation' (SICI, 2003, 1).

It is noteworthy that Ireland has garnered international support for SSE via its membership of the transnational European agency SICI for more than a decade even though SSE is only now gaining currency within Irish schools. The vision of reframing the SDP process, and shifting the emphasis away from school inspection towards Irish schools engaging in a formal self-evaluation process mirrored the situation in many other European countries. This meant from 2003 onwards SICI endorsed this approach in Ireland with the backing of the Irish Inspectorate with the result that 'self-evaluation is an essential component of the school development process in Ireland' (SICI, 2003, 1). It is perfectly logical that the OECD and SICI would not advocate one particular standard model of SSE because each individual nation has different cultural, political and economic circumstances. However as early as 2006, MacBeath had identified three generic sub-models of evaluation in Europe which he describes as follows:

> Proportional: in which inspection takes the school's own data as its starting point. The better the self-evaluation the less intensive the inspection. The Netherlands, Scotland, Portugal, Flanders, The Czech Republic, Ireland and England are described as falling under this rubric.
>
> Ideal: in which the inspectorates report on the quality of self-evaluation and point to improvement is needed. Northern Ireland, Austria and France are in this category.
>
> Supporting: the inspectorate provide support for schools in carrying out self-evaluation more effectively. Denmark and some German Lander fall into this category. (MacBeath, 2006a, 2)

I present the above as evidence that school self-evaluation was taking place in so many European countries since the early years of this century. This therefore has relevance for tracing the origins of the model of SSE emerging now in Irish schools just over a decade later. Given the globalised nature of life in modern day Ireland, it can be argued that it was inevitable that we would willingly follow this international trend towards embedding school self-evaluation into Irish schools:

> OECD has entered a new phase of global influence. Representing the world's most economically developed nations, it has the financial resources and political clout to shape the 'accountability' agenda in ways that rival and even overshadow the influence of national policy makers – thus raising concerns that it is on its way to becoming a global ministry of education. (Meyher et al, 2014, 2)

As Ireland is both a willing and long term member of both OECD and SICI, it is unsurprising that the Irish Inspectorate would embrace the international principles of these transnational organisations concerning SSE. Proposition five of the ten propositions in the 'Bratislava Memorandum' states 'self-evaluation leading to improvement rather than passive compliance with an externally determined agenda is central to sustained enhancement in the quality of students' learning' (SICI, 2013, 3). For this piece of research I found the use of the term 'passive compliance' as a possible by-product of the self-evaluation process particularly informative. This mirrors a theme which emerges in the findings of covert rather than overt resistance by the research respondents to the SSE model being introduced in Irish schools. This I believe is a salient point for my research because any resistance to SSE mentioned in the focus groups was not against the philosophy of the school self-evaluation but concerned the type and format of the model that should be introduced. Criticism of the SSE process highlighted in this piece of research seemed to be focused on the SSE model advocated in the official guidelines (DES, 2012a) and the manner in which it was introduced.

It is important to emphasise that while the Irish model of SSE is presented in a guidelines format to schools, these guidelines are backed up by a departmental circular (DES, 2012b) which makes them a quasi-compulsory requirements for all Irish schools. In the absence of a strong legislative framework for education until the beginning of this century, Department of Education Circulars were the primary tool by which policy was issued to and got implemented in Irish schools and to this day, they retain their decision making influence as a policy implementation mechanism.

2.3 Influential Contemporary Forces Driving SSE Policy

School self-evaluation in Ireland must be understood within broader policy imperatives. These influential policies are increasingly being driven by an overt managerial discourse. Two of these contemporary forces are "neoliberalism" and "new managerialism". Therefore before examining the implications of this managerial discourse on the evolution of SSE in Ireland, I deem it necessary to give a brief introduction to the two pervasive philosophies of neoliberalism and new managerialism which frame the international policy context in which school self-evaluation is situated.

2.3.1 Neoliberalism and New Managerialism

The term neoliberalism has a very broad remit and while it may defy a simple explanation, I consider the definition below to be a good starting point:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey, 2005, 2).

Neoliberalism has many influential advocates including some transnational global agencies such as the OECD and SICI which I have discussed in the international policy context in the previous section. Neoliberalism is a political ideology closely aligned to new managerialism which became a more prevalent feature of the management literature during the 1990s.

New managerialism or its predecessor New Public Management (NPM) is a mode of corporate governance characterised by the promotion of market values and practices in the public sector as 'its vocabulary is rich with references to customers, producers, consumers, empowerment, charters, excellence and performance indicators' (Deem, Brehony and Heath, 1995, 32).

New managerialism and neoliberalism are related terms and have many common characteristics while also possessing some distinctive qualities. Neoliberalism has a greater overarching reach and broader terms of reference whereas new managerialism focuses more on the issue of governance of the public sector using private sector management tools and ideals which enable 'the enactment of performance indicators and the availability of surveillance mechanisms, instituted through new information technologies, makes the task of managing and controlling professionals much more feasible than it had been hitherto' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 5).

I present some concrete examples of modern day work practices in education to provide compelling evidence of how neoliberalism and new managerialism have profoundly influenced the model of SSE that is emerging in Ireland. What intrigues me most about the implications of neoliberalism on the education sector is the hegemonic manner that has framed the debate and discourse concerning the language we use about public policy initiatives such as SSE. Any concern I would have about the relationship between neoliberalism and the education sector is whether it possibly manipulates the way many professional practitioners including myself perceive the education working environment. It possibly does this in a very subtle manner by placing parameters on the way school based personnel view the world by limiting their vision concerning a wide range of educational policy initiatives such as SSE:

> Neoliberalism has in short become, hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. (Harvey, 2005, 3)

The predecessor to neoliberalism was "embedded liberalism" which rose to prominence from the 1930s onwards. John Maynard Keynes is considered the father of this philosophy which advocates strong state intervention to regulate economic cycles such as recession or boom periods. The equally renowned Chicago based economist Milton Friedman endorsed an alternative approach to embedded liberalism which was labelled neoliberalism which gained international prominence in the early 1980s as it was so closely aligned and associated with the Reagan era in the United States and Thatcherism in the United Kingdom.

I include the above very crude outline of the grand narratives of embedded liberalism and neoliberalism not as a means of insightful illumination as I do not think it is possible to do justice and give an adequate explanation of both in a few paragraphs. My brief introduction to these economic philosophies however helps to contextualise the grand ideologies in which school self-evaluation has evolved and is grounded. I also feel it is important to highlight that there are alternative economic philosophies to neoliberalism such as strong state intervention, elements of which are also a salient feature of governance structures in modern day Ireland.

The language of neoliberalism and new managerialism is similar. Language has always evolved over time and certain terms and expressions become fashionable and gain greater common currency while other terms tend to go into terminal decline in usage and their use often seems quite antiquated:

> Key words and concepts have come to characterise this agenda. These include choice, accountability, transparency, value-for-money and decentralisation of responsibility for performance to individual professionals and institutions such as schools. These goals when achieved are to be policed through such processes as regulation, quality assurance, quality control, audit, benchmarking, evaluation and inspection. (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008b, 173)

Advocates of neoliberalism and new managerialism would argue that most of the terms above are progressive terms and the incorporation of such concepts into our public sector will lead to a badly needed modernisation of public sector governance. The

premise of this argument often hinges on the belief that a free-market approach in the management of the public sector should result in less waste and inefficiency and result in savings to the taxpayer. My perspective on neoliberalism is that it is hard to argue against all elements of this grand ideology. Some of the above concepts which are often associated with neoliberalism have merit. For example, it is a reasonable point that schools should be accountable but the contentious element to this debate revolves around who they should be accountable to and the degree of accountability required. An overemphasis on achieving accountability may have the unintended consequence of stifling creativity in the classroom. One must question what gets lost in the SSE process if greater public accountability leads to reduced professional autonomy. This is a debate which I will re-visit in the next chapter.

When considering the merits or otherwise of the impact of neoliberalism and new managerialism on the Irish education sector, I do think that it is unfortunate that both these terms are quite loaded. Advocates of neoliberalism and new managerialism rarely use these terms to describe themselves meaning these terms tend to be used most frequently by those who oppose these policies rather than those who endorse them. This makes identifying who are the main stakeholders on both sides of the argument difficult. The classification of those individuals and groups who are for and against neoliberalism is perhaps an oversimplification of a complex process but it is often presented as members of the academic community against the state apparatus:

> While there were dissenting voices in the academy challenging neo-liberal politic (Allen, 2000, 2007; Baker et al., 2004; Coulter and Coleman, 2003; Kirby, 2002; Lynch 2006; Murphy, 2002; Meade, 2005), these were politically and intellectually subsumed under the weight of neo-liberal rhetoric promulgated within the machinery of state (McSharry and White, 2000; Forfás, 2009). (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 8)

In 2010 Forfás, Ireland's policy advisory board on industry at that time released its annual competitiveness report whose subtitle alone '*Bench Marking Ireland's*

Performance Report' indicates how neoliberal language is deeply embedded into its modus operandi.

What is also quite clear from the present debate about neoliberalism is that there exists a sizeable gulf between advocates and opponents concerning this controversial ideology as there are 'voices of dissent but also acquiescence' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 8). My perspective on neoliberalism is quite practical in that I take a realistic approach to the present situation. Ireland is a small open economy operating in a globalized world and because neoliberalism is an international force in the ascendancy, it is inevitable that strands of neoliberalism will impact on Ireland. However, the extent to which it should impinge on Irish policy is very much open to debate and within our collective control. The onus is on those of us who have an interest in the future direction of education in Ireland to ensure that this debate happens. However that ongoing discussion needs to do more than just inform those who draft policy. There is also a responsibility that the ongoing debate becomes more mainstream, like a national conversation and extends beyond the narrow remit of policy makers at national level and the academic community.

2.3.2 The Impact of New Managerialism on the Irish Education Sector

New managerialism as a mode of governance to promote neoliberal economic and social policies is a prevalent feature of the Irish public sector in general and the Irish educational sector in particular from the 1990s onwards. The following description captures cogently for me the central characteristics and the impact of new managerialism on the contemporary education sector:

> It focused on outputs over inputs, measured in terms of performance indicators: it proposed to break down large scale organisations into smaller units: emphasised the language of choice, competition and service users. (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 2)

This shift from the private sector to the public sphere of education also happened in other areas of public governance so that 'what was significant about new

managerialism, not only was it exported through the veins of neoliberalism between countries but it was also exported systematically from the private to the public sector as a form of governance' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 4). Some influential global agencies have been identified as major players who are key driving forces behind new managerialism in the Irish education sector:

> These ideologies and an associated reform agenda have been systematically encouraged by governments, sections of the media and perhaps most influentially by key trans-national agencies such as the OECD, the World Bank and the European Union. (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 1)

New managerialism was initially sold as a simple modernization project but the appropriate label to describes its current format is open to debate as a case can be made that 'new public management is dead – long live digital era governance' (Dunleavy et al, 2005, 467). This evolving view of new managerialism in the education sector is reinforced in Spring (2004) who points out that the OECD and World Bank are advocating policies that are pressurising Governments 'to rely on the privatisation and the free market for the provision of educational services' (Spring, 2004, 65). The fluidness of new managerialism to adapt has implications for the likely future impact on the education sector in Ireland over the next few years:

> While neoliberalism may have emerged as a prevalent force in the 1990s, it gained momentum in the first decade of this century. However it also altered direction. The focus on the human capital value of education persisted but it was married to a new education project focused on educating students for the market economy. (Lynch, Grummell, and Devine, 2012, 21)

I contend that new managerialism is a flexible management strategy that enables neoliberalism to alter course or change direction. Similar to neoliberalism, new managerialism has its critics and supporters:

> Proponents of the new managerialism in education argue that managerial methods are necessary to respond to the demands of a changed environment with dramatically increased degrees of uncertainty in a knowledge-dependent society. Opponents view the new managerialism in the context of capitalist corporatism penetrating heretofore sacrosanct boundaries of non-market institutions. (Meyer, 2002, 534)

The impact of new managerialism on Irish schools is unlikely to abate anytime soon even if the manner in which that impact manifests itself is unknown at this juncture. This has implications for all levels of the education sector, not just school self-evaluation. While I explore the logics for school self-evaluation in this dissertation, I am mindful of the challenge of new managerialism to the logic of education itself brought about by 'an increasingly aggressive 'new public management' orientation, replacing the logic of education with the logic of economic efficiency' (Meyer et al, 2014, 3).

2.3.3 Examining SSE as New Managerialism

The implications of neoliberalism and new managerialism in Irish schools are wide, varied and evolving and in many ways go beyond the scope of this study. However, there is no escaping the impact new managerialism is having on the education sector and modern day Irish schools as 'in the past 15 years, there has been a considerable buy-in by the DES into the ideology of new managerialism' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230). MacRuairc (2010) offers ample evidence to support this assertion, but I wish to turn my attention to the evidence for viewing SSE as new managerialism by what he calls 'the language of the marketplace that delimits discussions and documentation emanating from the DES' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230).

The official guidelines on school self-evaluation (DES, 2012a) contain many examples of neoliberal dialect and an overt managerial discourse. The following partial sentence about the difference between SSE and its predecessor SDP is illustrative of the frequent use of the language of the marketplace in those guidelines with regard to 'the emphasis that school self-evaluation places on **evidence-based** evaluative judgements and on the link between those evaluative judgements and the school's action plan for improvement' (DES, 2012a, 14). The bold font type on "evidence based" is what the DES use in this sentence in the guidelines to highlight the importance it attached to such

an evidence centred approach when schools are conducting their own school self-evaluation. There are numerous other examples of the use of managerial style language in the guidelines such as the terms "evaluative judgements" and "action plans for improvements". The frequent use of the above terms and similar expressions in the guidelines illustrate that a new managerialism discourse informs much of the vernacular when it comes to contemporary official documentation in the education sector.

Managerial style terms are also used quite regularly in the templates which form part of the guidelines on SSE. A comprehensive exposition of the constraining use of new managerialism vocabulary in the main template included in the guidelines are the six suggested headings for the school improvement plan that all schools are expected to draft on an annual basis. They are 'targets, actions, responsibility, timeframe, measurable outcomes, review date' (DES, 2012a, 15). All six headings are indicative of how deeply implanted the language of new managerialism is in the official documentation emanating from the DES about SSE.

The use of new managerialism style terminology has filtered through to school based personnel as was evident in the language used by the school leaders and teachers in the series of focus groups I conducted as part of this piece of research. I explore in the discussion of findings chapter other examples of the use of language with a strong neoliberal bias from the respondents but one very telling example was the use of the word 'customer' for parents and students. However I wish to point out that I do not think that such frequent use of the language of the marketplace by the research respondents reflects a strong allegiance to new managerialism. I believe it gives us an indication to the extent which such language has gained an everyday currency when we discuss in a semi- formal manner modern day management practices in the public sector in general or SSE as I did with the focus groups participants in this particular case.

Another major impact of neoliberalism via new managerialism is that SSE brings the two competing concepts of accountability and autonomy very much to the fore. The inherent tension between these two objectives is a consistent theme not just in the responses of the focus group participants but is also very prevalent in the literature about SSE. So while 'it is envisaged that schools and teachers will become more autonomous, taking greater responsibility for budgets, planning, teaching and learning, self-evaluation and professional development' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 2) paradoxically it also often means 'these same schools are to be the subject of sophisticated surveillance procedures including teacher proof curricula, increased student testing, benchmarking, inspection and external evaluation' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 2).

I believe awareness about the use of new managerialism language is not a semantic point as it has an impact on the emerging model of SSE in Ireland. In the next chapter, I discuss a dimension of the professional accountability versus personal autonomy debate in terms of whether SSE is about 'to prove rather than improve' (Stern, 2002). I believe this is a critical point rather than just a mere academic exercise as both terms reflect the use of neoliberal language in relation to SSE but with opposite objectives. It is my considered viewpoint that a strong case can be made for both autonomy and accountability when designing a school self-evaluation prototype. The model of SSE in Ireland contains strands of both but I believe will be weighted more towards the side that can make the most compelling argument for SSE. So while neoliberalism is likely to continue to be a dominant hegemonic force operating upon the Irish education system, the overt use of the language of new managerialism needs to be backed up by research based evidence to ensure it is a positive rather than corrosive influence on the education system.

2.4 Policy Implications on the Evolving Model of SSE in Ireland

School self-evaluation as already stated is very much in its infancy in Ireland even though its roots can be traced back to over a decade ago with the launch of the *'Looking at Our School'* document by the Inspectorate (Department of Education and Science, 2003). SSE was not a priority back then and it had a slow but steadily rising profile in its early years. This all changed in 2012, when SSE gained considerable momentum with the launch of the official guidelines, (DES, 2012a), a Departmental Circular (DES, 2012b) and an officially dedicated national website www.schoolself-evaluation.ie . The Inspectorate division of the DES has spearheaded the growing profile of SSE by not just preparing all of the above documentation for publication but also organised for Department Inspectors to visit all primary and post primary schools in the state to deliver a presentation to school staff about SSE. In this section, I explore the Inspectorate's central role in spearheading SSE and what possible implications this may have for the evolving model of SSE in Ireland.

2.4.1 The Inspectorate

The historical and contemporary role of the Inspectorate is central to this piece of research as my research question revolves around investigating the impact of SSE on school based leaders and teachers in two second-level schools.

The Inspectorate is the statutory body responsible for monitoring and inspecting standards of schools in Ireland and is a separate and distinct division of the DES. Traditionally, the role of Departmental Inspectors was quite broad and non-prescriptive. An inspector's main role was to conduct school visitations but any written evaluations of schools and teachers produced by them in the course of their work remained private in that they were just shared with schools and their boards of managements and never usually entered the public domain. This remained the case up until a decade ago. However, the practice of publishing school inspections reports

commenced in 2006. This was just one of a significant number of changes to the work of the Inspectorate. Up until the end of the twentieth century, Ireland lacked a legislative basis for much of its educational system as 'it operated largely on the basis of long-standing understandings and precedents' (Hislop, 2013, 3) but this situation was remedied in the last decade of that century. A central plank of this legislative feat was the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998).

This not only addressed a legislative lacuna but by placing education within a comprehensive national legislative framework for the first time meant it was a very altered educational landscape for those in the employment of the DES and in particular for the Inspectorate personnel many who had new found responsibilities. The nature of Departmental Inspectors work changed significantly with the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) as it resulted in a more clearly defined role for the Inspectorate and a greater focus on its key tasks.

'The Inspectorate Division Reference Guide' (Department of Education and Science, 2009) identifies three main objectives for the Inspectorate. Firstly, to contribute to the evaluation of the education system. Secondly, the provision of advice to the education system. Thirdly, to contribute to the formulation of education policy. The foundation of these objectives can be traced to some of the key tasks of the Inspectorate as set out in the Education Act (1998) such as:

1. To support and advise recognised schools, teachers and boards of management on matters relating to the provision of education, through evaluation of the organisation and operation of schools and the quality of education provided therein
2. To evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education
3. To conduct research into education and to support policy formulation
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching, development, promotion and use of Irish in schools and
5. To advise on any matter relating to education policy and provision, including curriculum, assessment and teaching methods. (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 13)

The general responsibility for inspection work in all recognised primary, second-level and special schools was now assigned to five regional business units. The use of the terminology of business units reflects the growing pervasiveness of the managerial discourse of both neoliberalism and new managerialism as discussed in detail in an earlier part of this chapter. Most of these business units are based in a geographic location in the different provinces and contain a regional cluster of counties. In each of these business units, Inspectors as part of their job description are assigned various responsibilities that include conducting formal evaluations of schools in that particular region. As well as the regional business units the national inspectorate also has a small number of policy business units with specialist responsibilities. The policy business unit with responsibility for school self-evaluation is the school improvement and quality unit which states that its remit is to provide for the 'development of policy and materials for school self-evaluation, school improvement plans and information on schools' (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a, 4).

2.4.2 Aims and Purpose of Inspection

The inspection process as it currently exists came about as a result of The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). This Act states that the Minister for Education is required 'to monitor and assess the quality and effectiveness of the education system provided in the state recognised schools and centres for education' (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 13). Placing school inspection on a statutory basis marked a radical change from the past. School inspections were now based on explicit criteria which were available to all relevant stakeholders. A handbook for the Inspectorate at the time stated that the aims of evaluation are:

> to identify, acknowledge and affirm good practices in schools, to promote continuing improvement in the quality of education offered for schools, to promote self-evaluation and continuous development by schools and staff and to provide an assurance of quality in the educational system as a whole based on the collection of objective, dependable, high quality data. (Department of Education and Science, 2001b, 1)

The Inspectorate carries out annual programmes of inspection and evaluation involving whole school inspections, incidental inspections, subject inspections, evaluation of programmes at second-level, inspection of the work of individual teachers, including probationary teachers and finally focused evaluations of particular aspects of the system. A summary of recent developments with the various inspection models used at second-level is provided in the following table:

INSPECTION MODEL	DESCRIPTION
Whole-School Evaluation (WSE)	The WSE model was introduced at second-level in 2004. It involves an examination of the quality of school management and learning, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the school's own planning and self-review.
Whole-School Evaluation, Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)	A revised WSE model introduced in 2011. They focus on four key areas; quality of school management and leadership, quality of learning and teaching in a range of subjects and levels, the implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations and the school's self-evaluation process and capacity for school improvement.
Subject Inspection	An evaluation of the work of individual subject departments in post-primary schools. The emphasis is on the quality of teaching and learning.
Incidental Inspection	Short unannounced inspection of teaching and learning. Feedback is provided to individual teachers and school principals.
Programme Evaluation	These are designed to evaluate specialised programmes such as Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme.
Follow-Through Inspection	Systematic follow-up procedures were introduced on a pilot basis in 2012 to enable the Inspectorate to monitor how well school communities have responded to the recommendations made in previous inspections.

The Inspectorate defines its current role as follows:

- Provides an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system
- Carries out inspections in schools and centres for education
- Conducts national evaluations
- Promotes best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools
- Publishes inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education
- Reports on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment generally in the educational system
- Promotes the Irish language
- Provides advice to policy makers in the Department of Education and Skills and to the wider educational system. (Department of Education and Skills, 2015b, 1)

The changing role of the Inspectorate over the past two decades reflects what was happening internationally at the time. In 1992, Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education - a non-ministerial government department charged with improving standards in education and childcare in England was set up. The term "inspection" was more in vogue than the term "evaluation" at that time. However the seeds of tension between inspecting schools to hold schools to account and helping schools to improve was still very evident as 'the key purpose of any judgements of school quality should be to promote school self-accountability, to be translatable into wider accountability, to provide useful indications of what works well and what needs to be improved' (Stoll and Fink, 1996, 168). The use of the term 'school self-accountability' is not evident in the official literature about school self-evaluation from the Inspectorate however it does reflects a dimension to the contemporary model of SSE in Ireland.

A recent OECD (2013) publication *'Review Project on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks'* identifies two components to school evaluation which are inspection and school self-evaluation. Concerning inspection the current Chief Inspector of the Inspectorate considers this element to be well developed in Ireland:

> The Education Act placed inspection on a statutory basis and since then inspection has undergone considerable development and reform. School inspections which were already a feature of primary schools were reintroduced at secondary level and inspection is a well-regarded and well-accepted part of the landscape of quality assurance and school improvement. (Hislop, 2013, 14)

What I wish to address in the next section is the trend towards a greater focus on the self-evaluation component of any formalised school inspection system. However, it is not my intention to undermine or discount the inspection element to school evaluation. While school self-evaluation is the primary focus of the research component of this dissertation, I contend that the debate is no longer about whether individual countries should adopt an external or internal approach to self-evaluation but how to incorporate the best of both inspection and school self-evaluation into their school evaluation systems and structures.

2.4.3 Inspectorate Initiatives on School Self-Evaluation

School self-evaluation does not have a long well established tradition in Ireland, but it is seen very much as a major priority for the national inspectorate over the next few years:

> In contrast, school self-evaluation has been considerably less well developed, and has been a focus of attention in the last two years. A national framework for self-evaluation has been developed to assist schools in evaluating their teaching and learning, and its use has been made mandatory. (Hislop, 2013, 3)

The genesis document for school self-evaluation in Ireland came into circulation in the early years of the new millennium, *'Looking at our School - an Aid to School Self Evaluation'* (Department of Education and Science, 2003). This document has been the main blueprint used by schools for about ten years in relation to school self-evaluation in Ireland. However in order to deepen the school self-evaluation process and give it a fresh impetus, the Inspectorate has recently issued '*School Self-Evaluation – Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools'* (DES, 2012a). The Inspectorate piloted these guidelines in twelve schools and issued the final revised guidelines in November 2012 and from that time onwards they became operational and mandatory in all schools on a national basis. As these guidelines are having a significant impact on school self-evaluation, I issued a copy of these guidelines to all the research participants and facilitated a professional conversation about their philosophical and practical usefulness in the middle round of focus groups conducted in February 2013. My findings about the respondents'

perspectives on those guidelines I discuss later in this dissertation but suffice to say for now they were not overly impressed with their content and structure.

As part of the drive to increase awareness about school self-evaluation the Inspectorate issues SSE updates on a regular basis. The first update was available to all second-level school from September 2012, (DES, 2012c) and it summarised the requirements on schools concerning SSE. This update was backed up by DES Circular 0040/2012 (DES, 2012b) which made school self–evaluation a mandatory requirement for all post-primary schools. The Inspectorate also created an official website www.schoolself-evaluation.ie about SSE. This website contains the officially approved documentation in relation to SSE and displays exemplar material from pilot schools of school self-evaluation best practice. Knowledge about this website amongst teachers and leaders is minimal and the fact that it has stayed below the radar of many school leaders and teachers is the subject of further comment in the findings chapter of this dissertation.

Apart from publishing documentation the other major Inspectorate initiative on SSE has been advisory support visits by Departmental Inspectors to all primary and secondary schools during the 2012/2013 academic year. This is a novel approach as it offeres the Inspectorate the opportunity to engage directly with school leaders and teachers about SSE. Up until now the only engagement most second-level teachers would have had with inspectors was in the conduct of formal school based evaluations such as WSE-MLLs or subject inspections to assess of the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

I believe this initiative has considerable merit if it goes beyond a once-off briefing session about SSE. The process of engaging directly with school leaders and teachers offers the possibility of meaningful dialogue about SSE which has benefits for all sides. It provides an opportunity for school leaders and teachers to give feedback directly to

inspectors while the Inspectorate can facilitate the necessary debate and ongoing discussion about the role and purpose of school evaluation:

> The most crucial question facing us has been whether the primary purpose of inspection and self-evaluation should be accountability or school improvement. For example, while school self-evaluation serves both these purposes we have decided that school improvement is the primary objective in school self-evaluation. (Hislop, 2013, 15)

The findings in this dissertation also suggest that the primary purpose of inspection and school self-evaluation needs to be clarified. It seems the current Chief Inspector shares these concerns when he stated in a recent keynote speech that 'our national guidance on school self-evaluation deliberately emphasises the improvement journey that the school should seek to undertake … an overemphasis on accountability has not led to school improvement' (Hislop, 2013, 15).

To summarise the likely implications of the various policy contexts along with the Inspectorate initiatives on SSE, I would say that the imprint of new managerialism and neoliberalism will be a continuing feature of the SSE model currently under development in Ireland. Evidence that this trend is likely to continue into the future includes 'the significant increase in forms and frequency of inspections and school/programmes evaluations' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230). A recent Inspectorate publication outlines a new inspection model called "follow-through inspections" (DES, 2014) which involves reviewing the progress schools have made in implementing recommendations made in previous inspections. Striking the correct balance between inspection and school-self-evaluation is the challenge for the Inspectorate as while they are likely to continue to exist side by side an overuse of the inspection model may stifle a vibrant SSE model laden with positive possibilities and potentialities from flourishing in Irish schools.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I identify the various contexts that have influenced how policy concerning school self-evaluation was formulated and implemented over the past couple of decades in Ireland. I give ample consideration to the impact that neoliberalism in general and new managerialism policies in particular have on the educational reform agenda being pursued in Ireland today which includes requiring schools to evaluate themselves for quality assurance purposes.

Ireland is a small open economy operating within the global axis of neoliberalism and new managerialism and this has a significant impact on shaping educational policy in relation to SSE:

> Ireland operates within the Anglo-American zone of influence for reasons of history, culture, language, colonization and trade. It is not surprising therefore that it also displays many of the features of its powerful neo-liberal neighbours in terms of its social, health and education policies. (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 5)

AT the commencement of this chapter I examined the policy context of school self-evaluation. This involved an exploration of the various components of SSE in an attempt to deepen understanding of this complex and multi-faceted process which also has some inherent paradoxical dilemmas. An assessment of various definitions of school self-evaluation sets the scene which enabled a conceptualisation of SSE from a national and international perspective.

Two influential contemporary forces driving school self-evaluation policy in Ireland are neoliberalism and new managerialism and I contextualise SSE within both these policies. I deem this to be necessary not for the sake of passing judgement on the merits or otherwise of these twin forces but to properly understand the origins of the emergent Irish model of SSE advocated by its national inspectorate. New managerialism is a dominant influence on the discourse in which school self-evaluation is emerging in Ireland today. This is evident in the literature reviewed in this chapter but also in the

language used about SSE by the research respondents in the focus groups and therefore worthy of examination and scrutiny.

The final section of this chapter considered the implication for policy of the evolving national model of SSE. The Inspectorate division of the DES is spearheading the ongoing evolution and development of school self-evaluation in Irish schools. In order to advance this objective it has made some recent initiatives in this area and released various documents about SSE. An exploration of these initiatives and a review of recent documentation emanating from the Inspectorate gives an indication of the likely implications of SSE on Irish schools presently and into the future.

In summary, my intention with this contextualising literature chapter is to set the backdrop to how we ended up where we are today with school self-evaluation. The combination of the various contexts outlined in this chapter has dictated the discourse in which the developing model of SSE is situated. I deemed it necessary to look at the origins of these discourses as without properly understanding them, this inhibits our ability to successfully steer SSE in the right direction and maintain momentum to sustain SSE in the long term. In the next chapter, I will focus on conceptualising school self-evaluation.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I contextualised school self-evaluation, whereas in this chapter I now wish to conceptualise SSE in such a way that deepens understanding and knowledge about this evolving and emerging concept. In order to do this, I will look at SSE from the perspective of the "4 P's" of Purpose, Power, the Person and Practice. The concept of the 4 P's was first used by Jerome E. McCarthy to describe the four basic elements of the marketing mix of Product, Place, Price and Promotion (McCarthy, 1960). However their legacy has endured and 'these mnemonically easy to remember labels rapidly became the organising structure for virtually all introductory marketing textbooks' (Yudelson, 1999, 60).

The idea of exporting this concept and to relabel the 4P's to use as the main structure of my conceptual framework gradually dawned on me as an intriguing possibility as Purpose, Power, Person and Practice kept emerging as significant dimensions when conducting my initial trawl through the literature about SSE. Following discussion with my dissertation supervisor and careful consideration, I decided to use an adaptation of the 4 P's marketing concept for my conceptual framework. I believe it offers a unique and appropriate structure to interrogate the relevant literature I have selected for inclusion about SSE while also directly addressing the three parts of my research question. This conceptual framework also enables me to interpret the findings about SSE which were generated from the series of focus groups conducted with the sample of school teachers and leaders in an academically rigorous manner.

The general rationale for SSE presented by the Irish Inspectorate is that it 'facilitates schools in telling their own unique story to their school community' (DES, 2012c, 2).

I explore in-depth the "Purpose" of school self-evaluation beyond 'empowering schools to tell their own story' (DES, 2012a, 3) and the Inspectorate's perspective that 'SSE is

primarily about schools taking ownership of their own development and improvement'
(DES, 2012a, 8). When exploring the purpose of SSE I found myself in agreement with
the three overarching logics for school self-evaluation of 'accountability, improvement
and economic' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). The reason why I find these logics useful for
framing my discussion about the purpose of SSE is because 'while these three are not
discrete in their expression, they can easily become the prevailing or driving motive' for
SSE (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). Concerning these three logics, neither improvement,
accountability nor economic adequately addressed the deliberative democratic impulses
for SSE that I detected in some of the educational literature about SSE.

As democracy can take many formats I confine my discussion on democracy in schools
to the evaluation culture in schools with particular emphasis on SSE and 'the three
requirements for deliberative democratic evaluation: inclusion, dialogue and
deliberation' (House and Howe, 2000, 5). I argue in this dissertation and present a
compelling case for a fourth overarching logic to school self-evaluation of a deliberative
democratic logic. To assist me in this endeavour, when exploring the purpose of SSE, I
also make reference to the Habermasian concepts of "deliberative democracy" and
"communicative action". Both of these concepts are grounded in reason as 'the
structures of linguistic communication and co-operative, purposive-rational action must
of necessity rely on reason' (Habermas, 1992, 101).

The next section of this conceptual literature chapter explores the second P of my
conceptual framework which is "Power". Cartwright (1959) highlights the importance
of power when examining social and psychological data. I believe that power has just
as much relevance today as when he originally made the claim over fifty years ago that
'it is simply not possible to deal adequately with data which are clearly social
psychological without getting involved with matters of power' (Cartwright, 1959, 2).

Power is not just a core concept for social science but also for education. In the past, power was very often not discussed in an explicit manner in the educational literature as 'the customs and culture of educators prohibit the mere mention of power and censor the impulse to think seriously about it' (Nyberg, 1981, 1). Even today, the term power in relation to education tends to be broached in an implicit manner as 'soft power skills of vision, communication, and emotional intelligence are becoming more important' (Nye, 2006, 20). Therefore, I believe consideration of how power operates in a modern day educational setting is central to understanding SSE and I attend to this by examining power from a conflict, consensus and compromise perspective.

I examine the relationship between power inequalities and SSE whereby 'power imbalances are endemic in society, and it is easy to see how they can disrupt and distort evaluations' (House and Howe, 2000, 6). I explore specific examples of how power is exercised in relation to SSE and how deliberative democratic evaluation can help address some of these power imbalances as 'evaluators must design evaluations so that relevant interests are represented and so that there is some balance of power amongst these interests' (House and Howe, 2000, 6).

The third element of my conceptual framework is the "Person" and I would concur with the following assertion that 'we have become so accustomed to the presence of change we rarely stop to think what it means as we are experiencing it at the personal level' (Fullan, 1991, 30). I address this pertinent issue of what change means at a human level and also examine the psychological impact of change on the educational practitioner as an individual. Furthermore in relation to personal identity, I focus on the "Self" component of school self-evaluation. I contend that the evidence generated in the research findings of this dissertation backed up by the literature explored in this section make a compelling case that greater attention needs to be paid to the human impact of change on the individual educational practitioner.

In the final part of this conceptual literature chapter, I explore the fourth element of my conceptual framework which is "Practice". I address in an in-depth manner how school self-evaluation is integrating itself into established educational practices in the Irish second level school sector. I suggest that the evaluation culture in schools today encourages self-surveillance bears some similarities to Bentham's eighteenth-century prison design as it could be argued 'that schools have for some time now been in their own version of the panoptican and that, in their eyes, escape appears impossible?' (Plowright, 2008, 121). This idea of self-surveillance, along with the conceptual significance of the panoptican is a salient feature of Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, which is discussed in this chapter.

3.2 Purpose: The Various Logics for SSE

'School self-evaluation is simply a structure to enable teachers, principals and the management of schools to have that focussed conversation about teaching and learning' (DES, 2012a, 3). While this quote presents SSE as just an ongoing professional conversation between colleagues in reality its roots are more grounded as 'school self-evaluation is now seen as matter of priority in most economically advanced countries of the world' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). In Ireland it is part of a suite of initiatives ongoing in schools with the chief aim to deliver for the education sector 'an extensive programme of reform, including the most comprehensive programme of legislative reform in over a decade' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2014, 40).

I explore the purpose of school self-evaluation using the three overarching logics of 'improvement, accountability and economic' (MacBeath, 2008, 1) and I find these three logics useful for several reasons. Firstly, all three terms are broad enough to form distinct categories even though there is a certain degree of interconnectivity or overlap between the three logics. Secondly, all three terms have an everyday currency and are self-explanatory. All three logics contain neoliberal or new managerialism overtones

and sit comfortably within 'the language of the marketplace' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230) while also offering the possibility of a wider interpretation. If there is a shortcoming to the three concepts of accountability, improvement and economic for rationalising and structuring a debate about school self-evaluation, it is perhaps that none of these three logics adequately capture the potential of SSE to unleash greater democratisation. I present evidence in the final part of this section for the assertion that 'there are powerful arguments for using deliberative democratic evaluation methods for educational evaluations' (Davidsdottir and Lisi, 2007, 373) and this forms part of my rationale for arguing that there is a fourth overarching logic for SSE which I call a deliberative democratic logic.

3.2.1 Improvement Logic

The current Chief Inspector of the Inspectorate laments 'the lack of robust self-review in Irish schools' as he believes it 'can be a powerful agent for improvement' (Hislop, 2012, 23). The improvement logic has moved more centre stage in recent years underpinned by the following rationale 'a school improvement logic which holds that the process of reflection, dialogue and concern for evidence is the motor of better schools' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). This link between school self-evaluation and improvement is very prevalent in the contemporary literature as 'it is seen as obvious that in order to know how to improve, a school must be able to evaluate where it is, what it needs to improve, and what indicators will suggest that it has achieved this aim' (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 11). This appetite for improving schools is nothing new but what has changed is a greater focus on school self-evaluation to bring this about:

> Educational research directed to finding ways of improving schools has also been highly visible and influential for at least the past three decades … This research increasingly suggests that formal school and teacher self-evaluation as opposed to external inspection represents an important component in making schools more effective. (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 6)

The improvement logic for school self-evaluation is also much more prominent in official documentation from the Inspectorate about SSE as 'over a four year period from 2012, all post-primary schools should engage in school self-evaluation and produce three school improvement plans' (DES, 2012c, 3). Improvement is a broad term so it is important to tease out what the Inspectorate expects to be included in a School Improvement Plan (SIP):

- A summary of strengths and areas for improvement
- Targets for improvement with a focus on learner outcomes
- Actions required to achieve targets
- Reference to those who are responsible for undertaking actions
- A statement of how schools will check if targets have been achieved
- A timeframe for achievements of targets. (DES, 2012a, 10)

My interpretation of the proposed structure for mandatory SIPs are while they put the onus on schools to pursue an improvement agenda, schools are expected to do so within a very tight accountability framework. MacBeath (2006a) endorses an accountability dimension to school improvement but it is worth noting he sees improvement as more important than an accountability logic when he claims that 'while school improvement is the most compelling of the three 'logics', it will falter without accountability and attention to the attendant time and opportunity costs' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1).

I contend that linking school self-evaluation and school improvement to accountability is a concrete example of new managerialism in education. The official guidelines on SSE state 'the setting of specific targets is the starting point of improvement' (DES, 2012a, 19). The Inspectorate's obvious focus on setting targets as a specific and initial requirement for school improvement plans places tights parameters on their design makes them quite technical in nature. This may serve to negate against the possibility of individual schools taking an in depth qualitative approach to SSE.

The requirement for schools to draft a SIP on a yearly basis implies improvement is a continuous ongoing process. This is a common feature of the international literature

about school self-evaluation as 'across Europe and beyond, is focusing on the promotion of continuous improvement' (SICI, 2013, 2). The term improvement is open to a broad interpretation. Interestingly in the 'Bratislava Memorandum on Inspection and Innovation' signed up to by 33 national and regional inspectorates including Ireland would seem to endorse a broad approach as it states that 'the terms 'innovation', 'improvement' and 'change' can sometimes be used interchangeably' (SICI, 2013, 2). So while improvement is an ongoing component of the SSE process, schools needs to deepen their understanding of how improvement manifests itself. Gladwell (2001) states there are three rules which bring about change or improvement in an organisation, the rule of the vital few, the stickiness factor and the power of context. He considers the following three rules as major agents of change:

> The rule of the vital few is where a few exceptional by doing something different start and incubate an epidemic. The stickiness factor is where some attribute allows it to endure long enough to 'catch', to become contagious or 'memorable'. Finally, the third rule refers to the power of context. This means that the physical, social and group environment must be right to allow the epidemic to then suffuse through the population. (Gladwell, 2001, 19)

I agree that school self-evaluation requires a 'vital few' at localised school level to drive and generate interest in the potential of SSE to bring about improvement and by making school improvements plans mandatory will also help SSE 'stick'. However I think that it is his third and final rule of the 'power of context' that is most critical in understanding whether SSE will result in Irish schools embarking on a journey of continuous improvement as envisaged by the Irish Inspectorate so that 'the implementation of the school improvement plan ultimately leads to a new cycle of school self-evaluation' (DES, 2012a, 20). The collision of various contexts combined with the impact of a suite of new policy initiatives on school based personnel does not augur well for the national roll out of school self-evaluation currently underway. These factors for the school leader and teacher respondents who formed the focus group participants for this study emerged as serious stumbling blocks for engaging with SSE

in a meaningful way. This potentially perilous situation is a recurrent feature in this dissertation and I will explore this issue further in chapter five, the findings chapter. Concerning my own views on the improvement logic, do I think schools need to improve and can SSE bring such progress? Having taught in several different schools over the past few decades, I would argue that there is always room for improvement but the nature of the improvement is more difficult to define. In some cases, it relates to the quality of teaching whereas in other situations it may be poor leadership or management. My perspective on improvement is influenced by the belief that all learning organisations should never become complacent and need to always strive to do better or improve. I also believe a well-designed school self-evaluation model could spearhead such improvement in schools.

3.2.2 Accountability Logic

In a rather short period of time, the term accountability has embedded itself deeply into the education lexicon particularly as a justification for new policy initiatives so that 'during the past decade accountability has emerged as the master rationale for education reform' (Meyer et al, 2014, 1). Therefore it is hardly surprising that accountability is often used as a justification by advocates of school self-evaluation that 'schools should render an account to government, parents and other educational stakeholders in return for the investment and public trust placed in teachers and school leaders' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). There is also an economic component to accountability as 'schools must provide proof to key stakeholders (parents and the local community) as well as to the government that they are providing value for money' (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 11). The current Chief Inspector of the Inspectorate recognises how difficult it is to reconcile these two logics when he states that concerning accountability and improvement 'while school self-evaluation serves both these purposes, we have decided

that school improvement is the primary objective in school self-evaluation' (Hislop, 2013, 15).

I too would deem it prudent to prioritise the improvement rather than the accountability logic for SSE and not just because 'an overemphasis on accountability, as shown by evidence from many countries around the world, reveal an attrition of professional engagement and vitality of teaching' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). I say this for the following reasons. Firstly, because I believe it is inevitable that accountability will be incorporated into the evolving model of SSE in Ireland courtesy of the contextual factors of neoliberalism and new managerialism on SSE as discussed in the previous chapter. Secondly, I would be mindful that a misguided or zealous approach to accountability could result in an over reliance on statistics and test scores. This could result in a tyranny of numbers which could reduce the SSE to a process primarily about the generation of numeric data as 'not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted, counts' (Albert Einstein, undated as attributed from a sign in his office at Princeton).

The phenomena and popularity of league tables which rank schools reflects this trend towards reducing a school's perceived value or worth to its numeric placing on a list. Specifically concerning school self-evaluation this is a very real and pressing concern for the future direction of SSE as 'a great deal of work in the social sciences has shown clearly, complex systems with wide and varied goals such as education are hugely resistant to quantifiable measurement' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 198).

I believe that the accountability logic is already well incorporated into the current Irish SSE model and therefore the improvement logic should be a greater priority. I say this because a DES circular already makes the process mandatory in all schools and states 'schools should make a summary of the school improvement plan available to the whole-school community' (DES, 2012b, 2). The fact that schools must make a

summary of their school improvement plan available to the 'whole-school community' (DES, 2012b, 2) will inevitably lead to these documents entering the public domain thereby facilitating comparison between schools. This form of high stakes accountability carries risks as it could lead to the micro management of the school improvement plan by the utilisation of some of the following strategies:

> The manipulation of statistics and indicators, the stage management of events, hiding, and side-lining underperforming children and the kind of accounts that schools and individual construct around themselves. (Ball, 2001, 202)

Ball (2001) identified the above questionable strategies as possible features of schools put under pressure to perform in the United Kingdom. The degree to which the accountability logic drives SSE in Ireland is undecided. The Irish Inspectorate has indicated that it is keen not to repeat the mistakes of other countries stating it will learn from 'the experience of Michael Fullan and others, where an over-emphasis on accountability has not led to desired improvement' (Hislop, 2013, 15). I would endorse this viewpoint, as it prioritises improvement over accountability as a logic for SSE. Fullan (2011) argues that accountability has a role as a driver of reform but should not be a lead driver:

> To be clear it is not the presence of standards and assessment that is the problem, but rather the attitude (philosophy or theory of action) that underpins them, and their dominance (as when they become so heavily laden that they crush the system by their sheer weight). (Fullan, 2011, 8)

This perspective on the perils of excessive accountability chimes with similar concerns others have expressed in the educational literature on this pressing matter including Hargreaves (2004) who points out that 'the rightful quest for higher educational standards has degenerated into a compulsive obsession with standardisation' (Hargreaves, 2004, 82).

This quote sums up succinctly my position concerning the accountability logic for SSE. I think SSE can support the increasing demand for greater transparency in the workings of our schools but I would have reservations if it is to be implemented by the imposition

on schools of a uniform one size fits all standard model with rigid criteria. A worrying scenario is if the Irish SSE model did evolve into a number crunching exercise that ranks or rates schools and the teachers who work in them but this is not a possibility at the moment. However this fear was latent in several of the responses of some of the research participants as will be discussed in chapter five.

3.2.3 Economic Logic

While I have already considered the implications of global macroeconomics on Ireland's education sector and evaluation culture in the previous chapter, I now wish to turn my attention to the microeconomics of SSE in particular.

Leading advocates of SSE such as MacBeath (2006a) have emphasised that one of the major benefits of SSE is economic as 'the costs of training, administration, conduct and follow up of external inspection are too high and may not offer value for money' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). The economic logic of this argument is that school self-evaluation is a far cheaper alternative than the present arrangements for inspecting schools. Up until the start of this millennium most developed countries used external inspection school visits as the main means by which they evaluated schools. This still remains a central feature of the evaluation systems used in many countries as 'the external monitoring of professional performance and practice remain strong' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 13). Most of these external inspection units were long established separate divisions answerable and accountable directly to a state governing authority. They are often viewed as having an authoritative approach as 'a review of evaluation literature reveals that inspection as a form of external evaluation continues to be associated with control mechanisms' (Mathews, 2010, 50).

Proponents of SSE have argued that savings could be generated by moving away from the external inspection only model because 'self-evaluation is cheaper than expensive external inspection frameworks' (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 11). However in the

current prevailing fiscal climate, the economic logic for SSE has probably not gone unnoticed by the DES who are under ever increasing pressure to implement cost savings. In the '*Public Sector Reform Plan 2014 – 2016*' the current Government has set out its stall for the management of the public sector over the next few years. This plan highlights the impact rising demographics is having on the education sector meaning there is a 'significant challenge at a time of reducing financial resources in meeting the needs of an increasing population' (Department of Expenditure and Public Reform, 2014, 40).

Critics of the traditional approach involving the exclusive use of external inspection units point to the high costs of recruiting and training inspectors along with the administrative costs of organising, conducting and follow up of external evaluation visits. In the present economic climate with the ongoing pressure to cut public expenditure (Department of Expenditure and Public Reform, 2014) a case can be made for less external inspection and a demand for alternative and cheaper approaches to evaluation.

The logic of requiring schools to be self-inspecting (that is assuming an external inspection role) and self-reforming may have many economic benefits some of which can be linked to the discussion about new managerialism in the previous chapter resulting in a 'decentralisation of responsibilities in order to create market-type conditions that will ultimately lead to a more efficient, responsive and effective school system' (MacRuairc, 2010, 233). I too would have reservations about the overuse of a market driven approach to evaluation colonising the criteria shaping the schools accountability debate in Ireland.

My own view on this matter is that economics cannot just be measured in terms of costs but also should make allowances for the cost to schools in terms of time. SSE if it is to be carried out in a comprehensive manner is a time consuming process and the national

inspectorate do recognise this when they state that 'it is acknowledged that the process may take more time in the early stages' (DES, 2012b, 2). Therefore I welcome the fact that the official guidelines state that 'the school evaluation report should be no more than two to three pages' (DES, 2012a, 18) and the 'school improvement plan should be no more than one to two pages long' (DES, 2012a, 19). While document length does not necessarily imply smarter use of time management in their construction, brevity can be an asset. Similar to my views on accountability, I perceive the economic logic to be subservient to the improvement logic for SSE as my concerns would be that it is important not to divert attention away from the core work of the classroom. Therefore while one must be highly cognisant of economic and accountability constraints of any SSE model, one must never allow these logics to subvert or corrupt exemplary educational practices to bring about school improvement. So while I see merit in all of the above three overarching logics in the next part of this section, I will argue that there is a rationale for a fourth overarching logic that is worthy of serious consideration.

3.2.4 Deliberative Democratic Logic

In my opinion, none of the above three overarching logics adequately fully capture the potential of SSE to enable a greater role by an array of educational stakeholders. Evaluation in the past and up to quite recently tended to be primarily focused on an external inspection conducted by Inspectorate personnel who visit a school site, conduct a formal evaluation in a school and then produce and publish a report of their findings which is available on the DES website. However this situation is changing as 'the Education Act placed inspection on a statutory basis and since then has undergone considerable development and reform' (Hislop, 2013, 14). School self-evaluation is a significant part of that ongoing reform agenda and is designed to further deepen 'the inclusion of the voice of **students and parents** in school self-evaluation processes' (DES, 2012a, 9).

This in my opinion is a progressive development as I would endorse the viewpoint that 'evaluation should be explicitly democratic so that evaluation is tied to the larger society by democratic principles argued, debated, and accepted by the evaluation community' (House and Howe, 2000, 3). From the outset of this section, I wish to clarify my use of the term democracy concerning schools and evaluation. I use the term deliberative democracy, because there are many different interpretations of what constitutes a democracy. Whether schools actually are founded upon principles of democracy is a debatable point which goes beyond the remit of this dissertation, however my use of the term deliberative democracy is intended 'to focus attention on the decision making procedures that democracy requires and to avoid confusion with other concepts of democracy' (House and Howe, 2000, 3).

The House and Howe (2000) model highlights 'the three requirements for deliberative democratic evaluation: inclusion, dialogue and deliberation' (House and Howe, 2000, 5). I believe the use of these criteria could strengthen the model of SSE evolving in Ireland today. The experience of using a deliberative democratic evaluation model in a small research project in Icelandic schools was quite positive as 'findings from the study indicate that democracy is indeed valuable as part of school self-evaluation' (Davidsdotter and Lisi, 2007, 382). A deliberative democratic logic goes way beyond the mere token consultation with parents associations and student councils and requires proactive engagement with members of the wider school community:

> Dialogue in evaluation contexts refers to engaged, inclusive and respectful interactions among evaluation stakeholders about their respective stances and values, perspectives and experiences, dreams and hopes, and interpretations of gathered data related to the evaluation and its context. (Greene, 2001, 182)

This idea of engagement and dialogue between stakeholders not only has a democratic overtone as 'dialogic evaluation constitutes an important democratic activity in society' (Greene, 2001, 182) but it also highlights the relationship between effective communication and democracy. In many respects it bears a resemblance to the

Habermasian concepts of deliberative democracy and communicative action. Habermas grounds both these concepts in reason when he states that 'the structures of linguistic communication and co-operative, purposive-rational action must of necessity rely on reason' (Habermas, 1992, 101).

I am cognisant of the fact that when Habermas 'developed a concept of democracy grounded in a theory of communication' (Brookfield, 2005, 1127) the context was not that of school self-evaluation. He does however present a compelling case for meaningful inclusiveness which is a worthy ideal for twenty first century public governance and SSE falls into this remit. Habermas (1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1979) in a series of books published in the 1970s argues that if we could understand the conditions necessary for people to participate in full, free, and equal discourse, then we would have the theory of communicative action that would guide the operation of democracy. Habermas defines communicative action as happening 'wherever the action of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric locations of success but through acts of reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1984, 286).

Brookfield (2005) divides Habermas's work into two different projects reclaiming reason and practicing democracy. Habermas believes three crises are undermining our democratic processes, the collapse of the public sphere, the decline of civil society and the invasion of the lifeworld. However, he believes that true reason, reason employed to build participatory democracy can help us build a way out of these crises. This viewpoint echoes my own epistemological commitments and ontological experiences which have evolved over the many years I have spent engaged in my professional practice as an educator. I believe Habermas's theory on 'communicative action' offers democratic impulses and is a compelling argument in support of a more localised 'bottom up' approach to school reform such as SSE. While I have only used a very small segment of the vast contributions from this contemporary and prolific writer, his

approach to democratic decision making summarises for me what should be at the heart of the emerging model of SSE in Ireland and is worthy of further consideration.

In this section, I advocate that there is a deliberative democratic logic to school self-evaluation. House and Howe (2000) who devised a deliberative democratic evaluation model state that 'deliberation is fundamentally a cognitive process, grounded in reasons, evidence, and principles of valid argument, an important subset of which are the methodological canon of evaluation' (House and Howe, 2000, 8). Exchanges between the various educational stakeholders about SSE as part of a deliberative democratic process also has implications for the exercise of power in a manner to bring about 'a consensus arrived at in discussion free from domination' (Habermas, 1970, 7). In the next section, I revisit deliberative democratic evaluations, but this time from a power perspective.

3.3 Power: Conflict, Consensus and Compromise

Power does not exist in a vacuum and therefore the concept of power must be understood in the context of which the term is used as 'when we use the concept in different contexts its meaning changes sufficiently so that there is no single definition of power which covers all usage' (Haugaard, 2002, 1). I agree that the issue of power cannot be completely isolated from the context in which the term is used but I think the following explanation gives a comprehensive insight into its various components:

> Power is the ability of individuals, or the members of a group, to achieve aims or further the interests they hold. Power is a pervasive aspect of all human relationships. Many conflicts in society are struggles over power, because how much power an individual group is able to achieve governs how far they are able to realize their own wishes at the expense of the wishes of others. (Giddens, 2001, 696)

The reason why this definition of power is useful to me is because it alludes to two aspects of power which I wish to explore in this section. This definition highlights that power is 'a pervasive aspect of all human relationships' and it is also at the heart of the social sciences. It is therefore worthy of examination because it offers a perspective on

the inescapable impact of power in an educational setting such as second-level schools. The second aspect which I think is useful is that the above definition highlights the dynamic, complex and fluid nature of power and that it is often used 'to further the interests' of specific groups. This means from an educational perspective power manifests itself in both a conflictual and consensual manner and sometimes in both ways simultaneously. This is pertinent to my research because this conception of the dual nature of power resonates with many of my findings about SSE in chapter five of this dissertation.

Power is a universal concept and while much explored in academic literature 'the array of power perspectives may appear bewildering' (Haugaard, 2002, 1). According to Nyberg up until the 1980s, power was largely absent from educational research literature:

> Why is power not in the education lexicon? The idea of power has lain more completely neglected in educational studies than in any other field of thought that is a fundamental social interest. (Nyberg, 1981, 1)

Nyberg (1981) set out to remedy this situation by developing a concept of power in education which identifies three attributes to power 'the social, the psychological and the instrumental' (Nyberg, 1981, 3) which are present in all social relations. He claims that 'instead of direct power, however, what we hear is indirect and euphemistic talk about authority, leadership, charisma, management, and motivation in school teaching and administration' (Nyberg, 1981, 1). I would contend that this claim is probably still valid today from an Irish educational perspective in no small part because 'in recent years in Ireland, the process of policy making is based on a partnership model' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230). Nyberg's (1981) use of the terms direct and indirect powers resonate with the more common contemporary use of the terms "hard" and "soft" power described by Nye (2006) as follows:

The ability to affect the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want, and there are three basic ways to do that: you can coerce them with threats, you can induce them with payments, or you can attract and co-opt them. (Nye, 2006, 2)

The first two ways of threats and inducements are closely related and are examples of hard power while soft power 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye, 2006, 2). Hard and soft power are often intertwined together which means while they are opposite in nature, they sometimes reinforce each other. This resonates with the concept that power can be both conflictual and consensual. The precise nature of the relationship between these two components is an ongoing source of contention:

Conflict and consensus has been a major source of debate in literature on power over the years. It has taken the form of an insistence by some that power is primarily conflictual and others that it is mostly consensual. (Haugaard, 1997, 136)

The idea that power in education is an ongoing struggle between consent and conflict while sometimes containing elements of both is useful to me for this study because it captures the complexity of the various ways power can be exercised in an educational setting. This means that when power is exercised sometimes consent can be backed up by coercion. This is one possible interpretation of the teaching and other public sector unions voting to accept revised conditions of employment contained in the 'Public Sector Stability Agreement' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013). This agreement was backed up by legislation to enforce pay cuts in the 'Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act' (Government of Ireland, 2013) if the proposals were rejected by public sector unions.

Haugaard (1997) advocates a model of power where consensus and conflict are on a continuum and I would concur that this is an appropriate model to describe how power operates in a modern day educational context. Education is a social science and human interaction often involves a complexity of motives and behaviours. Those interactions are therefore unlikely to be neither purely consensual nor conflictual but are probably best understood as a blended combination of these two types of power as 'sometimes

there is consensus, sometimes conflict and, most frequently there is both' (Haugaard, 1997, 137).

The combination of consensual and conflictual power in an Irish educational setting is often based on compromise. I discuss in the contextual literature chapter a unique feature of Irish national policy over the past thirty years. This is the combination of a coalition culture at national government level which is complemented by a "partnership" approach between the State and various stakeholders. Consensual power is a central feature of this national decision making model of which 'accommodation, compromise and consensus' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 11) are key attributes.

This approach to accommodating the power of compromise and consensus in the Irish educational sector particularly at primary and secondary level is probably predicated 'on the strategic location of teachers and their union representatives across the state sector' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 19). There is strong evidence to suggest that the 'teacher unions, in particular, retain significant power in terms of the nature and pace of reform' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230). I would contend that it is not just because of the involvement of the teaching unions in the policy making process that educational power in Ireland tends to occupy 'a middle ground between conflict and consensus' (Haugaard, 1997, 137). The 'process of policy making is based on a partnership model' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230) which is deeply embedded into our governance systems courtesy of a series of national agreements starting with a 'Programme for National Recovery' in 1987 (Department of Finance, 1987) right up to the ten year framework outlined in the social partnership agreement 'Towards 2016' (Department of Finance, 2006). This partnership approach to policy making at national level was disrupted by the arrival of the Troika in November 2010 and the imposition of a Memorandum of Understanding (Department of Finance, 2010). Following Ireland's formal exit from the Troika programme in December 2013, it is a possibility that some aspects of the

partnership approach to policy making in the education sector will be restored thereby meaning once again that 'emerging policies are characterised by moderation and consensus' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 12).

3.3.1 SSE from a Power Perspective

In this section, I wish to focus specifically on the role of power in determining the model of school self-evaluation emerging in Irish schools. I believe that the exercise of a delicate combination of consensual and coercive strategies best typifies the approach currently being adopted by the Inspectorate to pursuing a self-evaluation agenda in Irish schools.

One of the most obvious examples of this strategy is the framework currently being used to ensure all Irish schools engage with school self-evaluation processes. What could be characterised as a softly, softly, approach to increasing awareness about SSE has been ongoing for the past decade starting with the release of a *'Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Second Level Schools'* document (Department of Education and Science, 2003). This document was actively promoted by Departmental Inspectors when conducting school evaluations as 'its publication reflects the Inspectorate's advisory remit under the Education Act 1998 to promote excellence' (Department of Education and Science, 2003, v). This document remained the seminal document on SSE up until the publication of the official guidelines on SSE (DES, 2012a). What makes these guidelines so different and more powerful than the 2003 guidelines is that they are backed up by a Department of Education and Skills Circular making them mandatory (DES, 2012b). A more resolute and firm approach to SSE implementation is evident in recent years by mandating all schools to draft a SIP on an annual basis, a short summary of which must be published 'schools should make a summary of the school improvement plan available to the whole-school community' (DES, 2012b, 2).

This use of the combination of hard and soft power can also be found in the cubic model of school self-evaluation (MacBeath et al, 1999). This model suggests there are three dimensions to school evaluation:

1. top down/bottom up – how a system sees and implements change

2. pressure/support – individual's perception of the amount of assistance or coercion they receive

3. external/internal – evaluation from an outside source to self-evaluation.

I would suggest that top down, pressure and external all represent hard power while bottom up, support and internal represent the exercise of soft power. I would support their assertion that the ideal model of school self-evaluation requires a blend of all six elements which they elaborated upon further in a follow-up publication:

> top-down approaches need bottom up responses. External expectations have to meet internal needs, and pressure will not work without the push of some internal direction or vision. (MacBeath et al, 2000, 93)

Creating the right balance between exercising power in a consensual or coercive manner concerning SSE is a precarious task in which the two sides have been characterised as hawks and doves:

> The 'hawks argue that school self-evaluation is an easy soft-centred option which can result in naval gazing and lacks the objective hard edge that external evaluation brings … while 'doves' argue that for improvement, to be embedded within the school, it must be owned by the very agents of change tasked with generating improvement. (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 16)

They suggest that placing both sides at loggerheads with each other is 'a false dichotomy as most accept there is, or should be a link and blend between school self-evaluation and external review' (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 16). I agree with this assertion as there is ample evidence in the selected literature used in this dissertation to suggest that power needs to be exercised in both a coercive and consensual manner to advance a sustainable model of SSE acceptable to the various educational stakeholders involved in both its design and implementation. I also believe that power

considerations concerning SSE must also take into account contextual intelligence about the national policy context as discussed in detail in the previous chapter. In order for SSE to navigate a sustainable future for itself its advocates must use 'contextual intelligence to manage the combination of soft and hard power into smart power' (Nye, 2006, 21).

In the previous section of this chapter, I advocated that there was a deliberative democratic logic for SSE using the principles of deliberative democratic evaluations. The three requirements of deliberative democratic evaluations, inclusion, dialogue and deliberation can also be viewed from a power perspective. The relationship between SSE and power has implications as 'power imbalances are endemic in society and it is easy to see how they can disrupt and distort evaluations' (House and Howe, 2000, 6). Concerning school self-evaluation this means the involvement of parents, pupils and members of the wider school community must go beyond mere tokenism 'the powerful may dominate the discussion, or those without power may not be represented adequately' (House and Howe, 2000, 6).

I have described how altering power relationships via school self-evaluations can be achieved but it is an arduous task as 'changing power relationships consistent with the goals of the changes is, to indulge understatement, no simple affair' (Sarason, 1990, 64). One of the reasons he puts forward as to why this is such a difficult task is 'because these relationships are subtle, informal and indirect' (Sarason, 1990, 65). I find this perspective about power interesting as subtlety, informality and indirection are closely aligned with the concept of "soft power". The logic of this argument would tend to support the assertion that as the model of school self-evaluation continues to develop in Ireland it may be wise to 'place greater emphasis on the soft power of attraction rather than the hard power of control' (Nye, 2006, 20). A disposition towards

this culture of compromise is also evident in the approach of the school leaders and teachers to SSE in the findings of this dissertation.

3.4 Person: The Human Meaning of Change

The third element of my conceptual framework concerns the person. I explore the meaning of change at a human level as I believe that 'educational change is above all a very personal experience in a social but often impersonal setting' (Fullan, 1991, 350). I deem an examination of the "person" dimension a worthwhile exercise because I contend that due consideration needs to be given to the impact of SSE on the professional practitioner of school leaders and teachers if it is to successfully embed itself into Irish schools. The complexities of the change process throws up many contradictions:

> We acknowledge its inevitability, and yet a profound conservative impulse governs our psychology, making us naturally resistant to change and leaving us chronically ambivalent when confronted with innovation. (Evans, 1996, 21)

Perhaps it is linked to our evolution and survival as a species that humanity may have a natural disposition towards stability which makes some individuals 'naturally resistant to change' because of 'the conservative bent of human behaviour, the manifest desire to preserve, hold, fix, and keep stable' (Nisbet, 1969, 270). This desire for stability has a strong hold and influence on human behaviour. This may be true partially because we are 'pattern-seeking animals' (Gould, 1991, 60) and our 'ability to learn from experiences relies on the stability of the interpretations by which we predict the pattern of events' (Marris, 1986, 6).

Whether we welcome change or not does not alter the fact that change is a fundamental part of our daily lives. Phenomenology concerns itself with the study of experience and how we adjust and react to change is an existential part of human experience. Therefore an awareness of 'what the change will activate in the phenomenology of individuals and their institutional relationships' (Sarason, 1990, 101) is essential to understanding the

human meaning of change. I contend that as phenomenology itself claims to achieve knowledge about the nature of consciousness, a distinctive kind of first person knowledge, through a form of intuition, this has a significant bearing on how school leaders and teachers perceive a fundamental change such as a school self-evaluation policy initiative.

School based personnel are not unique in experiencing change as a major feature of their personal and professional lives over the past few decades. Since the early 1990s the political, economic, cultural and social landscape in Ireland has been radically transformed as discussed in the national policy context section in the previous chapter. The drive for educational reform is likely to continue as 'an extensive programme of reform including the most comprehensive programme of legislative reform is underway across the sector' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2014, 40). This parallels educational reform underway in other countries as 'education reform is never far from the national agenda in the United States going back at least as far as the 1950s' (Gregg and Underwood-Gregg, 2011, 1).

To help understand why 'schools have been intractable to change and the attainment of goals set by reformers' (Sarason, 1990, xiii), I examine how SSE and the professional practitioners who must implement it are situated in 'a lifelong tension between the demands of the new, and the safe haven of where we are' (Heywood, 2009, 30).

Evans (1996) unpacks the complexity of the human meaning of change by breaking it down into four key components when he states that 'change is what it means to those who must implement it, and that its primary meanings encourage resistance; it provokes loss, challenges competence, creates confusion, and causes conflict' (Evans, 1996, 21). I believe this approach is useful because failure to recognise change as a phenomenon and its main components means we tend to ignore important aspects of change and misrepresent others. Therefore to negate against this possibility, I now wish to consider

Evans (1996) four key components of change; loss, competency, conflict and confusion from a school self-evaluation perspective.

Feeling a sense of loss by changing practices unsettles our sense of security as 'we are also bereaved if assumptions we live by and take for granted are devalued' (Evans, 1996, 29). This is a challenge for the implementation of SSE because not only is it innovative by its nature but it also questions the efficacy of past and current practices. This possibly manifests itself by a deep seated conservatism within the human psyche which may have an in-built disposition towards a continuation of past practices rather than towards embracing enthusiastically new practices.

Likely to have a greater impact than an attachment to past practices is whether school leaders and teachers feel that the true purpose of SSE is to challenge their sense of professional integrity because 'change immediately threatens people's sense of competence, frustrating their wish to feel effective and valuable' (Evans, 1996, 32). The fact that many school leaders and teachers may define themselves by their work can make them more sensitive to change and shake their confidence. A possible implication for the national roll out of SSE is an overly critical assessment of the effectiveness of current practices in our schools that may lead to some school leaders and teachers perceiving SSE as questioning their professional competency.

Change creates confusion as 'whatever improvement change may promise, it almost always increases confusion and unpredictability' (Evans, 1996, 34). I would concur that confusion is a necessary by-product of innovation and while there may be a strong rationale for making Irish schools engage in SSE processes, confusion particularly during the implementation phase needs to be minimised. Structural stability is very often undermined, even when structure is not the direct target of innovation. School reform such as school self-evaluation by its nature does not lead to quick fix solutions or instantaneous improvement so the minimisation of confusion created by the ongoing

implementation phase of SSE will be a critical factor in determining its long term sustainability.

The final component identified by Evans (1996) typology of change is conflict. Change is nearly always presented as being better for everyone but 'the reality is almost always quite different, change almost always generates friction, both between individuals and groups' (Evans, 1996, 35). When examining the power element of my conceptual framework I explore the relationship between SSE and conflict. Power in schools tends to be exercised in a manner which is 'subtle, informal and indirect' (Sarason, 1990, 65) so if this was to pertain to SSE it would suggest that conflict needs to be kept to a minimum and should not be a political tool or used as a pawn by school management to manipulate the power hierarchy in a school.

Understanding change at a human level uncovers many of the obstacles or barriers to change buried deep within individuals as 'real change, then whether desired or not, represents a serious personal and collective experience characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty' (Fullan, 1991, 32). In this section, I explored the four factors of loss, incompetence, confusion and conflict from a SSE perspective. This typology helps explain why there may be such a public gap between what change means to its authors and what it may mean to its targets of professional practitioners at school level. This is recurring theme often highlighted in educational literature:

> Ideas whose time has come are no guarantee that we know how to capitalize on the opportunities, because the process of implementation requires an understanding of the settings in which these ideas have taking root. (Sarason, 1990, 99)

If school self-evaluation is such an 'idea whose time has come', then central to 'an understandings of the settings' is an understanding of what change means at a human level.

3.4.1 Personal Impact: Fear, Trust and SSE

While change involves 'loss, challenges competence, creates confusion, and causes conflict' (Evans, 1996, 21), these obstacles can be overcome. The pursuit of educational reform at times appears relentless so 'we can take it as given that there will always be pressures for educational change' (Fullan, 1991, 17). In this section, I examine two primary emotions fear and trust which were at the heart of many of the responses of the professional practitioners about school self-evaluation for this piece of research. In the methodology chapter I place fear and trust on a continuum to explore emotions triggered by SSE and both emotions are a consistently recurring feature referenced by the research respondents in the findings chapter. Firstly, I wish to examine the concept of fear:

> It is seldom noted, but fear is the first emotion experienced by a character in the Bible. Not desire, not shame but fear. Adam eats from the tree, discovers he is naked, and hides from God, confessing 'I was afraid, because I was naked'. (Robin, 2004, 1)

The above quote is apt because it demonstrates that the concept of fear has been around for a long time. Fear was also explored and mused about by some well-known ancient Greek philosophers as 'Aristotle, for example believed that an individual's fear was the concluding sentence of a dialogue between his passion and beliefs' (Robin, 2004, 7). Fear has been described as 'an uneasiness of the mind' (Locke, 1959, 304) and it is this definition which I think is particularly useful when considering the emotional mind-set of the professional practitioners concerning SSE. Evaluation and teacher appraisal are two of the main sources of anxiety for school based personnel as 'in Ireland at the present time there is among teachers a fear of whole school evaluation and teacher appraisal' (Heywood, 2009, 30). This situation is probably unlikely to change any time soon as 'since 2008, the Department has established processes to deal with instances of seriously under-performing schools' (Hislop, 2012, 27). Most schools would not fall into this bracket as 'instances of seriously under-performing schools are rare' (Hislop,

2012, 27). While it is probably only proper that serious school underperformance is tackled, the existence of processes to deal with these situations highlights that school based personnel can still fear processes which will probably never affect them. I detected anxiety and fears as a significant feature of the research respondents which I explore further in the discussion of findings chapter.

Fears are often not rational or based on reason which are sometimes personally constructed based on the 'artifacts of our own psychologies and experiences and have little impact beyond ourselves' (Robin, 2004, 2). Specific examples of how fear may manifest itself concerning SSE were explored in the "power" section of this chapter. While in this section, I have focused on fear as it pertains to the person, it too has a political dimension which also can manifest itself in a multitude of ways because even 'though fear has a politics, we often ignore or misconstrue it, making it difficult to understand how and when fear is used' (Robin, 2004, 2). So even though fear about SSE can be considered from other perspectives, I chose to focus on its personal dimension as I believe 'ultimately the transformation of subjective realities is the essence of change' (Fullan, 1991, 36).

Trust is situated on the opposite side of the continuum I am using to examine the possible emotions experienced by professional practitioners as a result of formally engaging with school self-evaluation processes. I suggest that moving from fear to trust is achieved by strengthening cooperation which is an issue I also explore in this section. Like fear, trust is a complex emotion and has many dimensions. The dimension which is most useful to me for this study is to examine trust from the perspective of the person. Lahno (2001) refers to trust as 'an attitude that enables us to cope with risk in a certain way' (Lahno, 2001, 171). He also describes trust as an emotional attitude which 'may be understood as some general pattern in the way the world or some part of the world is perceived by an individual' (Lahno, 2001, 171). This perception of trust as an

emotional attitude also enables insight into the concepts of relational trust and cooperation from the perspectives of the person and SSE.

Relational trust according to Bryk and Schneider (2002) is 'the interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a school community' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 1). There are many exchanges that take place in a school community; principal to teacher, teacher to teacher, teacher to student and parent to teacher. Each party in such a relationship maintains an understanding of their role obligations and hold expectations about the role obligation of others. They further develop the concept of relational trust arguing that it is 'built on the four criterion: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 1).

From a school self-evaluation viewpoint, respect involves recognising the role of a wide remit of stakeholders while competence should ensure that the SSE achieves its desired outcomes. Personal regard for others is the perception of how one goes beyond what is required when carrying out tasks and this should mean that the responsibilities of implementing SSE is not shouldered on just a few individuals. However, it is the final criteria of integrity which perhaps best captures for me what is at the core of relational trust and SSE. I say this because I believe trust like integrity cannot be mandated and it involves a leap of faith. When you place trust in others there is no way of 'knowing whether that faith can be justified' (Sennett, 2013, 153). Trust is important because while you can make SSE a mandatory requirement for schools you cannot legislate for personal integrity or force school based colleagues to trust each other. Integrity has been described as what you do when nobody is looking or as 'the consistency between what people say and what people do' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002 1). Personal integrity in my view is a critical and an essential element to building and understanding relational trust in schools.

Relational trust as discussed above is social in nature and concerns our interactions with our colleagues in a school setting. However, emotional trust not only takes into account our perceptions of other people, but also our views of systems and structures such as school self-evaluation. In this section, I suggest that moving away from the fear side towards the trust side of the continuum SSE can be achieved by strengthening cooperation. I contend strengthening cooperation by forging professional communities in schools not only helps to increase systemic trust but also creates a more positive disposition in terms of attitudes, emotions and implementation practices amongst school teachers and leaders towards SSE.

Sennett (2013) suggests that cooperation is a craft that 'requires of people the skill of understanding and responding to one another in order to act together but this is a thorny process, full of difficulty and ambiguity' (Sennett, 2013, x). The idea of strengthening cooperation resonates with the notion that 'stability in power relations increases as the degree of informed cooperation increases' (Nyberg, 1981, 7). He also argues that this is the highest form of power in education because it leads to a condition Nyberg calls a 'balanced trust' which has the following benefits:

> Time, energy, and attention can be concentrated on the tasks required by the plan, and not dissipated in suspicion and fear. The kind of human organisation that achieves these characteristics, whether between two people or among many, is very powerful indeed. (Nyberg, 1981, 7)

So while building cooperation would appear to be a worthwhile endeavour from a SSE perspective it does present significant challenges. One of those potential pitfalls that would affect the emotional temperament of professional practitioners would be an over reliance on excessively rigorous inspection techniques as 'external monitoring of an intrusive kind can seriously damage the autonomy and morale of professionals and organisations' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, ix).

In this section, concerning the personal impact of school self-evaluation on professional practitioners, I suggest cooperation as a bridging mechanism between fear and trust

based on the assumption that most people find themselves located somewhere in the middle as 'some of us are change agents, others resist change … while most of us lie somewhere in the middle of this continuum' (Heywood, 2009, 261).

Trust is an important component in understanding the culture of any organisation and it is often promoted as an effective management tool which can be applied to organisations such as schools because 'if we want to promote trustful interaction we must form our institutions in ways that allow individuals to experience their interest and values as shared and, thus, to develop a trusting attitude' (Lahno, 2001, 171). Regarding the emerging model of SSE in Ireland, this will require strengthening cooperation between the various stakeholders involved in school self-evaluation processes. As part of any ongoing SSE processes, expecting stakeholders to work in a more collegiate manner, I think is a realistic and achievable target for organisations such as schools but it is important to note that 'the nub of cooperation is active participation rather than passive presence' (Sennett, 2013, 233). Schools can be places of frenetic level of activity placing an array of pressing and immediate demands on school leaders and teachers during their working day therefore building trust may not be high on their agenda. However, trust can be a pivotal tool to increasing the sustainability of SSE as 'a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day to day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans' (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 5).

3.4.2 Personal Identity: The 'Self' in SSE

Personal identity or self-identity has been described as 'the process of self-development through which we formulate a unique sense of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us' (Giddens, 2001, 30). How any of us understand ourselves is difficult to put into words, and is the subject of ongoing academic debate:

> The formation and construction of identity is a complex and often contradictory process, with recent analyses querying the concept of a 'unitary self' … in

favour of accounts which stress the multiple and fragmented nature of self and identity that emerges in societies increasingly characterized by risk, flexibility and uncertainty. (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 105)

This modern view of identity as fragmented is useful as it offers an insight into many of the apparent paradoxes associated with school self-evaluation identified in this study. One such paradox is that on one level an individual may find the SSE process affirming and validating their sense of self at work while on another level and at the same time SSE may increase anxiety and personal insecurities about professional identity.

How we perceive ourselves is probably always in a state of constant flux as 'it is an individual's constant negotiation with the outside world that helps to create and shape his or her sense of self' (Giddens, 2001, 30). This means the perspective of educational practitioners about school self-evaluation is likely to be in a continuous state of review influenced by their ongoing engagement with SSE processes. As SSE is rolled out nationally in Ireland over the next few years, it is likely to increasingly impact on school leaders and teachers' sense of personal identity as 'all change involves us in a capacity to deal with ourselves as we construct or maintain our identity' (Heywood, 2009, 262).

The relationship between work and identity often manifests itself in our emotions. In the previous section, I explored the personal impact of SSE on an emotional continuum of fear and trust as 'work can provide a sense of meaning and identity but also insecurity and anxiety for self in a competitive environment that erodes trust relations' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, 109). Anxiety can impact negatively on personal identity so it would be prudent that the ongoing implementation of SSE does not heighten anxiety levels unnecessarily in professional practitioners. In some situations outright resistance to the SSE project is a possibility as 'adaptation is not always accomplished with ease, and sometimes not at all. Moreover anxiety can lead individuals and groups to resist change totally' (Heywood, 2009, 30). However, it is

inevitable that change brought about as a result of engaging with school self-evaluation processes will cause a certain degree of anxiety 'raising guilt and anxiety - these are necessary, especially at the outset of an innovation but almost never sufficient' (Evans, 2010, 4).

While change probably increases anxiety levels, the ongoing development of identity also means the individual can actively pursue a change agenda as 'nevertheless, we will drive for change if we believe it will help us find or develop our identity' (Heywood, 2009, 263). From a SSE perspective, this means that while the motivating forces pushing the self-evaluation agenda may be external to schools, such as the Inspectorate, it is the individual who will decide whether to actively engage in the change process. This means if individuals elect to 'embrace innovation depends not on whether outsiders think they need to, but on their own readiness to do so' (Evans, 2010, 1). Personal identity will be critical in determining whether professional practitioners feel ready to cooperate with SSE in their individual schools as 'many attempts at policy change … ignored the fact that what people did and did not do was the crucial variable' (Fullan, 1991, 65).

The formation of personal identity is a complex process, unique to each individual which is influenced by life experiences and interior thought processes. This often means that our understanding of the reasons why an individual acts or behaves in a certain way can be highly speculative in nature. Therefore, it follows any interpretation of an individual's motives for cooperating with school self-evaluation are wide, varied and can never be fully known with absolute certainty. Cooperation can take many forms in schools from contrived collegiality which 'is characterised by a set of formal, specific, bureaucratic procedures' (Hargreaves, 1991, 19) to true collaborative cultures that are 'deep, personal and enduring' (Hargreaves, 1991, 14). This notion that cooperation is a deeply personal and deliberate act resonates with the sentiment, that

'cooperation occupies a middle ground between psyche and society' (Sennett, 2013, 179). Sennett (2013) argues that there exists a character type which he labels as the 'uncooperative self' which weakens cooperation in the present era:

> A distinctive character type is emerging in modern society, the person who can't manage demanding complex forms of social engagement and so withdraws. He or she loses the desire to cooperate with others. The person becomes an 'uncooperative self'. (Sennett, 2013, 179)

This conception of an 'uncooperative self' offers a possible interpretation of the state of mind that certain school teachers and leaders may have towards school self-evaluation. The reason why I believe it is informative is because it suggests that the needs and concerns of the person who is expected to implement the change at grass roots level are a significant factor which need to be taken into account when introducing a new policy initiative such as school self-evaluation.

3.5 Practice: The Critical Phase of Implementation

Policy formulation tends to be an easier task that policy implementation and 'educational reformers have trouble understanding that change by legislative feat or policy pronouncements from on high is only the first and easiest step in the change process' (Sarason, 1990, 101). This difficult disconnect between bringing a policy from the drafting phase to implementation and having a significant impact would also seem to apply to the recent history of school self-evaluation in Ireland where there is also a 'rhetoric reality gap between policy and implementation' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, 89). There are a myriad of possible reasons why implementation is such a difficult phase some of which I will discuss in this section but 'the evidence to date suggests that schools in Ireland have a very limited capacity for self-evaluation' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, 80). Developing the capacity of Irish schools to self-evaluate will require extensive training and development to support staff to master new competencies as 'implementation requires staff to move away from what has become at

least old competence if not incompetence to what is now defined as new competence'
(Evans, 1996, 63).

This idea of whether school based staff have the capacity at the moment to engage with SSE is significant as it was identified as a stumbling block to the self-evaluation movement in the United Kingdom in the 1980s which 'fell on stony ground in spite of the glossy check-lists issued by numerous local authorities' (Elliott, 1995, 1). Elliott (1995) suggests that teachers were 'methodologically adrift' concerning SSE and therefore 'unsure of what questions to ask, what kind of data to collect, by what methods to collect and how to analyse it when it had been collected' (McNamara, and O'Hara, 2008a, 26).

Building capacity in schools to self-evaluate is a real challenge which is recognised by the national inspectorate when its current Chief Inspector states 'our biggest challenges lies in the area of capacity. We recognise that the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage in self-evaluation is yet to be probably developed' (Hislop, 2013, 16). He further admits that it is for this very reason that the introduction of school self-evaluation will be a gradual process which may take some time:

> Indeed it is this concern that has led us to carefully phase in the elements of school self-evaluation so as to give us time to provide the necessary professional development and experience to build up familiarity and expertise within the process. (Hislop, 2013, 16)

I consider the decision to implement SSE on a phased basis to be prudent as a delicate combination of pressure and support is required to be applied in a judicious manner as 'pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation: support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources' (Fullan, 1991, 91). I would concur with the viewpoint that at different points throughout the implementation process of SSE, pressure and support will be required and staggering the various phases of implementation should help assist with this endeavour. Implementing SSE on a phased basis also has the additional benefit of ensuring the time and space for professional

practitioners to build up a commitment to SSE as 'all real change is personal, which means it has to be accomplished person by person' (Evans, 1996, 71).

3.5.1 SSE as a School Based Practice

The magnitude of the task to deeply embed school self-evaluation in Irish schools should not be underestimated for many of the reasons concerning purpose, power and person discussed earlier in this chapter. In this section, I explore the implementation strategy of the DES concerning SSE and how this is likely to impact on practice.

The DES issued a circular to all school making it mandatory for all schools 'to engage in systematic school self-evaluation from the 2012/2013 academic year onwards' (DES, 2012b, 1). This circular contains elements of pressure and support, is persuasive in nature and could be considered to be presented in the style and language of 'soft power' (Nye, 2006). It could be argued that using the language of consensus to implement SSE is a clever strategy as 'softening the divide between informal and formal exchanges can enable people to meet productively and it can help keep people connected when hostile to one another' (Sennett, 2013, 241).

The pressure aspect of the circular manifests itself with the requirement for all schools to draft SIPs based on 'a concise school self-evaluation report' (DES, 2012b, 2) that also must be compiled by each school. This requirement is summarised in a single sentence in bold type from the circular when it states that:

> Over a four-period from 2012, all post-primary schools should engage in school self-evaluation and produce three-year improvement plans for numeracy, literacy and one aspect of teaching and learning across all subjects and programmes. (DES, 2012b, 3)

The circular then outlines what resources will be available 'in order to assist schools to engage in the process of school self-evaluation a number of supports have been put in place' (DES, 2012b, 4). These SSE supports fall into three different domains, Guidelines, School Support and Online Support. The national guidelines about SSE were released in November 2012 (DES, 2012a). School support consisted of an

advisory visit to all schools during the 2012/2013 academic year, which all schools were asked to facilitate 'to enable presentations about school self-evaluation to be made and questions and queries to be answered' (DES, 2012b, 4). Online support primarily revolves around the dedicated website www.schoolself-evaluation.ie. The school leaders and teachers respondents' perspectives on these three strategies are explored further in Theme 5 – SSE Support Mechanisms in the findings chapter.

It is too early to say whether the combination of these strategies will have a significant impact in altering practices in Irish second level schools. Change in practices are often quite subtle and happen gradually over a period of time. However, a growing awareness about SSE combined with the above mentioned strategies will probably impact to some extent at an individual psychological level leading school leaders and teachers to engage more in practices of reflection and self-surveillance. Surveillance can happen at two levels. It can be explicit, where individuals are watched at all times or implicit, where they police their own thoughts and behaviour in what may make them feel like they are in a permanent state of surveillance. Foucault (1977) identifies Bentham's panoptican design model for prisons as an example of both types of surveillance:

> To induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it discontinues in its actions; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary … in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which themselves are the bearer. (Foucault, 1977, 201)

While the original specific context for this kind of surveillance is prisons, Foucault considered that it also could be applied in a much broader setting as 'Foucault believed that many of techniques developed in prisons can also be applied to other areas of life such as schools' (Giddens, 2001, 354).

Plowright (2008) concurs that the modern day school does bear similarity to Bentham's panoptican in that 'behaviour becomes compliant with expectations. Likewise, being under constant but unseen observation, schools will be forced into moving the

inspection criteria to a daily focus' (Plowright, 2008, 121). Central to the panoptican model is what Foucault describes as disciplinary power as 'he uses this phrase to describe modern society in which discipline is produced through monitoring, controlling and punishing the human population (Giddens, 2001, 354). This supports the idea that not only does discipline works through a series of quiet coercions working at the level of people's minds and bodies but it also influences human behaviour and how individuals perceive themselves, others and the world. This ties in with the idea that power when exercised at a subtle individual level it is most effective as 'power is greatest when it employs the instruments of education, not the instruments of force' (Nyberg, 1981, 4).

So how does the exercise of power not as an imposition but as instruments of education 'designed to help individuals move from simple acquiescence' (Nyberg, 1981, 4) impact on SSE practices in schools? It suggests that professional practitioners at school level in many cases are willing instruments who impose surveillance procedures on themselves, which subconsciously influences their thoughts and practices as 'a form of surveillance based on the panopticon prison model disposed people to monitor themselves and others regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of types of behaviour and body shape' (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb, 2000, 62).

Self–surveillance is an example of the manifestation of monitoring behaviour which may become more pervasive by professional practitioners if the evolved model of SSE is rooted in a pernicious evaluation environment. Evaluation culture has a long history over several decades with mixed results:

> Evaluation blossomed as a discipline and profession in the 1960s, became more focused on cost effectiveness in the 1980s, and became a handmaiden to the reinventing of government and the public sector that spread across the globe in the 1990s. (Mathison, 2011, 21)

Evaluation models will continue to evolve over time and current international trends indicate 'that internal evaluation has become more commonplace' (Mathison, 2011, 13).

SSE is a manifestation of this trend to incorporate internal evaluation in Irish schools. It probably encourages greater levels of personal reflection and more discussion including review and analysis about the relationship between evaluation and school based practices by educational stakeholders. This facilitates 'a conversation on how practice and learning … can be a powerful agent for improvement' (Hislop, 2012, 23). Blending elements of internal evaluation and inspection can change school based practice but it is a delicate and difficult endeavour:

> It seems that policy makers are unaware of the impediments to change. Often they push through change too quickly. When that happens, then it is quite likely that change will only be superficial because it is not internalised and assent (which is assumed) is not given. (Heywood, 2009, 281)

Changing practices concerning SSE in many ways is a battle which takes place in the mind-set of the professional practitioners who are expected to implement the principles of SSE into their daily practices. In my opinion 'self-evaluation leading to improvement rather than passive compliance with an externally driven agenda' (SICI, 2013, 3) will be decided by the commitment levels of school based personnel. To change practice in schools requires building commitment at a personal and professional level as 'commitment can be tested in a straightforward way: how much are you prepared to sacrifice for it' (Sennett, 2013, 258). Convincing professional practitioners to commit to SSE remains the pivotal precursor to changing practices as the chequered history of education reform to date tells us, it is important not to 'confuse a change in policy with a change in practice' (Sarason, 1990, 101).

3.6 Conclusion

School self-evaluation has rapidly established itself as a significant part of the educational habitus in which modern day Irish schools exist. In this conceptual literature chapter, I viewed SSE from the various perspectives of Purpose, Person, Power and Practice. This chapter commenced with an examination of the purpose of school self-evaluation. The education literature identifies three main logics for school

self- evaluation. They are the improvement, economic and accountability logic. Following an exploration of each of these logics, I believe that there is also a deliberative democratic logic for SSE, a viewpoint which is endorsed by the findings generated by the focus groups carried out for the research component of this dissertation.

The issue of power as an educational concept is explored along with the manner in which it is exercised. I suggest that power in education is an ongoing struggle between consent and conflict and sometimes containing elements of both. I provided several concrete examples as evidence of how the power of compromise is an apt description of how power from a SSE perspective is exercised in Irish schools.

I then explored the human meaning of change and considered the impact on the person of the phenomenology of change in general before examining the impact of SSE on the person. Change impacts at a personal level and to explore its impact, I discussed the two key primary emotions of fear and trust. In relation to the personal identity, I focus on the 'Self' component of SSE arguing that the complex and fragmented nature of identity offers an insight into many of the apparent paradoxes associated with school self-evaluation identified in this study.

In the final part of this conceptual literature chapter I considered the fourth element of my conceptual framework which is practice. A major barrier to change is failure to recognise the importance of the implementation phase and the role of the school based practitioner. The relationship between how professional practitioners interpret the change process has a major bearing on whether they will alter their professional practices to engage with the policy change or new initiative.

In this chapter, I explored the concept of SSE from the perspective of purpose, power, person and practice. It is important not to underestimate the challenges to its successful implementation in Irish schools because school self-evaluation mirrors many of the

complexities of the change process itself as 'change is difficult because it is riddled with

dilemmas, ambivalences and paradoxes' (Fullan, 1991, 350).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

'Why education reform has failed time and time again' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1991, 1). This quote which is the opening line from the introductory chapter of '*What's Worth Fighting for in your School: Working Together for Improvement*' is a damning indictment of the history of educational reform to date. It begs the question of how best to achieve effective school reform which is a topic that has always fascinated me throughout my professional career but particularly in later years and informed my ruminations when considering a research question for this dissertation.

While there are a myriad of research framework models, I tailored the model used in this dissertation on the research design frameworks suggested by Crotty (1998) and Creswell (2013). When designing the research framework, I was cognisant that it must address directly all three parts of my research question concerning the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of school based practitioners to school self-evaluation. I start off this chapter with an explanation of my philosophical assumptions underpinning the research as 'inquirers often overlook this phase, so it is helpful to have it highlighted and positioned first in the levels of the research process' (Creswell, 2013, 18). I address philosophical assumptions related to my theoretical perspective, ontological experiences, epistemological stance, reflexivity and ethical considerations.

The research methodology is situated within a social constructionist paradigm and is largely based on field research conducted via a series of focus groups with school leaders and teachers in two particular schools during the 2012/2013 academic year. Social constructionism is a broad paradigm which highlights how subjective meaning is both varied and multiple therefore is 'formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives' (Creswell, 2013, 25).

The two main methods used in the dissertation are focus groups and documentary research of official policy documents about SSE (DES, 2012a, 2012b and 2012c). These two methods offer a compatible rationale with the social constructionist paradigm that is a link between the importance of subjective knowledge and collective experiences. Focus groups and documentary research are also two methods which enable me to adequately address all aspects of my research question about school self-evaluation in a meaningful and academically rigorous manner.

The final part of this methodology chapter examines all stages of the data processing phase including data collection, coding, analysis and interpretation. I used a thematic approach to coding the data incorporating a six step model designed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I provide a detailed explanation of how the data was validated through all stages of the research process. Data interpretation is a highly subjective task particularly in a social constructionist paradigm so I engage in a detailed discussion about how I validated the accuracy of the findings. This is an essential feature of the research design used in this study and therefore is also outlined in this chapter.

4.2 Philosophical Assumptions Underpinning the Research Design

Creswell (2013) suggests that it is 'important to understand the philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research and to be able to articulate them' (Creswell, 2013, 18). Crotty (1998) argues that we bring a number of assumptions to our chosen paradigm, and that before one can choose a research approach we need to as best as we can, to articulate these assumptions. I decided that the best way I can illuminate the assumptions underpinning my theoretical perspective is to outline my ontological experiences and epistemological stance. Identifying these assumptions is inter-connected with the concept of reflexivity. In order to properly understand the philosophical assumptions a researcher brings to the research process, it is necessary to consider, the researcher's 'personal history, views of themselves and others, and ethical

and political issues' (Creswell, 2013, 18). Therefore I address my approach to ethics in this section about my philosophical assumptions.

4.2.1 Ontological Experiences and Epistemological Stance

Ontology describes the nature of existence and it has been suggested that in educational research 'ontological assumptions (assumptions about the nature of reality and the nature of things) give rise to epistemological assumptions (ways of researching and enquiring into the nature of reality and the nature of things)' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 3). Concerning ontology this means that 'different researchers embrace different realities, as do the individuals being studied and the readers of qualitative study' (Creswell, 2013, 20). I believe that reality is multiple and can be seen through many viewpoints and my ontology endorses this view of reality.

An obvious connection between my own ontological experiences and school self-evaluation is that I have previously conducted research about SSE as part of a Masters of Education programme between 2006 and 2009. For my dissertation, I conducted an action research based project that involved devising and conducting a school self-evaluation programme in the school where I teach (Harvey, 2009). While this experience, influenced my decision to conduct this piece of research about SSE, that decision was also informed by other ontological experiences including working as a professional practitioner in a school setting for the past two decades.

This combination of school based employment and having previously conducted a dissertation about SSE formed a significant part of the back story to my consideration of research topics. Spending the last twenty years as an educational practitioner at the chalk-face of schools has shaped consciously and subconsciously both my epistemology and my ontological positioning. Finding myself, immersed in a second-level school environment as a professional practitioner has heavily influenced my belief that teachers are the most significant agent in facilitating educational reform and change. I was

curious to see would a piece of academic research back up this belief. I state this here explicitly so the reader is aware of why I have decided to do a second dissertation about SSE.

This time, I have a very different objective from my original piece of research, namely to examine the phenomena of educational reform via SSE from the perspective of the professional practitioner at school level. My professional experiences to date influenced my desire to examine the pivotal role played by teachers and school leaders in bringing about effective educational reform in this piece of research. This has also had a major bearing on the architecture of the research design outlined in this chapter.

This dissertation looks at the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of a group of school leaders and teachers to SSE. The rationale for approaching my research question from the perspective of the local practitioners reflects my personal bias or belief that while one must address structural and in-built institutional inertia to change within the educational sector, greater attention needs to be paid to the human impact of change on the individual educational practitioner.

Ontological experiences influence the way a person perceives reality. This has no doubt shaped my beliefs about why a top-down approach to educational reform has had such a limited amount of success in the past. The relationship between structure and agency is complex but I believe in order for school self-evaluation to be successful in the long run it requires the deep seated commitment of school based personnel. That commitment is primarily influenced by the personal perception of the practitioner to what is the primary purpose of the educational reform measure which in this case is SSE. One of the primary purposes of SSE identified by my findings and in the conceptual literature review chapter of this dissertation is school improvement. Striving to achieve school improvement is a value which has shaped my ontological experiences of working with students in the educational sector and I feel it has an influence on my philosophical

assumptions underpinning my approach to the architectural design of this dissertation 'when studying individuals, qualitative researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities' (Creswell, 2013, 20).

I wish to acknowledge what I believe constitutes legitimate knowing within this qualitative piece of research by supporting the claim that 'your epistemology is, literally, your theory of knowledge' (Mason, 2002 16). Concerning my epistemological stance I see subjective knowledge as legitimate. This therefore this has implications for my research as 'to see knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, however, imposes on researchers an involvement with their subjects' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 6). The kind of knowledge that I hope to generate from this research is to ascertain school leaders and teachers' perspectives on engaging with school self-evaluation processes over the 2012/2013 academic year. I believe this is legitimate knowledge because unless we understand teachers and school leaders' beliefs and attitudes about school self-evaluation, any attempts to externally mandate SSE is doomed to fail in the long-term.

Schools are naturally conservative, time consuming and often energy sapping institutions for those who work in them, so unless individuals are presented with a compelling argument and enabling environment for change, they are less likely to engage in a meaningful way with any reform initiatives foisted upon them. Therefore, I maintain that we need to deconstruct teachers' and school leaders' views on school self-evaluation and convince them of its purpose in order to successfully implement a sustainable model of SSE in second-level schools.

I state my epistemology stance in an overt manner in order to make the case for the value of subjective knowledge generated by the research participants about SSE. This also implies that the purpose of this piece of research is 'not to provide self-evidential

proof of universally perceived objective realities, instead of the more epistemologically modest concepts of perspective and argument' (Mason, 2002, 16).

4.2.2 Reflexivity

I commenced this section about my philosophical assumptions underpinning the research by outlining my ontological positioning and my epistemological stance, highlighting the elevated status I attach to subjective knowledge. While this all fits in with my choice of a social constructionism paradigm in which to situate this piece of research, it also recognises and acknowledges the role I as a researcher play in the research process as 'the personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self' (Creswell, 2003, 182).

I share the belief implied in the above quote that research in general and qualitative research in particular requires a high degree of self questioning and reflexivity on behalf of the researcher. Mason (2002) cogently captures my understanding of the term reflexivity as 'thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions, decisions shape how you research and what you see' (Mason, 2002, 5).

Reflexivity suggests that 'researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 225) and that is the primary purpose of what I hope to achieve in this section. The reason why I relate to Mason's view of reflexivity is while she recognises reflexivity is a complex concept, she also places parameters on the reflexive process and emphasises it needs a practical focus:

> It is important, however that you focus your reflexive efforts meaningfully and strategically on the research itself and that you resist the temptation to use your research to showcase ego-centric or confessional tales about yourself, which may do little to illuminate your research practice or problem, or to help you make sound research decisions. (Mason, 2002, 5)

In order to honour this commitment to focus my 'reflexive efforts meaningfully and strategically' I address the impact of reflexivity on the research process and myself separately.

The Impact of Reflexivity on the Research Process

When I commenced this study it initially was my intention to use an action research methodology. During the 2011/2012 academic year, when I started designing the research component of this dissertation, I spent a considerable amount of time building up professional relationships with staff (leaders and teachers) in the two schools in which the focus group respondents were based. As part of that preparatory work, I made several visits to both school sites before the execution of the focus groups during the 2012/2013 academic year. At that time, my initial research question revolved around tracking the experience of teachers and school leaders of using various self-evaluating techniques in two second-level schools over a period of time using an action research methodology.

However, as the field research progressed, I moved away from an action research methodology. In essence, action research is about the combination of action and reflection with the aim of improving practice at local level. So with action research as my chosen methodology, I did a separate presentation to the staff in both schools about school self-evaluation. At that stage, my intention was still to assist both schools in designing a school self-evaluation model and to monitor how they got on using various school self-evaluating instruments.

So why did I change from an action research methodology towards a social constructionism paradigm? My reservations with conducting an action research based dissertation only became apparent when I conducted the initial round of focus groups in October 2012. I detected a sense of frustration from both the school leaders and teachers who formed the research participants of the study, with the number of new

initiatives underway in schools at that time. More importantly for my research, it was clear that this would have a major bearing on their engagement with any school self-evaluation initiative as it was been rolled out nationally at that time. At no stage did I detect any animosity towards me. I did however perceive a palpable sense of reform fatigue in the initial series of focus groups and realised any research about SSE in Ireland at that time should be viewed in the context of those suite of initiatives which were obviously a source of strife.

During the initial series of focus groups two major initiatives in particular came to the fore concerning Junior Certificate reform (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2011) and a national strategy on numeracy and literacy (DES, 2011c). These initiatives along with others were a major source of contention and were actively contributing to an overwhelming sense of weariness with policy overload amongst both the research respondents. This tension of underlying hostility towards the reform agenda was not helped by the industrial relations climate in schools at this time. Take home pay had been eroded over a series of budgets while simultaneously, additional after-school meeting time of an extra one hour a week was imposed on staff in schools in what is known colloquially as Croke Park hours courtesy of *'The Public Service Agreement 2010-2014'* (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010). This agreement was negotiated between the Government and public service unions and one of the major requirements for the second-level education sector was that teachers would provide an extra thirty three hours annually for after-school meetings.

Having conducted the first series of focus groups in October 2012, my preliminary analysis of the transcripts indicated the school leaders' and teachers' responses were far more intriguing concerning their attitude towards the imposition of SSE on their working lives rather than what they might have to say about the data instruments often associated with the conduct of the self-evaluating process such as checklists or

questionnaires. The last question I posed to the four focus groupings at the end of each focus group was deliberately included to cater for reflexivity in the research. It asked the research participants if there was anything they would like to add that had not been addressed in that particular focus group discussion. My intention with this question which was asked at the conclusion of the recording session for all twelve focus groups was to let the voice of the participants shape an element of the research.

As part of the reflective process when I examined the overall content and tone of those initial focus groups, my focus switched and I became far more interested in the attitudes of teachers and leaders rather than the actuals tools used to implement SSE. Following discussion with my thesis supervisor, I felt it was important to listen to what the research respondents wanted to say and this changed the direction of my research to focusing more on the attitudes and emotions of the research respondents. The flexible and fluid nature of qualitative research afforded me the opportunity to move away from an action research towards a more inductive paradigm of social constructionism:

> The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means that the initial plan for the research cannot be tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process may change after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data. (Creswell, 2009, 175-176)

This was a major learning point for me and turning point for the research as I felt it was important that I allowed the research to lead me rather than to stubbornly direct it in a predetermined path. Even though the direction of the research changed after the first series of focus groups this change was communicated to all four focus grouping before the middle series of focus groups. No misgivings or reservations about this change was expressed to me by any of the research respondents.

I engaged in reflective processes before I started the field research. This influenced my decision to separate leaders from teachers in both schools into separate focus groups. I was acutely aware of the different perspectives and positions, and the potential for

power dynamics if these two groups were combined into a single focus group and therefore I made the decision to split them into separate focus groupings.

<u>The Impact of the Research Process on Myself</u>

While I may have changed direction from an action research to a social constructionist paradigm, the use of focus groups as the main method to gather data remained consistent despite never before having used this method to conduct academic research. I have always believed in the importance of listening to the local practitioner. However engaging with reflectivity about the research process made it more evident to me the extent to which the individual needs to be engaged at the policy formulation stage. Before I embarked on this piece of research, I would have viewed policy formulation as a precursor to policy implementation and regarded them as taking place in a sequential manner. I now believe that this approach does not reflect the complexity of what happens at organisational policy level and in particular in organisations such as schools at local level. A top-down approach to reform such as SSE may be hampered by a disconnect between those who formulate the policy and those who are expected to implement it at grass roots level. I do not underestimate the difficulty in enabling schools to find time and the necessary resources to formulate their own policies, but I do believe it is the only way to ensure meaningful policy implementation. This belief is an example of how the research impacted on myself.

Strengthening cooperation emerges as a central finding in this dissertation and coincidentally my main data collection method of focus groups is a means by which this can be achieved. Ironically, by personally engaging with the concept of reflexivity for this piece of research, I learnt how much I believe in the concept of social reflexivity. Social reflexivity has been described 'as a process that encourages groups to explore together reflectively and to use such explorations to build new social identities' (Rogers, 2006, 135). Therefore when I used focus groups in this piece of research, I wished to

learn about the learning that occurs in group situations. Engaging in reflexive processes when conducting this piece of research has shaped my belief that social reflexivity has an important role to play in embedding school self-evaluation within the educational infrastructure. However I now also believe in the wider application of social reflexivity beyond the scope of examining attitudes, emotions and implementation practices in relation to SSE.

Before I had even started the field research, I was very aware that focus groups require skilful facilitation and management by the researcher. As previously mentioned, engaging with reflexivity processes heightened my awareness of the different positions and the potential for power dynamics. This was the main reason why I formed the school leaders and teachers into separate focus groups. However, I was cognisant of the fact that power dynamics could still play out in these separate groupings. In particular, I was conscious of the potential for dominant members to suppress other voices getting a fair hearing. Therefore, I planned each focus group well in advance of the recording date and wrote up debriefing notes after each focus group session. I was cognisant of group dynamics and strived to ensure I was reflecting on my facilitation skills and thereby hopefully improving my skills set as a focus group researcher.

Learning about social reflexivity and witnessing its transformative nature via the focus groups is an example of the significant impact the research process has had on myself. I say this because my knowledge of social reflexivity and awareness about power dynamics has increased as a result of carrying out twelve focus groups for this piece of research. This has afforded me fresh insight into the nature of group interactions that are both professional and personal in nature, which will continue to inform my understanding of group dynamics in the future.

4.2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were to the forefront of this researcher's mind at all stages throughout the research process. The research process of this dissertation involved an intensive consultation and collaboration with the staff of two second-level schools (School A and B) in order to track over a period of time their experiences of school self-evaluation. Ireland is a small country in terms of size with just under seven hundred and twenty second-level schools. I was anxious from the outset of the field research to conduct all stages of the research in a highly ethical manner and to ensure that all of the research participants understood the purpose of the research and were aware they had the right to withdraw from the process at any time.

Informed consent has been described as 'the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would likely influence their decision' (Diener and Crandall, 1978, 57). I felt it was important to be clear from the initial meetings with staff in both schools about what my research project was about and how much commitment and involvement would be involved. In order to adhere to this objective, I met with the school leaders in both schools and exchanged a series of emails over a period of six months before I commenced conducting the actual field research. I also met the teachers in both schools looking for volunteers to be research participants well in advance of conducting the focus groups. While I provided information about the project to both sets of staff, I did not put any pressure on staff to sign up to the research project, as I was cognisant of the fact that 'researchers have to ensure that volunteers have real freedom of choice if informed consent is to be fulfilled' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 80). I did not ask for the consent forms to be filled in there and then after I spoke to both staff but said I would return and collect them from the school office at a future date as I wanted to ensure 'that participants

really do understand the implications of the research, not mindlessly sign a consent form' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 80).

I designed an information sheet (Appendix A) about the research project in consultation with my dissertation supervisor. I submitted the information sheet as part of my documentation to receive written approval for my research project from Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee. This process involved submitting a detailed protocol form outlining how I intended to address the ethical considerations which may arise in an appropriate manner from conducting the research. I subsequently received written approval from the Ethics Sub-Committee to proceed with my research project. A copy of the information sheet about the research project was then provided to all potential research participants

Once I collected the names from both schools of the candidates who were willing to be research participants, I gave all the research participants an amended information sheet which now incorporated a written consent form (Appendix B). I felt it was important to state explicitly in the information sheet that any research participant could withdraw from the process at any time. I also verbally communicated this message to all respondents at the start of the initial series of focus groups.

At the start of the initial series of focus groups, I requested permission to audio record all of the focus groups. I re-stated this at the start of subsequent focus groups acknowledging that if any individual did not wish to be recorded, I would comply with this request. None of the research participants ever expressed such a reservation.

At no stage when I was conducting the field research was information about the research project withheld from the research participants and I did not use any deception techniques. I intend to make myself available to meet with the research participants in both schools after I submit my dissertation and present my findings to them.

As is common practice in academic research, it seemed appropriate that the research participants or the schools in which they teach would not be disclosed in the final published thesis. Anonymity and confidentiality are two ways of protecting a participant's right to privacy. By confidentiality I mean 'not disclosing information from a participant in any way that might identify that individual or that might enable the individual to be traced. It can also mean not discussing an individual with someone else' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 92). My understanding of the term anonymity in relation to educational research supports the assertion that 'the essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 91). By offering confidentiality and anonymity to the respondents, I felt it was important to clarify for both myself and the research participants if requested to do so the precise meaning of both these terms in relation to educational research.

No payment was offered to any of the research participants as I did not want to distort the researcher-participant relationship to create the possibility 'that participants may say something only because they will be paid for it' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 80). However, I did think that the school leaders in both schools felt they could benefit by tapping into my knowledge and skills that I have acquired in relation to school self-evaluation having recently completed a Masters dissertation about the topic (Harvey, 2009). So while my presence in both schools may have been mutually beneficial, I was always cognisant of the fact that I was a guest in both settings and not to take for granted the privilege afforded to me by granting me permission to conduct my research in the two school sites.

While I was acting as a researcher, the nature of this research project meant that I was also acting as a 'critical friend' in both schools by offering and sharing my views and knowledge about school self-evaluation. I do not think this impacted on the validity of

my research findings as I was acutely aware at all times that my primary role during my visitations to both schools was as an academic researcher. I do not envisage myself ever working in both schools and pointed out to all of the research participants that there was a clear time limit and completion deadline date of May 2013 for the final focus group and their commitment to the research process. Hopefully my ongoing attention to the ethical considerations outlined in this section alleviated any fears or anxieties the research participants may have had about involvement in this project.

By engaging with the concept of reflexivity throughout the research process as discussed in the previous section my intention was to highlight and minimise any potential ethical dilemmas for me that arose as I conducted the research. I familiarised myself with the '*Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*' (British Educational Research Association, 2011) and attempted to adhere to them at all times. I was keen to adequately address any possible dissemination issues that may arise as a result of my research. I believe there is a responsibility on social science researchers 'to make public the results of their research for the benefit of educational professionals, policy makers and a wider public understanding of educational policy and practice' (British Educational Research Association, 2011, 10). I would also concur that:

> Educational researchers must endeavour to communicate their findings, and the practical significance of their research, in a clear, straightforward fashion and in language judged appropriate to the intended audience. (British Educational Research Association, 2011, 10)

Therefore as a matter of appreciation and professional courtesy to the research participants, after I formally submit this dissertation it is my intention to make myself available to present my findings to the research participants. I also intend to issue a copy of the dissertation to both schools that assisted with this study or any other interested parties who may make such a request.

4.3 Paradigm: A Social Constructionist Worldview

The paradigm I would most identify with because of my philosophical assumptions outlined earlier in this chapter is a derivative of constructionism. Crotty (1998) suggests that constructionism rejects the notion of an absolute or objective truth waiting for us to discover it:

> Truth or meaning, comes into existence in and out of engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. (Crotty, 1998, 8)

However if I was to be more specific about the paradigm or world view which my philosophical assumptions most resonates with, it would be social constructionism as 'individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences - meaning directed towards certain objects or things' (Creswell, 2013, 24).

The above quote about social constructionism captures for me the essence of the symmetry between my epistemological approach and my ontological experiences. I view knowledge as something which we construct from our personal experiences and the degree to which we internalise those ontological experiences significantly shapes how we view the world.

I can identify with a derivative of constructionism because I believe not only are these meanings varied and multiple but they are often negotiated socially and historically as they 'are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives' (Creswell, 2013, 24).

A social constructionism paradigm fits into a qualitative research tradition that is 'grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly 'interpretivist' in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted' (Mason, 2002, 3). Creswell (2009) while suggesting there is a

high degree of commonality between the terms methodology and paradigm expresses a preference for the term worldview by which he means a set of beliefs that guides the researcher as 'a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that the researcher holds' (Creswell, 2009, 6).

While there are certainly many elements of other paradigms that I would consider to have merit, it is the general features of social constructionism that I find most appealing as 'there is no one school of social constructionism. Rather it is a broad church' (Lock and Strong 2010, 6). However they further elaborate that 'it is concerned with meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities' (Lock and Strong, 2010, 6). This would be a viewpoint that I would endorse and it makes social constructionism appealing to me as a paradigm in which to situate this piece of research.

Positivism and critical theory are two paradigms which I would have a natural affinity towards but to me both have limitations. Positivism has an enduring legacy which traces its roots back to the early Greek philosophers. It is mainly associated with the nineteenth century philosopher, Auguste Comte whose 'position was to lead to a general doctrine of positivism which held that all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can only be advanced by means of observation and experiment' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 7). A criticism of positivism is that it claims the legitimacy of the objective over the subjective and as someone who teaches Mathematics, I often find the use of empiricism reassuring. I would endorse the viewpoint, positivism does not often lend itself well to the study of human behaviour as 'where positivism is less successful, however, is in its application to the study of human behaviour where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrasts strikingly with the order and the regularity of the natural world' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 7).

Critical theory is another grand theory that affords an interesting way of looking at the world in general and knowledge in particular, and I would contend it also has influenced my epistemology. I say this because it encourages a questioning culture particularly of the assumptions and values on which I understand and view knowledge. I have found engaging with critical theory intellectually challenging but a worthwhile endeavour. When examining the various official policy documents about school self-evaluation for this dissertation, it was evident that they were written in the language of a strong managerial discourse and discourse analysis is a particular tool often associated with critical theory. I am aware discourse analysis is just one aspect of this grand theory which is useful to me. The slant on critical theory, I find insightful is that identified by Stephen Brookfield, who states 'thinking critically as being able to identify, and then to challenge and change, the process by which a grossly iniquitous society use dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs' (Brookfield, 2005, viii).

I find this definition of critical theory particularly useful as it reduces the essence of critical theory to three simple outcome verbs, identify, challenge and change. When reviewing SSE policies for this dissertation, I considered the text of those documents from the viewpoint of those three verbs. While situating the research within a social constructionist paradigm gives the dissertation structure, I adopted a flexible approach to incorporating features of other paradigms. My rationale for doing so is it supports and complements my academic endeavours to adequately address the various components of my research question. The use of this rationale helps to explain why I adopted a critical approach to documentary policy analysis about SSE in this dissertation. However at an instinctive and academic level, social constructionism and many of its features resonates more with me than any of the other paradigms and therefore is the overarching paradigm in which this piece of research is situated.

Like all grand theories in my view social constructionism has some limitations. Its critics would question the 'active' role of the researcher 'researchers recognise that their own background shape their interpretations, and they 'position themselves' in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences' (Creswell, 2013, 25). This is why I felt it was important to include a section about my philosophical assumptions at the start of this methodology chapter. An examination of my philosophical assumptions made me more cognisant that 'the researchers makes an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experience and background' (Creswell, 2013, 25). I addressed these caveats often associated with social constructionism by actively engaging with the concept of reflexivity throughout the research process.

4.4. Methods: Linking Subjective Knowledge and Collective Experiences

Before exploring my two main research methods of focus groups and documentary research I feel it is important to explain in more detail why I decided on adopting a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to this piece of research. My reasoning for conducting a qualitative rather than quantitative piece of research concur with those of Creswell (2009) who argues that if the research question calls for identifying factors that influence an outcome, the utility of an intervention or understanding the best predictor of outcomes, then a quantitative approach is best. However alternatively he advocates a qualitative approach 'if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach' (Creswell, 2009, 18). While SSE is indeed under researched in Ireland as it is relatively new phenomenon, it is also more compatible with a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach because it 'exhibits a preference for seeing in context and for stressing the importance of multiple inter-relationships between a wide range of factors in operation at any one time in the setting' (Denscombe, 2010, 238).

Mason (2002) identifies that qualitative research 'has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts' (Mason, 2002, 1) but also points out what its critics say 'it is merely anecdotal or at best illustrative, and that it is practiced in casual and unsystematic ways' (Mason, 2002, 1). I believe any potential shortcomings are outweighed if it is carried out in a highly structured and academically rigorous manner. I have endeavoured to do that in this research project as 'it deserves to be done well so that it can make fully justified claims for its own significance, effectiveness and meaning' (Mason, 2002, 1).

In this dissertation, I use two qualitative research methods and in my exploration of each I unveil why they form a natural link between my research methods and a social constructionist worldview. Both these methods complement the reflexive nature of qualitative research which starts with the assumption that individuals have an active role in the construction of their own social reality which is unique to them and this should be reflected in the research process. The two main methods used in this dissertation also respect that truth or claims to truth are subjective as to state something is true with absolute certainty is fraught with difficulty. An interpretative-qualitative approach recognises the importance of subjectivity in relation to knowledge and experiences and is compatible with a social constructionism worldview and the methods used in this piece of research.

4.4.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups are so central to this piece of research it is important I explore what they are and my rationale for using them. They are the main data collection method used in this study and they tend to 'consist of small groups of people who are brought together by a 'moderator' the researcher to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic' (Denscombe, 2010, 177). While they are a special type of group

in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures they do not conform to the traditional notion of a group interview:

> Focus groups are a form of group interview, though not in the sense of a backwards and forwards between interviewer and group. Rather the reliance is on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher, yielding a collective rather than individual view. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 7)

The dynamic nature of group interaction with an emphasis on a collective perspective is one of the main reasons why I decided to use focus groups rather than group interviews as a method in this piece of research. This resonates with the significance I attach to the concept of social reflexivity which I discussed earlier in this chapter. Focus groups are compatible with a social constructionism paradigm. I am interested in the participants' interpretation of what school self-evaluation means not just to them individually but also as a collective group working together in a professional capacity. This interpretation is possible by my use of this method as 'focus groups can afford participants the opportunity of simultaneously managing their individual identities and making a collective representation to the researcher' (Barbour, 2007, 39). This fits in with a social constructionist worldview because it is 'linking the individual and group interaction processes to wider social concerns and processes' (Barbour, 2007, 39).

Focus groups generate a different kind of data to individual interviews which seem to better address all three parts of my research question 'because one to one interviews are generally better suited to eliciting detailed contextualised histories … and focus groups are likely to facilitate discussion and unpicking the rethinking involved' (Barbour, 2007, 42).

So while focus groups are a comfortable fit with a social constructionism paradigm there were other reasons why focus groups came to the fore as the main method I would use to generate data for this piece of research. The following quote sums up those reasons as it states that 'focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what

participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do' (Morgan, 1988, 25).

One of my main reasons for choosing to use focus groups was their flexible nature as 'the moderator's role is to facilitate the group interaction rather than lead the discussion' (Denscombe, 2010, 177). Focus groups as a method are often underused in educational research because 'although its potential is considerable, the focus group, as a particular kind of group interviewing, still has to find its way into educational circles to the extent that it has in other areas of life' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 437). While the use of focus groups may be more frequently used in political and business circles, it intrigued me to use a method which is becoming more visible in relation to educational research. I believe that the use of focus groups in this study to access the attitudes, emotions and implementation procedures of school leaders and teachers to SSE processes is an ideal method because 'focus groups in common with other qualitative methods, excel at providing insights into process rather than outcome' (Barbour, 2007, 30).

Composition and Structure of the Focus Groupings

I conducted twelve focus groups in total over the 2012/2013 academic year. I decided on a timeframe as indicated in the following table and I managed to keep to the proposed schedule. Each focus group session was given a unique code for example ATFG1 stands for School A, Teacher Focus Group 1 or BLFG3 represents School B, Leader Focus Group 3.

The first letter of each code A or B is not included in the code of the individual leader and teacher quotations used in the dissertation. This was a deliberate decision so no comparison is possible between the two schools as that was not the purpose of this study. Secondly it helps to preserve the anonymity of both schools and the individuals who work in them.

FOUR DISTINCT FOCUS GROUPINGS	OCTOBER 2012	FEBRUARY 2013	MAY 2013
SCHOOL A TEACHERS (ATFG)	ATFG1	ATFG2	ATFG3
SCHOOL A LEADERS (ALFG)	ALFG1	ALFG2	ALFG3
SCHOOL B TEACHERS (BTFG)	BTFG1	BTFG2	BTFG3
SCHOOL B LEADERS (BLFG)	BLFG1	BFGL2	BLFG3

I decided to form two distinct focus groups in each school composed of school teachers and leaders as alluded to in the reflexivity section, as I expected school leaders and teachers to have different perspectives on school self-evaluation. The separation of these two groups was done to avoid any potential conflict of interest due to the professional, management and employment nature of the school leader/teacher relationship. My intention by facilitating two separate focus groups in each school was to enable both groups to be more frank and open in their discussions. This meant also in relation to my research question, I could look for differences in attitudes emotions and implementation procedure between the school teachers and leaders. Differences between the school leader and teacher groupings forms a subtheme of each of the eight main themes in the findings chapter.

<u>Outline of Topics Explored During the Focus Group Series</u>

The focus group series was conducted in three parts over the 2012/2013 academic year. My intention with the initial focus group with each of the four groupings was to establish their expectations of engaging with school self-evaluation processes and the level of learning and prior knowledge they had about SSE. Following consultation with my supervisor, I devised five key sensitising concepts to discuss during the initial round of focus groups in October 2012. Those sensitising concepts all revolve around school self-evaluation:

1. What does school self-evaluation mean?

2. Is it just paperwork and another administrative duty for schools?

3. What are the benefits of SSE?

4. What difficulties do you envisage by engaging with SSE?

5. What anxiety or fears do you have about SSE?

At the end of each focus group I asked 'is there anything else in relation to school self-evaluation which anyone here would like to add which did not come up for discussion'. The middle round of focus groups addressed issues in relation to recent documentation from the DES about school self-evaluation (DES, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) and the official website about school SSE, www.schoolself-evaluation.ie which was launched by the Inspectorate in November 2012. My objective was to establish how the research participants' knowledge about SSE had advanced or changed since the previous round of focus groups and to track if they had actively engaged in the implementation phase of SSE over the previous few months.

The final round of focus groups returned very much to the five sensitising concepts of the opening round of focus groups as I wished to see had their attitudes or emotions about SSE changed and to track that change as part of my research. When deciding in advance the topics to be explored in each series of focus groups, I was attempting to

probe deeply areas which enabled me to explore the respondents' attitudes and emotions about SSE as this would help answer all three parts of my research question.

<u>The Practicalities of Conducting the Focus Group Sessions</u>

The focus groups were all recorded on a portable audio recording device specifically designed for conference recording. An iPhone 4 was also used as a backup recording device but the quality of the recordings on the audio recording device was satisfactory for transcription purposes which meant the backup copies were not required. All focus group recordings were transcribed by myself. This was a slow laborious process but I felt it was necessary to listen to the data several times in order to get close to the data to ensure my interpretation of the data went beyond the superficial.

In school A, the teacher interviews took place at the end of the school day in a school classroom. The interviews with the school leaders took place in the Principal's office. In school B, all interviews took place in the school boardroom which I used as my base during all my visits to the school. The interviews took place at the end of the school day and this meant at times some of the teachers were under time pressure due to other meetings taking place simultaneously or their involvement in co-curricular activities. The atmosphere I was trying to create was professional but relaxed. In order to make the participants feel at ease I stated at the start of each focus group, if they wished to withdraw anything which they said from the transcripts at any time, this request would be facilitated. At no stage did it appear to me that anyone felt uncomfortable or regretted any comments made as part of the focus group recordings.

While each leader focus group normally had two participants, for the middle series one school leader focus group just had one participant. This was due to an unforeseeable event which led to the unavailability of one of the school leaders on the day the focus group interview was recorded. I realise that this makes it a one to one interview and not technically a focus group and removes many of the dynamics and characteristics

features of focus groups from that particular data collection exercise. However, I ran the session as a focus group rather than as an interview. I as the moderator, encouraged the participant to consider the possible perspectives of other school leaders to the ideas discussed and what the absent school leader response would be to viewpoints expressed in that session.

A criticism of focus groups concerns the potential for certain voices to become very dominant while others remain muted. This is why I felt it was important for me to transcribe each focus group before the next round of focus groups so as to be alert to the possibility of 'a problem of only one voice being heard, particularly if there is a dominant member of the group, and for the group dynamics to suppress dissenting voices or different views on controversial topics, even though the group moderator may try to prevent this' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 437).

I was a novice researcher in the use of focus groups as a data collection method at that time. I wished to minimise the impact of adverse group dynamics often associated with large groups so I deliberately limited the teacher focus groups to a maximum of five members and restricted the school leaders to just two members, the Principal and Deputy Principal in each school.

Barbour advocates the use of small focus groups 'if the requirements of the researcher to identify individual voices and seek clarification and further exploration of differences in views that emerge that make larger groups if not impossible, then exceedingly demanding to moderate and analyse' (Barbour, 2007, 60). This supports my rationale for using the term focus group in relation to the smaller focus groups. While focus groups often contain between six and ten people, the optimum number is flexible as 'one should not feel imprisoned by either this lower or upper boundary … ultimately, both the purpose of the research and the constraints of the field situation must be taken into account' (Morgan, 1997, 43). The senior management teams in both schools

comprised of the Principal and Deputy Principal so this was a constraint of the field situation that I took into account with the composition of the leader focus groups.

During the conduct of the focus groups, I was conscious of group dynamics and made a note of any non-verbal communication which might help interpret the data. When I play backed the audio recordings I listened not just to the content but noted inflections in voice, tone changes, conversational pauses or any other non-verbal forms of communication which may be relevant to my interpretation of the data.

My guiding principles when conducting the focus groups corresponded with those outlined in Newby (2010) when he states that 'focus groups should be clear on the agenda and focus, take place in a setting that is conducive to discussion, have a skilled moderator who can prompt people to speak, promote thinking and reflection and should have a record kept' (Newby, 2010, 350-351). I adhered to these principles to ensure that I as the researcher and moderator skilfully facilitated and managed the focus group data to get the most out of the data for my research findings. I was mindful as the moderator for the focus groups, to try and not to tightly limit the parameters of the SSE focus groups and overly influence proceedings or micro-manage the direction of the group discussion. This enabled the focus group participants to discuss issues such as reform fatigue and the prevailing industrial relation climate in schools which was impacting on their perception and perspective about school self-evaluation.

4.4.2 Documentary Research

Documentary research methods according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) is intended to provide access to and facilitate insights into three related areas of knowledge about human social activity. The first area relates to past research, but it is the second and third area of knowledge that they identify which is particularly relevant for this study:

> the second is that of processes of change and continuity over time … The third relates to the origins of the present that explains current structures, relationships

and behaviours in the context of recent and longer term trends. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 248)

In order to understand the research respondents' views about my research topic, I had to understand the origins of SSE and the processes which have shaped the model that is evolving in Ireland. By placing the emphasis of my research on processes, this also meant documentary research was compatible with a social constructionism paradigm where 'researchers often address the processes of interaction amongst individuals' (Creswell, 2013, 25). Social constructionism values subjective knowledge and meaning which is informed by context with a 'focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work' (Creswell, 2013, 25). A social constructionism worldview is consistent with documentary research as a method as 'the context of the documents being examined also requires close examination. This includes taking account of broad educational, social, political and other relationships' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 253). This symmetry of process and context meant documentary research as a research method and social constructionism as a research paradigm are compatible and therefore why I chose documentary research as a method. I believe that contemporary official documents are socially constructed and therefore this negates any 'attempt to treat them as objective and neutral accounts of real world events' (Scott, 2006, xxxiii).

The use of documentary research is quite prevalent in the social sciences as 'the bulk of the historical and comparative work that is undertaken in contemporary sociology involves the use of documentary materials' (Scott, 2006, 3). This is true of documentary methods in the educational domain despite the impression that 'the use of documents has tended to appear less significant than interviews, questionnaires and other techniques of direct observation' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 248).

This piece of research recognises the pivotal role of documentary research as a research method in education. Nearly all of the official documents examined about SSE were official publications which meant they were 'authoritative, since the data have been

produced by the State, employing large resources and expert professionals, they tend to have credibility' (Denscombe, 2010, 217).

While credibility is a welcome attribute of official publications as cautioned up above 'they are, rather, by-products of official activities and so must be treated, at best, as statements about these official processes' (Scott, 2006, xxxiii). This means recognising that school self-evaluation documentation must be understood in the appropriate context such as new managerialism as 'documents can owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture of reality' (Denscombe, 2010, 233).

SSE Documents Reviewed for this Piece of Research

Documents can emanate from a diverse range of sources as 'they may be produced by individuals or groups, and take many different forms' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 249). Therefore it is essential that I clarify the type and source of documents I used in conducting this piece of research. All documents used in this piece of research were primary and public 'records produced by local, national and international authorities and small or large organisations' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 249). All documentation reviewed in relation to school self-evaluation for this dissertation were public documents. This meant they were relatively easy to access and it was a simple exercise to authenticate the origins of the material.

These documents were all published this century so were not only contemporary but also available in an electronic format in that they could be readily accessible via the Internet. The primary authors of these documents tended to be transnational agencies (OECD, SICI) or Irish State agencies (DES, Inspectorate), so I was highly cognisant that 'government and other organisational websites that store documents in this way may seek to cast the government or organisation in a favourable light' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 250). When I examined these educational policy documents, I was conscious that in official documents 'language can be an instrument of power' (Olssen,

O'Neill and Codd, 2004, 66). Therefore when dissecting educational policy using documentary research as a method, I was keenly aware that official policy documents are not just a text but also a discourse as 'fundamentally, policy is about the exercise of political power and the language that is used to legitimate that power' (Olssen, O'Neill and Codd, 2004, 72).

I was acutely aware that while official documents were useful, I needed to recognise the managerial discourse which can be evident in many of these publications as 'policy reports are also important for revealing the kinds of assumptions that underlie policy reforms. They represent an outlook or ideology and also embody the contradictions and tensions that are inherent in state policy' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 251). Therefore, I was mindful, when scrutinising these public documents that they were often agenda driven and care needed to be taken to resist taking for granted some of the assumptions underlying these public documents.

While I reviewed several policy documents for this dissertation, one in particular was the subject of intense scrutiny. In November 2012, in order to deepen the school self-evaluation process in Ireland, the Inspectorate issued '*School Self-Evaluation – Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools*' (DES, 2012a). In my view, this is the seminal document in determining the SSE model that emerges over the next decade hence its prominence in this dissertation. When I started the field component of the focus groups these guidelines were still at draft stage. However even at that time I was aware of their impending import. I had recently attended a memorial lecture at Maynooth University given by the Chief Inspector of the Irish Inspectorate, Dr. Harold Hislop in which he made several references to these draft guidelines and suggested at this lecture that:

> They will help schools to make realistic and accurate judgements about the quality of their practice and to identify areas for improvement. In addition, the draft guidelines include advice on how self-evaluation may be undertaken and a set of simple tools that can be used to collect evidence about the work of the school. (Department of Education and Skills, 2012f, 18)

Those draft guidelines were officially launched in November 2012 and schools were actively encouraged to engage with SSE. This was fortuitous for me as the official launch of these guidelines coincided with the research timeline of my project. The prominence and publicity generated by these draft guidelines after their launch, was one of the factors which made them so central to this piece of research and hence they formed a pivotal focal point of the discussions during the second round of focus groups in February 2013.

I decided to issue a copy of '*School Self-Evaluation – Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools*' (DES, 2012a) to each of the research participants even though they are available online from the DES website www.education.ie. I was anxious to increase their basic knowledge about SSE and its likely direction without forcing the topic on them or to influence their opinions about SSE. By combining documentary research with focus groups within a social constructionist paradigm my intention was to use these two methods to interrogate all three parts of my research question in an academically rigorous manner as 'documentary research offers a means of promoting methodological pluralism which seems especially appropriate in a field as diverse and challenging as education' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 255).

4.5 Data Collection: Purposeful Sampling Strategy

In this section about data collection, I explain how the two schools were selected to be the field study sites in which I conducted the research. I describe the process of selecting the school leader and teacher participants in both schools. A purposeful sampling strategy involves three considerations which 'are the decision as to whom to select as participants (or sites) for the study, the specific type of sampling strategy, and the size of the sample to be studied' (Creswell, 2013, 155). I deem it necessary to go into detail about the selection of schools and research participants as the guiding principle of the sampling strategy used in this dissertation is to 'purposefully inform an

understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study' (Creswell, 2013, 156).

Selection of the School Sites for Conducting Field Research

The field research was conducted in two second-level schools so their selection was an important sampling decision. I decided that I was not going to conduct the research in the school where I have taught for the past fifteen years and where I am still a staff member. This decision I made for the following reason. I wished to minimise the possibility for any potential conflict of interest to arise by my exercising the dual role as practitioner and researcher in the same site. I felt that not selecting the school in which I teach as my research site was the best way for me to create that sense of professional detachment necessary to conduct the research. I do not think it possible or always desirable to remove oneself completely from the research. However, I wished to reduce the potential for any potential bias in my research.

Having made a decision not to conduct the research in the school in which I am based this meant I had to decide where I should conduct my field research and the number of schools. Following consultation with my supervisor and allowing for logistical and time challenges of juggling working full time while conducting the research, I decided that two schools would be the optimum number. I considered two schools to be an appropriate number because it still allowed for difference between school sites while it was a very manageable number for me in terms of commuting time and logistics. The essence of my research was never about quantity, but ascertaining the perspectives of some school leaders and teachers about SSE. I am cognisant that this piece of research is not representative of all second-level school leaders and teachers in Ireland as 'the intent in qualitative research is not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive information detail about each site or individual studied' (Creswell, 2013, 157). If I had more time and resources and wished to get a more national picture

of school self-evaluation in Ireland, I accept a much a larger sample of schools would be required.

While there are just over seven hundred second level schools in Ireland, most that share many common characteristics, I would contend that each one of these schools is unique and has its own particular culture. I am aware that my decision to choose just two schools places limitations on the scale and scope of this piece of research. The confinement of the sample size to just two sites means any findings that are generated from this dissertation are very situation specific. I contend that my findings do however provide points of insight that may be of interest to other second-level schools.

Geographical and time considerations meant my initial trawl of schools was confined to schools within a reasonable proximity of less than a two hour commute from my home and work locations. This is a highly urbanised region and corresponds to the most densely populated part of the island so this meant my possible sample size was still quite large. A major determining factor in choosing the two schools used in this study was their very short lifespan. The two schools are Community Colleges less than six years old, neither having completed the cycle of taking a First Year group right through to the Leaving Certificate at that time. A full second-level school cycle takes a minimum of five years or six years if the school has a Transition Year programme.

My rationale for choosing two schools with such a short history was as follows. Both schools were green field sites and this meant there was a strong sense they were pioneering their own destiny. This was important to me because of my belief that practices become embedded in schools some good, some bad but all difficult to change after they become embedded into the school culture. I felt practices would not be as embedded in newer schools making them more flexible and open to the concept of the school engaging with SSE practices. I also felt that while no school, no matter how new is completely a blank slate, to a certain degree there was a 'tabula rasa' dimension to

them. This probably made them more open and amenable to the idea of me conducting my research there and I was anxious to conduct my research in such a setting.

In both schools prior to the commencement of the focus group sessions, I conducted a short presentation about SSE. In school A, I met with the Transition Year teachers and talked about school self-evaluation in the context of Transition Year. In school B, I met the SDPI committee at a lunchtime meeting prior to a workshop I conducted with the whole staff about SSE. I do not think either of these once-off workshops had a major impact on the validity of my research project but I wish to acknowledge the potential influence of this prior work on the findings.

Community College Model of Second-Level Schools

There are various different types of second level schools in Ireland and I decided on choosing just one particular model which is the Community College model. Community Colleges are run by the local Education and Training Board (ETB) and usually have their own Board of Management which is a sub-committee of the ETB. They are non-fee paying schools and are fully state funded. They tend to have an open admissions policy and cater for all students of varying ability levels in their particular catchment area. My reasoning for choosing this particular model of second-level school was it helped to reduce the sample size and as I teach in this type of school, it was also the model most familiar to me.

There are 16 Education and Training Board (ETB) in Ireland. They replaced the governance structure known as Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) and were reconfigured with statutory effect from the 1st July 2013. The final factor that determined the two schools that I selected was that they were in two different ETBs and that I knew a permanent member of staff in both schools. This meant I could approach both staff members and make preliminary enquiries about conducting research about SSE in their respective schools. My rationale for having a contact in both schools who I

knew was not just about gaining easier access to a school. From the outset of conducting the field research, I was keen to build trust between myself and the schools by establishing my credentials as an individual who would conduct my research in a highly ethical manner. I felt that this was only possible if I had a previous working professional relationship with an individual in both my chosen schools.

School A - Demographic Profile

School A is a growing co-educational Community College situated in a suburban setting. The school was purpose built as part of a new town-land development on the periphery of a large urban setting. The school had 30 teachers and 550 students during the 2012/2013 academic year. The school was only three years old at that stage but plans to grow to one thousand students over the next few years. In September 2012, the school introduced a Transition Year programme and a Leaving Certificate Applied programme for the school's initial cohort of Senior Cycle students.

The school caters for students of varying levels of academic ability and from a diverse range of backgrounds. A high proportion of the student population was born outside Ireland. All subjects are taught at mixed ability level in First Year, but in subsequent years students are often allocated to Higher and Ordinary level classes in various subjects. The school also provides a wide range of co-curricular activities.

School A – Selection of Focus Group Candidates

I contacted School A in October 2011 via email explaining my research project and requesting a meeting with the Principal and Deputy Principal to explain in further detail my research project. Fortunately they both agreed to meet me and an appointment was scheduled for January 2012. From my initial meeting with the Principal and Deputy Principal of School A in January 2012, it was clear that the priority for School A was the introduction of two new programmes at Senior Cycle for the academic year 2012/2013. These two new programmes to the school were Leaving Certificate Applied

and Transition Year (TY). It planned not to offer the traditional Leaving Certificate programme until the following academic year 2013/2014.

Both the Principal and Deputy Principal were agreeable to be part of a focus group about SSE. They were anxious to tap into my expertise as a TY Coordinator in my own school so they expressed a preference for the teachers' focus group to be composed of teachers assigned to teach on their initial TY programme over the following academic year. I have more than three years' experience as a TY Co-ordinator for over one hundred and twenty students so I agreed to focus my research in their school on their initial TY Programme to run from September 2012 to May 2013. There was an element of quid pro quo to School A allowing me to conduct my research in that I would share my knowledge about SSE and TY with the TY Teachers and the newly appointed TY Coordinator in School A. I was very agreeable to this arrangement and felt it assisted me to build up a positive working rapport with the school which I felt was essential to carrying out my research in a satisfactory manner.

One of the main outcomes of this initial meeting was the identification of the introduction of TY as an immediate priority for the school. This had a significant impact on my selection of teachers from school A for my teachers' focus group. After the January meeting, I made contact with the TY Coordinator in school A and we set up a date in April 2012 for me to meet the TY teachers. During that short meeting, I gave a short presentation about my research project and gave all attendees an information sheet about my research project (Appendix A). I asked them to consider volunteering to take part in three focus groups over the following academic year. In order to not exert undue pressure to participate, I asked them to give their name to the TY Coordinator over the next few weeks if interested rather than to expect an immediate response.

The TY Coordinator contacted me a few weeks later with the names of five teachers who volunteered to take part in my study as research participants in the teachers' focus

group in School A. The teachers' demographics of the five volunteers were quite diverse in terms of age, teaching experience, teaching subjects. A couple of the research respondents had post of responsibility holders which are middle management positions in schools for which teachers get a financial allowance. In terms of gender all five teacher research participants were female which I do not think had a bearing on my findings. The school would have a greater number of female teachers than male teachers so would be representative of the staff profile and gender was not a focus of my research.

I agreed to liaise with School A's TY coordinator to arrange the date for the first set of focus groups to take place in October 2012 and sort out collection of consent forms (Appendix B). The focus group with the school leaders was arranged for the same day however it is noteworthy that there had been a change in personnel at Deputy Principal level. The newly appointed Deputy Principal was very knowledgeable about the workings of the Inspectorate which was extremely fortuitous for my research and readily agreed to be part of the research project.

School B - Demographic Profile

School B is just one year older than School A, and has many similarities with that School in that it is also a growing co-educational community college situated in a suburban setting and is an integral part of a vibrant local community. The school is also run by an ETB but not the same ETB as School A. The School introduced TY and the traditional Leaving Certificate Programme during the academic year 2011/2012. At that stage the school employed over 35 teachers and had a student population of 600 pupils. When I made my initial preparatory visits to School B, the students were being educated in a temporary building but moved into a purpose built permanent accommodation in September 2012. Similar to School A, the school is a non-fee paying school and caters for students with varying levels of academic ability.

The student population in School B was less diverse than School A and did not have as many international students. All subjects are taught at mixed ability level in First Year, but as students progress through the school, students are often allocated to Higher and Ordinary level classes in various subjects. School B also offers a wide range of programmes in addition to the traditional Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes. They include TY, Leaving Certificate Applied, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. The school provides a wide range of co-curricular activities.

In September 2010 the school set up a School Development Planning Initiative Committee (SDPI) which played a central role in the provision of teachers for the teachers' focus group in School B.

School B – Selection of Focus Group Candidates

My initial contact with School B followed a similar pattern to my early interaction with School A. In October 2011, I emailed the then Deputy Principal which was followed up with a phone call requesting a meeting with the Principal and Deputy Principal to discuss in further detail my research project. Following further email correspondence a date was scheduled for me to meet both of them in January 2012. The priority for this school was different from School A. They were keen for me to assist their SDPI team in preparing for a Whole School Evaluation (WSE). WSE is a form of inspection conducted by Inspectors from the national Inspectorate. It involves the compilation of a comprehensive report about various aspects of the school which is eventually published on the DES website. I was agreeable to this arrangement as school self-evaluation is a component of WSE so I knew it would not be difficult for me to assist with this task as I had built up quite a bit of knowledge about WSE's in my own school and from my academic studies (Harvey, 2009).

In September 2010, School B formed a school based SDPI committee whose primary remit was to draft a school plan. The SDPI committee is composed of the Principal, the Deputy Principal, an Assistant Principal, and four teachers from the staff. The four teachers and Assistant Principal who would have also had teaching duties formed the teachers' focus group in School B.

The SDPI committee personnel is a diverse representative mix of staff in terms of age, gender, and subject specialists. I met the SDPI committee in March 2012 and we prepared a two hour workshop with staff about WSE and school self-evaluation. As part of that workshop, I presented a forty minute presentation to staff after which the staff broke up into smaller groups to look at various aspects of WSE and SSE. The primary purpose of this workshop was to provide information to all staff and to prepare staff for what to expect if it had a WSE. A few weeks after the workshop, I met the SDPI team again at one of their scheduled lunch time meetings and they all agreed to form part of either my school leaders or teachers focus groups in School B.

When the focus groups sessions commenced in October 2012, the constituents of the teacher group remained the same but the leaders focus group had reconfigured over the summer months. The Principal was now on maternity leave, so the eventual line up for the leader's focus group in School B was the Deputy Principal who was the Acting Principal and a member of staff who was now Acting Deputy Principal. Just like in School A, fortuitously the change in personnel happened before I had conducted any of the three rounds of focus groups so had no bearing on my findings.

The main difference between the focus groups in school A and school B was that both focus groups in school B were mixed, while in school A both focus groups only contained members of the same gender. This meant that in school A, the leaders' focus group contained two males and the teachers' focus group contained five female teachers. In this dissertation, I was not examining differences between gender in my

findings, so I was not duly concerned about the uniformity of gender in the focus groups in school A but feel it is worthy of mention in this methodology chapter.

4.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of qualitative data can take many forms and is influenced by a myriad of factors such as epistemological stances, ontological experiences and methods used, all of which are discussed in this chapter. The generic aim of data analysis can be summarised as 'moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data' (Creswell, 2009, 183). Aware that my philosophical assumptions should provide the basis for informing the means in which I systematically analyse the data, I decided to use a thematic analysis approach. I adopted an approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) which incorporates six steps as the basis to their thematic analysis model. They define thematic analysis as follows:

> Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic. (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 83)

While they originally designed this generic guide to qualitative data analysis for use in the field of psychology, I chose it because I think it is equally apt for my dissertation. The Braun and Clarke model (2006) is comprehensive and its step by step structure made it easy to follow and apply. I feel because it is interpretative in nature it fits in well with the social constructionism paradigm in which I have situated my research. The six steps they identify are as follows:

1. Familiarise yourself with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Produce findings

I initially coded the data after each round of focus groups so this took place in November 2012, March 2013 and June 2013. I carried out the first three steps after the all twelve focus groups were conducted. I started the final three steps in August 2013 and it me took several months to complete the thematic analysis. The initial step involved familiarising myself with the data by listening to an audio of all of the focus groups recordings a couple of times before I started the transcription process. By listening to the audio repeatedly, I was not just conscious of the words the research participants used but was trying to pay particular attention to the group interaction between the respondents.

Getting close to the data was a necessary step before I could start the data reduction phase of my analysis as 'one of the enduring problems of qualitative data analysis is the reduction of copious amounts of written data to manageable and comprehensive proportions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 559). One of the ways, I addressed this challenge was by a process known as coding.

Coding has been described by Kerlinger (1970) as a process of assigning responses of the respondents to specific categories for the purpose of analysis. The second stage of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model involved generating codes and I started my coding framework with three categories revolving around all three parts of my research questions. This involved further categorisation of the data into four sections. The first section was knowledge about SSE. The second was attitudes towards SSE whether the research respondents had a positive or negative predisposition towards it. The third was emotions again positive and negative and finally the fourth category was any responses that related to implementation procedures or practices.

After I had categorised the data into the four sections, the next step was to search for themes. At this stage when I identified themes I colour coded the data using fluorescent highlighter pens giving each theme I identified a different colour. My rationale for

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coding the data and identifying themes after each round of focus groups was to help me prepare for possible follow up or related questions to the emergent themes in the next round of focus groups.

When I concluded conducting all twelve of the focus groups sessions, I returned to the various stages of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model of thematic analysis. Going back and forth with the stages fitted with their interpretation of how the model should be used. In a follow up publication by Braun and Clarke (2013) in which they reviewed their original model they stated that 'this should not be viewed as a linear model, where one cannot proceed to the next phase without completing the prior phase (correctly): rather analysis is a recursive process' (Braun and Clarke 2013, 123).

In July 2013, I pursued the coding process again but this time in a more intensive manner. I was free from work commitments for the summer months so this meant I could immerse myself more deeply in the coding process. I re-familiarised myself with the data and reviewed the themes I had previously identified. I was now at the penultimate stage of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model. This involved not just more clearing defining my themes but looking for subthemes in the data. The final stage of the six steps involved writing up my findings chapter. I was very conscious of linking up my themes to my research question in relation to the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of the respondents towards SSE. Because of the inductive nature of my research writing up my findings identified some themes which I had not initially considered and this suggested some fresh topics for my literature review. A pertinent example of this was the issue of building trust between the various educational stakeholders via strengthening cooperation as 'a final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation or meaning of the data' (Creswell, 2009, 189).

By highlighting the role of interpretation, Creswell (2009) identifies that no matter how scientific or sophisticated the data analysis process used, the subjectivity of the

researcher must be considered particularly in relation to findings. In the next section I explore how I validated the accuracy of my findings.

4.7 Data Validation

I believe that the validation of the findings occurs throughout the various stages in the research process. I single it out here as a separate section in this chapter to emphasise its importance as 'validity is an important key to effective research. If a piece of research is invalid then it is worthless. Validity is thus a requirement for both quantitative and qualitative research' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 179). Before I examine validity in relation to this piece of qualitative research, I feel it is important to mention that validity has a different meaning in quantitative and qualitative research as 'validity does not carry the same connotation as it does in quantitative research' (Creswell, 2009, 190). This perspective of multiple meanings for the term validity depending on the nature of the academic research is endorsed by others as 'much qualitative research abides by principles validity which are very different from that of positivism and quantitative methods' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 180). This piece of research is qualitative and situated in a social constructionism paradigm for the reasons outlined earlier in this methodology chapter. My main motive for conducting a qualitative rather than quantitative piece of research was 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people have for them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 3). This explains why I decided to conduct the focus groups in the 'natural setting' of the actual schools of the school leaders and teachers. However the interpretative nature of my research along with the dearth of research material about school self-evaluation in Ireland was influential in informing my decision to conduct this piece of research by a qualitative approach within a social constructionism

paradigm as 'the researcher will need to locate discussion of validity within the research paradigm that is being used' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, 559).

So what does validity mean to me within my chosen paradigm of social constructionism? Validity is 'the test a researcher employs actually measures what it is claimed that it measures' (Malim and Birch, 1997, 47). Wiersma (1995) states that 'validity of qualitative research for the most part is established on a logical basis, and providing an argument for validity requires well documented research and a comprehensive description' (Wiersma, 1995, 273). I attended to these two requirements to ensure data validity in the following ways. Chapter two and three in this dissertation review the literature and identified the main areas of study for this piece of research. These chapters fulfil the descriptive task that a clear audit trail exists from analysis back to source data. By looking at common aspects of my research in relation to other research about SSE in the literature review chapters meant that I was mindful of how my findings compared to the findings of others in the selected literature I reviewed about SSE. In general my findings about SSE reflected what is in that literature.

Triangulation was used to cross reference data and ensure validity. The focus groups (twelve in total) actively afforded all participants the opportunity to contribute their opinions. I was operating in the dual capacity as a researcher and moderator of the focus groups so I could follow up inconsistencies on positions and request clarification. I contend that there is a validating element with the use of focus groups as you are asking the research participants to evaluate key ideas about SSE. This validating effect is strengthened by conducting three focus groups sessions with the same participants over an extended period of time.

My understanding of the use and meaning of the term 'triangulation' refers to using more than one source of data gathering to provide a fuller and deeper meaning of the research topic. This understanding of the word seems to concur with Leader and Boldt

who describe triangulation as 'different views of the same situation ... to allow a more complete picture to emerge. Relying on one method of research may distort the reality of a situation and inhibit an adequate portrayal' (Leader and Boldt, 1994, 17). So while focus groups were the primary source of data, data was subject to triangulation by the use of documentary research. By using more than one method to obtain data, therefore I as the author of the research design and architecture can attest to the validity of the data generated by this piece of research.

My use of a variety of methods is compatible with my epistemological views of knowledge. By confining my documentary research to documents that are easily available online, means their authenticity can be easily checked and that there is an audit trail of paperwork. So while documentary research gives both globalised and localised context to SSE, it is also a suitable method to complement the use of focus groups in triangulating the validity of the findings.

Validity occurs at all stages throughout the research process and is enhanced by spending a prolonged period of time in the field as 'in this way, the researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and people' (Creswell, 2009, 192). Over an eighteen month period, I visited both school sites at least half a dozen times and this also strengthens the validity of the findings presented in this dissertation.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter addressed some of the key issues that arose when I designed a research framework in order to conduct this piece of academic research in a rigorous manner. The chapter started with an exploration of some of my philosophical assumptions. This involved an examination of my ontological experiences to date and my epistemological stance on the subjective nature of knowledge. These assumptions underpinned my research design and architecture and led me to adopt a social constructionist paradigm

in this research project. A concept closely associated with social constructionism is reflexivity and I explored not just the impact of reflexivity on me but also on the research process itself. My approach to ethics informed many of my philosophical assumptions. Therefore also in this section, I explored the ethical considerations that I was mindful to adhere to at all stages throughout the research process.

There then followed a discussion on the data collection methods used in the research. The two main methods used in this dissertation are focus groups and documentary research. I argued in this chapter that they are consistent with my chosen paradigm of social constructionism.

The final phase of the research design used in this particular study concerned my approach to the various data procedures I used to process data. The initial stages of data collection often involves making a number of critical choices. I used a purposeful sampling approach to selecting both school sites and the school leaders and teachers who were to be the research participants. The data collection phase preceded the challenging stages of data analysis and interpretation and here I used a thematic analysis model devised by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The final stage of data procedures involved validating the data. Various practices were employed throughout the research process to ensure the validity of any data collected, analysed and interpreted. Data was triangulated from various sources. Validity of the data was also enhanced by myself engaging in processes of reflectivity. I spent a prolonged period in the field as I visited both schools on a continuous basis over eighteen months. The combined effect of adhering to these data validating practices means I can attest to the accuracy and the quality of the findings generated as a result of this dissertation. Those findings form the basis of the next chapter in this dissertation.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into three main parts based on the timeline of a series of focus

groups held in October 2012, February 2013 and May 2013. Over the course of the

2012/2013 academic year, twelve focus groups in total were held in two second-level

schools with two distinct subgroups composed of school leaders and teachers in both

schools. The focus groups were held at the start, middle and end of the academic year

which corresponds with the timeline when the main findings of this chapter were

generated, October 2012, February 2013 and May 2013.

I deliberately decided to separate the findings chapter from the discussion of findings

chapter in this dissertation as I wanted to let the research participants' voices to be heard

with minimal interpretation from me as the researcher. I am cognisant that as a

researcher I have selected quotes from the research participants so this therefore negated

the possibility of eliminating researcher bias completely.

This chapter contains a breakdown of the main themes which emerged in that particular

round of focus groups. Those eight themes are as follows:

    Theme 1 – Initial Impressions
    Theme 2 – Perceived Benefits
    Theme 3 – Perceived Barriers
    Theme 4 – Stakeholders Involvement
    Theme 5 – SSE Support Mechanisms
    Theme 6 – Tracking Changes of the Respondents about SSE
    Theme 7 – Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE
    Theme 8 – Going Forward - Practical Suggestions.

I present the themes using the timeline of the series focus groups to enable the reader to

track changes in the attitudes and emotions of the research respondents to SSE. I also

believe a sequential approach to the data generated in the focus groups is logical and

enhances understanding of the data.

I explore any relevant subthemes and conclude each theme by looking at possible

differences between the school leaders and teachers' focus groupings. One significant

difference between the groupings concerns stakeholder involvement in that the school leaders in both schools seem to be more supportive of the involvement of external stakeholders in SSE processes.

I revisit many of the eight central themes and subthemes in the discussion of findings chapter of this dissertation. My intention by identifying these emergent themes now with relevant quotes from the respondents' findings is to further validate my interpretation of the data which forms the basis of a discussion of findings in the next chapter.

As the focus groups progressed, I more and more came to realise that even the term school self-evaluation itself is a contested concept. However the selected quotes chosen give a snapshot of some of the many paradoxical dilemmas associated with school self-evaluation, therefore influencing the varying perceptions of the respondents concerning this allusive term.

5.2 October 2012: Initial Series of Focus Groups

In October 2012, the initial round of four focus groups took place. Following a series of discussions with my supervisor, I decided that the initial focus group sessions would revolve around the following five main areas:

1. What does school self-evaluation mean?

2. Is it just paperwork and another administrative duty for schools?

3. What are the benefits of SSE?

4. What difficulties do you envisage by engaging with SSE?

5. What anxiety or fears do you have about SSE?

My epistemology lends itself to the view that deep understanding or true knowledge is generated by blending the collective viewpoints of the respondents about a situation or idea or as in this case about SSE. This influenced my choice of the five questions outlined above. The initial series of focus groups was framed in such way to tap into

the logical and emotional perspective of the respondents about SSE as the intention was to understand in a comprehensive manner what were the research participants' deep seated viewpoints concerning SSE.

Each teacher focus group had five participants and each school leader focus group had two participants so there were ten teacher respondents and four school leader respondents in total.

5.2.1 Theme 1 – Initial Impressions

I started each of the four focus groups by asking each of the participants what SSE meant to them. I felt this was important as this question was the baseline from which I could track how their views or attitudes towards SSE evolved over the academic year. This theme gives an indication of the prerequisite understanding and perspectives the school teachers and leaders have about school self-evaluation at the outset of this research project.

The comments selected best reflect school teachers and leaders initial insights about SSE that are common to both teachers and leaders. There was a lot of commonality in the initial impressions of the respondents about school self-evaluation. I also identify any differing viewpoints between these two groupings and I bring this to the attention of the reader for his/her consideration.

Initial Impressions – Shared Understandings of the Groupings

From the outset it was clear both the teacher and leader groupings had a good initial grasp of what SSE is about and identified some common characteristics or components one would associate with SSE:

> Self-evaluation to me is an evaluation of school processes from the ground up, from the point of view of student input on school environments and processes in classes, to teacher evaluations and also evaluations on managerial actions, processes, policies, support structures, attendance and examination. (TFG1)

Some of the teachers and leaders identified reflection as critical and central to the SSE process. One respondent stated that 'I would just see it as a way of reflecting on your own work and finding out what students think about what you're doing in the class' (T FG1). The high level of awareness is also evident in the school leaders' responses as reflected in the following comment that 'now they want schools to be reflective practitioners themselves and you must kind of engage' (LFG1).

From the commencement of conducting the focus groups, the school leaders and teachers appeared to be quite familiar with the term SSE and its basic meaning which added to the richness of the discussion during the various focus groups sessions and to the validity of the findings emanating from them.

<u>Initial Impressions – Differences between the Groupings</u>

The school teachers appeared to be more concerned with how SSE would impact in their classrooms, while the school leaders seemed to have a much broader perspective:

> I suppose evaluating my own lesson plans and if I did a good or a bad lesson and why, if it's good, great, carry on, if it's not really I suppose if it's not the part you need to focus on a bit more and what you did wrong and what you can do to improve it. Whether it be classroom management or maybe the lesson was pitched too high or too low, if the kids just weren't interested, weren't engaged. (TFG1)

Some of the teacher respondents referenced the role of reflection as a dimension to SSE and how it can be used as an evaluation tool:

> School self-evaluation means to me I suppose evaluating classroom practices. Student's evaluation of how a topic was taught or what they have learned from a topic and then teacher reflections and teacher self-evaluation on their own teaching. (TFG1)

While the school leaders were concerned about what happens in the classroom, they seem to more conscious that SSE involves a much wider remit:

> I think of school self-evaluation and I just see so many different levels of it and so many different areas that have to be evaluated from the bottom up, from the top down, right across the board from you know a management, from teaching and learning right down to evaluating how the time of the cleaners is used effectively. (LFG1)

This possibly could be attributed to the fact that school leaders have managerial positions in schools and they tended to view SSE as merely a reframing of SDP. SDP was a school based planning process which the research respondents were all quite familiar with at that stage:

> I suppose I see it as kind of an evolution of where things have started with the Whole School Evaluations (WSE) and you know going through to the Management, Leadership and Learning (MLL). It is almost like the Department of Education have being saying we have being giving you the tools and now we are handing it over to you and you must engage in this process yourself. (LFG1)

Improvement is one of the primary logics or rationale mentioned in the literature about SSE and this was also part of the reasoning for SSE advocated by some of the school leaders:

> The good school has been doing school self-evaluation all the time with a view to improving. Looking at what they've done, assessing what has happened, looking to put in change or improvement. So, you know, it is only a matter of recording that and putting a bit of structure on it, in my view. (LFG1)

Overall, initial impressions about SSE would indicate that the school leaders are more favourably disposed to the concept of SSE than the school teachers.

5.2.2 Theme 2 – Perceived Benefits

When prompted to discuss the benefits of SSE, the teachers and leaders responses to this theme were quite broad and covered a wide range of benefits. There was also a similarity in responses to this theme with several benefits mentioned repeatedly by both school teachers and leaders. These included encouraging critical reflection, staff collegiality and bringing a sharper focus to aligning staff towards similar goals.

Perceived Benefits - Staff Collegiality and Focus

The potential of SSE to encourage staff to work together in a more cohesive manner and for leaders to consider the broader implications of work based practices beyond the classrooms were mentioned:

> One benefit I think is that it really focuses the staff on the school and it really - should anyway - you know engender a kind of a buy in by the staff into a lot of the practices, policies and cultures that are in a school; and, you know, allowing the staff to be very inward looking on everything that the school does right from what they do as individuals in their classroom right up to the way that, you know, the principal and deputy would, you know, manage the school I guess and everything in between. (LFG1)

The focus is not just on working together but also teaching and learning:

> It's going to get the focus of the school on teaching and learning, you're getting everybody to begin to think in terms of a whole school approach to various things rather than just focusing on their own approach, so you're talking about a whole school approach - how to improve the whole school on whatever - literacy, numeracy; and they get the bigger picture, which is no harm. (LFG1)

Perceived Benefits – Reflection

SSE encourages reflection on professional practices which was seen as a potentially positive development by some of the participants:

> During the H. Dip, we would have done a lot of evaluation and I'm kind of still following through that. Like it does help you coming out of a lesson saying what went well, what didn't go well, you know for the next time then what change to make. So from a teacher's point of view it is very beneficial to reflect. (TFG1)

Perceived Benefits – Improvement

The word improvement was frequently referenced by most respondents as a perceived benefit of school self-evaluation. The potential of SSE to lead to improvement was mentioned by both school leaders and teachers as 'it should help to improve your teaching' (TFG1) and 'you'll see what's working and what's not working and then you can sit down maybe as a department with your other colleagues and discuss how you could progress and improve' (LFG1). Both of these quotations illustrate that SSE is seen as a vehicle for school improvement. However, while it was often stated by school leaders and teachers that improvement was a likely benefit of SSE, at this stage of the research process nobody ventured to outline what they meant by improvement.

<u>Perceived Benefits – Professional Autonomy versus Public Accountability</u>

A key feature of the responses about the perceived benefits of SSE was that the first of various paradoxes associated with SSE began to emerge. This paradox revolves around whether SSE is about giving schools the autonomy to enable improvement to take place or imposing accountability by putting in place systems and structures which make the internal workings of schools more transparent and hence more answerable for what they do? Concerning professional autonomy one respondent said:

> SSE is very empowering, there is no doubt about that, that you know it is giving you ownership of it and its saying to schools, you know you are the people who are in there all the time. You are the professionals. (LFG1)

While professional autonomy was mentioned by teachers and leaders respondents, the relationship between SSE and role of public accountability came more to the fore and was mentioned with a greater frequency:

> I think the fact that if self-evaluation was being carried out in the school it also makes the work that is being carried out in the school a lot more transparent to teachers, to students, to management and also to the likes of the board of management, the parents association, the community and they can easily see what we are doing well, what we are doing wrong and that we've recognised that maybe a system that we have in place isn't perhaps working and that we are taking steps to readdress that. So it does make the work that we are doing a lot more transparent. (TFG1)

The following respondent noted that public accountability should leave a paper trail which indicates a preference for a form of accountability which is evidence based:

> The benefits, a lot of the time would be in working through the process of school self- evaluation, but you might not be able to put it down on paper. This will leave some sort of a paper trail that you can identify, you've set a target, you've set the baseline data and you've used where you are to get somewhere, or maybe you didn't quite get there and you're looking back to see why you didn't. So the benefit, I see, the benefit of this structured approach is that you will have - it's evidence based. (LFG1)

At this stage of the research process nobody mentioned the inherent tension between professional autonomy and public accountability as a result of engaging with SSE, but it was pointed out by a couple of the research respondents in the middle and final series of focus groups.

Perceived Benefits – Differences between Groupings

While both school leaders and teachers recognised that public accountability is a potential benefit of SSE, it was referenced in both school leader groupings that accountability should be evidence based. The school leaders also appeared to have a greater appetite or enthusiasm for SSE and therefore were more forthcoming in outlining potential benefits of SSE. In particular, the school leaders placed a greater emphasis on collegiality and the positives of getting staff to buy in and take ownership of the process:

> It should be really positive and it should really improve everything, I mean the days anyway are gone of 'This is the way we do it and that's it.' I think those days are gone right across the board in education and in every field, I think they are gone. It is a great idea I think everybody should have it as it should be you know as I say part of a mind-set but it should be part of how we do things. It should be part of how everyone does things to evaluate what we have done. (LFG1)

It should be noted that some leaders envisaged SSE may reduce their workload in the long term by encouraging delegation:

> The positives of school self-evaluation are it should lead to a huge sense of collegiality. The main benefits I suppose it is when you get people to buy into this. People are taking responsibility within a school and it is not just left to the school leaders. (LFG1)

The leaders appeared to be more optimistic than the teachers about the potential benefits of school self-evaluation, particularly if it encourages staff to buy in more to the school and if it focuses staff on what happens beyond their particular classrooms. I mentioned when examining Theme 1 - Initial Impressions, the teacher respondents were primarily focussed on the impact of SSE in their own particular classroom rather than the overall school structure. Concerning classroom practice, an interesting observation pointed out by one teacher was that if SSE turns up critical data, SSE may challenge teachers to change their teaching methodologies and this could encourage teachers to be more innovative in their classroom practices:

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I would just see it as a way of reflecting on your own work and finding out what students think about what you're doing in the class and if you're moving too quickly or if it's too difficult for the students you might be able to change the way you teach it. Students might have suggestions about other ways that you could teach something and maybe something you haven't thought of yourself. So, it might be a way to help you improve your lessons. (TFG1)

So while there were differences between the two groupings concerning the potential benefits of SSE, most of the teachers and leaders were willing to indicate potential positives about it. This may indicate at this particular time, which was the start of the data gathering phase of the research process, neither the school leaders nor teachers had a negative disposition towards the concept of SSE.

5.2.3 Theme 3 – Perceived Barriers

There was a lot of uniformity in the initial responses of all of the research participants to this particular theme. Nearly all teachers and school leaders make reference to a fear of paperwork overload and finding the required amount of time in the working week to engage with SSE in a meaningful way rather than just engaging in a box ticking exercise. However apart from these two issues, other deeper concerns about SSE were also expressed.

Perceived Barriers – Paperwork and Time

Nearly all of the participants made a direct or indirect reference that SSE might just become another bureaucratic requirement as reflected in the following quote that 'if it's to be done properly, is going to take up quite a bit of time' (LFG1). Some of the respondents were more direct in expressing their reservations about the possible impact of SSE on their workload with one respondent stating that 'I think it fundamentally will lead to more paperwork' (TFG1).

Perceived Barriers - Fear of Criticism

Beyond the practical concerns of the perceived barriers to SSE as outlined above, the research participants were cognisant of the possible emotional impact SSE may have on themselves as professional practitioners. One such emotion triggered by SSE is a fear

of criticism. Fear of criticism could arise if an individual feels responsible for an adverse SSE finding particularly if it is in a written format in a school based document. Reservations were also expressed about the reasons why SSE was now being introduced. One respondent felt that this may imply that there was something wrong with their past and current practices in schools:

> There's an inbuilt sense with most people that what they're doing is right and sometimes it's difficult even when people look in on the way that they're doing things to nearly accept that there could be another way, a better way and their way is not always the right way. So in terms of kind of establishing a culture of looking in on ourselves, that can be difficult from the beginning, because everybody's inclined to think that they are doing the thing the right way. So you have to kind of overcome that. (LFG1)

This fear of criticism is linked to the idea that there is not currently an embedded culture of evaluation in Irish schools combined with the possibility that by engaging with the SSE process, this may increase the workload on teachers:

> Teachers probably don't want to hear negative things about their classes and maybe they're unhappy with what they're doing and it's kind of like it's going to be extra work for them to change things in the way they've been teaching something maybe and I suppose to make new plans and new ideas or new resources it's going to be extra work for some people. (TFG1)

Perceived Barriers – Fear of Change

In the conceptual literature chapter, the emotional impact of SSE as change is explored using a typology devised by Evans (1996). Evans identified uncertainty, competency concerns and fears of unforeseen consequences as components which need to be considered to help us understand how we process and emotionally understand change in our personal and professional lives. The following quote captures the fear associated with uncertainty:

> I suppose it is all new and it is out there and it is maybe just a little bit woolly and a little bit fluffy and you want to, I would love to be able to able to pull it down out of those woolly, fluffy clouds and just nail it and grab my hands around it and go okay, what do you want out of me here now and can I tackle that. (LFG1)

Allied with this fear of change is one of competency and this is very evident when one respondent states 'a difficulty I would have is am I reflecting properly? Am I supposed to be doing this or am I supposed to be doing that' (TFG1). The necessity of managing SSE to make it a user friendly process was also expressed. This would require much more than just dealing with issues of competency as reflected in the following comment:

> It has to be managed so that the gathering of data can be quite easy. Also it's the processing of the data that is the difficult part and the danger is that you gather too much data and you won't do the processing properly and you won't draw the correct conclusions from the data. (LFG1)

In many ways isolating the individual fear components is an artificial exercise. The following quote indicates the compounded impact of a combination of fears and complexity concerning SSE:

> There's a difficulty in maybe finding the time to do it as well, particularly if you try and bite off more than you can chew. So I think, you know, the process of self-evaluation should be, you know, a targeted one, and I think it's a very difficult job for a school to evaluate every single thing they're doing at school. I think that maybe they should have - they should break the whole school down into chunks that they can look at. (LFG1)

Perceived Barriers – Differences between the Groupings

Most of the school leaders and teachers were in agreement that genuine fears about SSE need to be allayed and one of the ways of addressing school leaders' and teachers' concerns was to ensure that any paperwork requirements needed to be kept to a minimum. A preference was expressed that SSE should only require a minimal number of concise documents. One difference between the groupings was that the school leaders were more concerned about what happens with the information generated by SSE:

> Where do you go from once you have evaluated like you are stepping into the unknown kind of. You have to take action on what you have evaluated so it's the fear of what you do, what can you do with the information, how do you improve, I suppose? (LFG1)

So while school leaders were more mindful of what they must do with the information generated from SSE, teachers' main fears were more focused on how that information would be generated. This is evident when one respondent posed the question 'is this going to involve somebody observing me in my classroom?' (TFG1).

To summarise, there were a lot of similarities between both the school leaders and teacher groupings concerning paperwork and time. In relation to the time issue, there were some indirect references made to the challenges of finding time for SSE in the context of other major initiatives at that time such as the proposed substantive changes to the revised Junior Certificate Programme (NCCA, 2011) along with the literacy and numeracy initiatives (DES, 2011c). These concerns about initiative overload manifested themselves by a latent level of frustration with reform fatigue in the initial series of focus groups which came much more to the fore in the focus groups held at the middle and end of the academic year. Differences between the groupings were school leaders were more keen to be solution focused about this issue. They felt SSE needed to be more directed with more specific guidelines required otherwise it would get squeezed out by other initiatives and therefore 'SSE may drown in a sea of initiatives' (LFG1).

5.2.4 Theme 4 - Stakeholders Involvement

Getting the respondents to discuss the extent of involvement of the various stakeholders with SSE gave an indication of the scale and scope of the model of SSE they envisaged might emerge over the next few years. In their discussions on this matter, they mentioned pupils, teachers, school management, the Inspectorate and the local community. However, the level of involvement of the various stakeholders threw up some differing opinions, especially concerning the degree of involvement of the Inspectorate. This is critical to this piece of research because while some wanted the Inspectorate to play a more directed role, other argued that if they operated in a more

interventionist capacity that this made SSE more externally mandated and hence undermined the SSE process.

Stakeholder Involvement – Parents and Pupils

Both the teachers and leaders were open to the idea of student and parent involvement in the SSE process:

> I do think that it is important to get parents and pupils input into SSE because really if you look at the fact that we're selling the product of their education and they should evaluate did we sell a good product or not. So I think that it is important but obviously within certain parameters that, you know you don't want them to be attacking a certain teacher or something like that. (TFG1)

Parental involvement was viewed more as a form of support rather than as a threat. One respondent stated that 'we might not be aware of something that the parents really value and I think they may see something that we're doing really well and we might not even aware of' (TFG1). However while nearly all the respondents supported the involvement of parents some concerns were expressed in relation to getting a cross section of parents to participate in the process:

> I suppose it is trying to get all of the parents, that is where I am coming at in that one actually is to get ideally a cross section of your parents actively engaged then as many as possible. Because the danger is when you do this that you just get the ones that are really pushing their children to do well in school. The ones that are actually, really interested in the school and you are getting a distorted picture potentially from that so absolutely but I would just guard against it that we need to have all of the parents or at least a reflection of the parents that are in the school and not just those who play an active role on Parents Associations. (LFG1)

This comment reflects that the school leaders were more comfortable with the involvement of parents in the SSE process and keen that it should be representative of the full spectrum of parents whose children attend that school.

Stakeholder Involvement – The Inspectorate and School Management

The role of the Inspectorate as a driving force for SSE was recognised by the school leader and teacher respondents:

> The Department, they are setting their own criteria as to what level of involvement other stakeholders are going to have. They are going to dictate how often, how regularly they are involved and how much input they have. (LFG1)

The four distinct focus groupings of leaders and teachers also acknowledged that internal school management would have a role to play in shaping SSE and the exact nature of that role seemed to be at the forefront of both of the teacher focus group participants:

> I'd be interested in the management's role in the self-evaluation, personally. In what they're going to be doing with the data. Every teacher's going to be in their classroom doing this self-evaluation and have meetings with their subject departments. But how is it all going to be processed, like is it going to be one big cycle, are the teachers going to be on one side and the management on the other? What are the dynamics between everybody in the school, and what will be its impact on professional relationships within the school? (TFG1)

The teacher respondent quoted below emphasises that it is important that internal school management communicates to staff how the data generated by SSE is used:

> If teachers have to fill out all this paperwork and we hand it in and we never hear anything about it again and we never see anything from it. Then in the same way that school management do all their evaluations but we never hear what they've come up with. The results of what is done with the data needs be shared properly. (TFG1)

The role of internal school management and how they use the information gathered as a result of SSE was highlighted by teachers. Reservations were expressed by some teacher respondents that information generated from SSE could be used in an adverse manner against teachers. This indicates a trust dimension that goes to the heart of teachers' and leaders' attitude towards SSE which is cogently captured in the following comment as whether 'SSE going to be a case of them and us' (TFG1).

Stakeholder Involvement – Getting the Balance Right?

The extent to which the various educational stakeholders should be involved with SSE generated very mixed responses. Some participants felt it was important that external personnel should not have an overbearing influence on SSE. This sentiment is reflected in the following comment:

A lot of people don't like to hear people from outside telling them how to run things, they haven't a clue, and they're only in for a day or a week. I personally wouldn't like that, I'd prefer someone who's in the school who knows, knows how I work, knows the system and they'd know better, I think. (TFG1)

The possibility of the loss of local ownership of the SSE process by the over involvement of outsiders is also a concern which was expressed:

I would think the school would lose a bit of the ownership of the process. Where there might be some benefit from bringing in somebody to help with the process, would be maybe just to focus people's minds on areas that should be evaluated. Now I know you could say that everything really should be evaluated, but you can't do all of that at the one time. So maybe from the point of view of giving priority pointers, yes; but I think essentially it should be a process that, you know, every individual in the school has some ownership of. (LFG1)

Some respondents felt that if the school built up a professional relationship with outsiders over a period time that they could play a positive role. This idea is reflected when one respondent states productive professional relationships are possible 'if they understand and know the school then it could work' (TFG1). Therefore getting the balance right concerning the involvement of the various stakeholders with SSE is a difficult task, as there would appear to be a wide divergence of views where that balance is, as reflected in the quite varied responses of both the school leaders and teachers.

Stakeholder Involvement – Differences between the Groupings

School leaders were more enthusiastic in their support of parental and student involvement and sometimes justified this position by using neoliberal language such as 'customers' when referring to parents and pupils:

I think to actually ask students for their opinions and ask parents for their opinions on teaching and learning is, again, its new territory for schools, but I think it's about time it happened. Like they are the customers and you are providing the service, so it is a source - it is an untapped source - in a lot of schools. (LFG1)

The above response indicates how deeply rooted in the mind-set of some modern day school leaders is the idea that schools provide a service and therefore needs to engage

more with parents and students to get feedback on their levels of customer satisfaction.

SSE provides one such means of engaging and communicating with parents and pupils

and driving improvement:

> You know, you're dealing with the customer and what you think is fantastic
> course may turn out not to be, or vice versa. You know our opinions as - we're
> coming from a different perspective as the educator than the student or the
> parent, so you know, it is time that we did tap into that resource, yeah. (LFG1)

Differences between the groupings concerning stakeholder involvement reflect that the

school leaders in both schools seem to be more supportive of the involvement of

external stakeholders in SSE processes.

5.2.5 Closing Remarks on the Initial Series of Focus Groups

Many of the themes addressed in the October 2012 focus groups recur in the middle and

final series of focus groups in February and May 2013. My intention by tracking the

participants' views on these themes is that one gains a deeper and more meaningful

insight into their embedded views on SSE over the prolonged period of time of a full

academic year.

From the initial series of focus groups there is a strong sense that both the school

leaders and teachers have a considered and reasonably well informed opinion about SSE

and are willing to engage with it if it is likely to lead to positive outcomes:

> I'd agree to a certain extent that maybe we need to put more pressure on
> ourselves to engage with SSE. That would definitely get it done but then the
> only concern I would have is that are we doing it properly and are we getting the
> benefit from it. (TFG1)

However not only do they have an expectation of benefits, but are aware of potential

pitfalls as captured cogently in this comment from a school leader:

> I think SSE is about creating a mind-set though and it should be you know automatic. In teaching practice you would be taught to evaluate. We are all taught to always you know walk out of a meeting or walk out of a classroom or walk out of anywhere and evaluate what happened and how could it be done better the next time. If we can instil that mind-set I think it is a great thing. (LFG1)

The following teacher comment recognises that while the aim of SSE is to use small amounts of data to achieve big improvements, the opposite may occur:

> A concern is that the gathering of the data will be the focus - instead of the improvement. We want to gather a small amount of data and make big improvements, not gather a large amount of data and make small improvements. (LFG1)

The findings at this early stage of the field work give a sense of some of the paradoxical dilemmas associated with SSE. Is it about professional autonomy or public accountability? Should it be internally driven or externally mandated? Is it about putting pressure on teachers or supporting schools? These tensions are at the heart of SSE along with others that become more evident in the follow up focus groups. However as one unravels more what SSE means to the school leaders and teachers, there is also a greater realisation that the perceptions of the research participants about SSE will have a significant impact on how willingly they will implement and engage with any SSE initiatives.

5.3 February 2013: Middle Series of Focus Groups

In February 2013, the second round of four focus groups took place. Following consultation with my supervisor, I decided that the middle series of focus group sessions would revolve around the following four main areas:

1. The official SSE Guidelines and the designated national SSE website?

2. Inspectorate Advisory Visits about SSE which took place in both schools?

3. An update on research participants' views and perception of SSE since the initial series of focus groups?

4. An opportunity for any additional comments or concluding remarks?

Gaining access into both schools in February to record the focus groups did prove challenging for logistical and timetabling reasons, as the school calendar tends to get rather overcrowded with Mock Examinations, Parent-Teacher and Staff Meetings from mid-Spring onwards. I was conscious that the school year does tend to intensify from February until the end of the academic year and as a result getting an agreed time suitable to the research participants was going to be challenging. This meant in the case of both schools that recording dates had to be altered or changed at short notice to facilitate other school meetings, some planned, others ad hoc in nature. A possible benefit to this heightened sense of activity and pressure at that time of the year in schools probably manifested itself in the frankness of their responses about SSE.

5.3.1 Theme 5 - SSE Support Mechanisms

An official SSE dedicated website was launched in January 2013, but very few of the school leaders or teachers participants in this research had much knowledge about it or were aware of its existence. Before each focus group commenced recording, I ensured the focus group recording rooms had computers with internet access so that each group could individually and collectively familiarise themselves with the content, structure, layout and presentation features of the www.schoolself-evaluation.ie website. I left several copies of the national guidelines on school self-evaluation (DES, 2012a) in the room for their perusal. I had issued a copy of these guidelines previously to all respondents but wished to afford the respondents the opportunity to refresh their memories on their content. I left the room while they did so to give them greater freedom to discuss amongst themselves the merits or otherwise of the Inspectorate officially designated website for SSE and the official guidelines. It should be noted that for most of the research respondents it was their first time to look at the website or the official guidelines on SSE (DES, 2012a).

SSE Support Mechanisms - Official SSE Website and Guidelines

Initial comments on the dedicated SSE website were quite complimentary:

> I found the website quite user friendly. All the labels that you need to know are actually there so you'd be looking at a six step process there. The videos were very good. They were short enough so that you could kind of understand and they were concise with the information. All the steps of the school development plan are all there, all the questions that you need 'How well are we doing?' These types of questions that you are going to start analysing were all there. (TFG2)

The short video clips about SSE on the official SSE website were also well received:

> Maybe a few more videos. I know there are some videos up there but I think when you go onto a website first you could click onto a video as opposed to maybe reading an article so maybe a few more videos. The videos that were there were informative. (TFG2)

Criticism of the guidelines and the website seem to revolve around the voluminous amount of text-based material in both, which they argued made them more difficult to navigate and less appealing for the website user or the guidelines reader. Referring to the guidelines, the following comment was typical that 'it's just when you are looking at it like long text; it's too much information to get the point across' (TFG2). The comment below is typical of the research participants opinions on the SSE designated website stating it should have been designed with a more user friendly interface:

> I was turned off by just too much information and it should be better laid out and more suited to the user, do you know what I mean, because when you are looking at sites like that you don't really have much time so it needs to be more I suppose teacher friendly or user friendly. (TFG2)

There is similarity between comments about the SSE website and the official guidelines and certainly they highlight a demand in some quarters for a more user friendly approach in terms of presentation and format. Both the guidelines and website would be enhanced if they contained more visually rich material and graphics. Text material probably needs to be more summary in nature and selected for inclusion on both in a more judicious manner:

> It's a very general overview and what I would like to see is timelines and that sort of nitty gritty structure as to what you should be doing, you know, the beginning of the year, what you should be trying to do in the middle of year,

what you should be trying to do, you know, schools are very busy places and we need sort of deadlines, a sort of a very general, in the first year, deadline isn't specific enough for my liking. I like to have small targets. (LFG2)

One of the respondents had the following practical suggestion which supports a more directed approach to the support material and the timeline for SSE:

> You should be trying to do a survey in the beginning of the year and you should be trying to analyse it in the middle of the year and are trying to get your results at the end of the year. This sort of very structured timelines, you know, I think schools would like that, you know, and I know you don't want to direct schools in any particular direction because school self-evaluation can take many routes but I do think that it wouldn't be any harm initially just to get things started, you know, to give them a little bit more direction, you know, it's a bit woolly would be what I'd say. (LFG2)

This dilemma whether school self-evaluation needs to be more directed at the beginning is reflected in the following comment about the SSE guidelines which are also available for download from the Inspectorate designated website about SSE:

> Concerning the guidelines, there's a lot of stuff there and there's a lot of very, very useful information but I would like to see timelines again. It needs to be more directive at the start to get people on the track I would say would be a better approach as in you should or you could do this in the first term, this in the second term, and this in the third term and see what comes out of it. It's a very wide, open document and, you know, that's no harm in the bigger picture but it would be nice to start schools off with a fairly directive one. (LFG2)

However one of the participants captures the irony of the directed approach to SSE with the following comment:

> I see a little bit of an anomaly in the process in that they talk about this as if you are going in completely cold and you evaluate and, you know, do an audit for want of a better expression and then find what you are going to do your work on but yet we have been told what we have to do our work on already. There are sections of this that are actually rendered redundant because of the fact that you have been told, you know, start initially with literacy and numeracy. (LFG2)

Knowledge of the content and existence of the guidelines and the existence of a dedicated school self-evaluation website were quite limited. One respondent stated that 'the website and guidelines, I'm not overly au fait with them to be honest' (TFG2). The official guidelines are just shy of ninety pages and at times. What was interesting was that while nearly all the school leaders and teachers seem to want a more directed

approach to school self-evaluation, one leader participant cautioned that this may undermine the philosophical framework of SSE as 'if they tell us how to do SSE that goes against the spirit of self-evaluation' (LFG2). This captures the inherent contradiction at the heart of SSE.

SSE Support Mechanisms - Inspectorate Advisory Visits

The Inspectorate arranged for Inspectors to visit schools in an advisory capacity to give a presentation about SSE during the 2012/2013 academic year. This is the first time the Inspectorate has formally organised visits to such a large number of Irish schools in an advisory capacity concerning a new policy initiative. I was curious to see how school based personnel would view this development. The SSE advisory support visit was facilitated in both schools as part of a pre-arranged staff meeting. In both schools the visit took place either at the end of the school day or at the end of term and this seems to influence their impact:

> It came at the end of a staff meeting a while back. It was quite late into a long meeting so maybe if it had been at the beginning of the meeting it would have made more of an impression. (TFG2)

The two Inspectors used a Microsoft PowerPoint slide presentation prepared by the Inspectorate. However in both cases the timing issue along with the delivery format meant most of the teachers felt they did not benefit much from these visits:

> To be honest I did not get a lot from the Inspector's visit. I suppose on the day it didn't help because a lot of us were after being supervising all day and then to come in to get so much information in one day. It was a lot of information and I did feel a lot of it was just 'Click the PowerPoint', 'Click the PowerPoint.' I would have preferred if it focused on a bit more practical things like what do I need to do, and what will I gain out of it. More direct, just steps, keep it simple but tell me what I actually have to get done so I didn't really find it hugely beneficial. (TFG2)

SSE Support Mechanisms – Differences between the Groupings

The school leaders tended to be more positive about the Inspector school visits. They seemed to find the visits reassuring and supportive of what was going on in both schools concerning their present approach to SSE at that time:

It was a very good presentation which was verbalised well. Inspector made the point to keep things small and that we are probably doing a lot of the things already and we need to just formalise the recording of what we are doing and try and work through the consequences of what we are doing. (LFG2)

So there was overall a very mixed response to the Inspectors' advisory support visits about SSE. Teachers tended to have been less engaged than the school leaders with the presentations. The timing of the visits seemed to be a particular source of dissatisfaction for the teachers in both schools. The school leaders would have had an input into the timing of the visit and more likely to know the inspectors so it is hardly surprising that they are less likely to be critical about the Inspector advisory support visits.

5.3.2 Theme 6 – Tracking Changes of the Respondents about SSE

Tracking Changes - Gradual rather than Significant Shifts

From the responses of the research participants, I could not detect significant changes in their emotional or logical perspectives about SSE since the initial round of focus groups four months earlier. While the uncertainty about the SSE process was still evident, this came more to the fore in their responses:

SSE is hovering there but I don't know what I'm actually supposed to do. Am I waiting for the principal to come and tell me 'Ok I want you to do this?' I don't know if everyone is kind of waiting to be told what to do. I don't know who is initiating 'Ok well I'm going to do this now myself.' I don't know if anyone is doing that or what we are actually supposed to do and when are we supposed to do it. (TFG2)

For some of the respondents, however the fear factor of SSE seemed diminished:

I know in the beginning I was apprehensive about the amount of paperwork involved but since then I was informed that, you know, the school improvement plan was three pages long. It wasn't this thing where you had to sit down and evaluate all your lessons and just looking through your resources that were on the website there they seem very straightforward and easy to use so I'd be a little less apprehensive about the amount of paperwork. I do believe that the idea could work once it's not too much work on teachers. If it is what it says it is then I'd be more willing to embrace it. (TFG2)

I detected a gradual rather than paradigm shift in attitudes about SSE combined with less apprehension about the process. Perhaps this was to be expected as the research

respondents became more familiar with the concept of SSE. I still deem it worthy to note this observation about the middle stage of the focus group series.

Tracking Changes - The Impact of Austerity on Attitudes towards SSE

At the time of the February 2013 focus groups, negotiations were underway to achieve greater savings via a renegotiation of the Croke Park Agreement (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010, 2013). A series of austere national budgets, the impact of reduced pay and worsening terms and conditions of employment on school based personnel were taken their toll and a hardening of position towards a range of initiatives such as SSE was evident. Respondents were more vocal on the negative impact all this change was having on their morale and willingness to engage with SSE:

> I mean at the moment it seems like it's all take, take, take. At the minute they are cutting our substitution and supervision hours, they are taking the money off us. They are cutting wages on people on higher scales. They are doing all this kind of thing and then they are throwing this school self-evaluation in on top of it so people are probably getting a bit annoyed and are saying 'Well why are we expected to do this work outside of our teaching hours if all they are doing is take, take, take.' I don't know, that's just something I would think people are annoyed about but that's not my own personal view either. (TFG2)

Frustration seemed to be exacerbated because more was expected of teachers with less rewards as 'we seem to be doing more for less. I don't know if anyone really has the time to be doing this as well as everything else' (TFG2). Some respondents felt the current impetus for SSE was motivated by a desire to cut the cost of public expenditure and to save money and this was its primary purpose:

> I have a question whether it's all just being pushed on to cut costs in the education system and whether it's just a fancy name to cut out the cost of the actual inspectors going around visiting and if this is the real push for it, say if that's the primary aim of it and it's just being forced upon us then it's not really going to work so it's just whether is it to cut costs or is it for the benefit of the school? (TFG2)

This suspicion that SSE is just a cost saving exercise was expressed by more than one respondent and by both school leaders and teachers as typified by the following comment that 'they are making us to do the work that is currently being done by

Inspectors' (LFG2). The inference here is that SSE is very much about making schools do more and thereby a reduced role for and size of the national Inspectorate.

Tracking Changes - Reform Fatigue Setting in

A recurring feature in the school leaders' and teachers' responses about SSE was a certain amount of weariness with the number of new initiatives going on in schools as 'I think we have a lot on our plate don't we, too much actually and now they want to reform the Junior Cert as well' (TFG2). This sense of reform fatigue was shared by both the teachers and leaders:

> You've got the new Junior Cert, the Literacy and Numeracy and School Self Evaluation. They are three separate things, they can be all tied together as one but they are three separate things. I think that two of the three would have been enough at the most. (LFG2)

This sentiment of tiredness and frustration with all the reform initiatives underway at that time was cogently captured in the following comment that 'you can't keep all the balls in the air all the time. Well it's very difficult' (LFG2). There also appeared to be a realisation that while a roll back on the number of new initiatives would be welcome, it was unlikely:

> There is definitely a danger of overload and you will have three half-heartedly done things so, you know, there is no going back for those things now unfortunately but, you know, it would have been wiser probably just one thing or maybe two at the most but three altogether is tough, it's hard going. (LFG2)

Reform fatigue applied to both school leaders and teachers as reflected in the uniformity of the content and tone of comments selected for inclusion in this subtheme.

Tracking Changes – Greater Awareness of Inherent Contradictions in the SSE Process

Could SSE ever be externally mandated was a dilemma expressed in the initial round of focus groups. This issue came up again in the second round of focus groups however with greater frequency. This dilemma centres on whether SSE in its truest form should be externally mandated? One respondent argued he did not think so but still felt a more prescriptive approach to SSE was probably the best way forward:

I would say there is definitely a fear amongst school leaders of the added workload and where exactly to start and, you know, that's why I'm saying a nice, direct approach might be better. You need to be a little bit more prescriptive, a little bit more directed to help people along and then you can broaden it out when people get the hand of it and realise that it isn't actually that onerous. (LFG2)

The demand for a more prescriptive approach was raised by both teacher and leader respondents:

It's good in theory if it was done properly but I don't think it is being done properly. I think it's just, like it's more directional. We are being talked at rather than talked to. This is the way it is, this is what you have to do and I don't think it gives you any motivation or excitement for school self-evaluation. It's more the negative when they should be bringing out the positive, you know, this is good for your school, it will make you work inwardly and, you know, identify all the positive things that you are doing rather than focus on the negative. (TFG2)

The inherent contradiction in imposing an externally mandated approach to SSE is expressed in an articulate manner in the following comment:

I would sense that people in general are not necessarily aware that, you know, every school will be picking their own areas, you know, going forward. I think it's very much a directive that we do literacy, we do numeracy and it's imposed as opposed to really necessarily understanding that it's every school looking at itself. (LFG2)

This nuanced approach to SSE suggests that the school leaders are more aware of some of the inherently contradictory aspects to SSE than in the initial series of focus groups.

Tracking Changes – Maintaining Momentum

As a panacea to the weariness of initiative overload outlined in the previous sub-theme, some suggestions were mentioned as how to maintain momentum. The first suggestion is that the goals of SSE should comply with the five SMART principles of planning. These principles are referenced in the official guidelines and state that all goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timing:

It is from the point of view, I suppose the model that is being put forward is looking for people to put forward clearly measurable targets that you can say we are at a particular point. We will try to achieve x, y or z and it is possible to do that. There are achievable targets that can be set in relation to a thing such as literacy and from that end it certainly is. (LFG2)

Some of the leaders expressed concern that maintaining staff momentum with SSE may pose a difficulty because some staff could view it more as something which is done and dusted in the short term rather than as a continuous on-going process:

> I'm finding the momentum gone a bit fragmented. I think a lot of subject departments are saying 'But we have already done that', 'We have already done literacy', 'We have already started it', 'We have certain things', 'We have key words', 'We are doing this', 'We are doing that' and in fact most of our departments have and it's sort of trying to get that momentum back up and running into it is a little difficult now because there is a sense amongst the staff that we have done that but we haven't all done it and we haven't all delved really deeply into it so. (LFG2)

This belief about the continuous cyclical nature of SSE is reinforced by the following viewpoint:

> It's a cyclical thing I suppose and that where we are now with it is to establish a baseline as to where people are actually at and that people will begin to realise from that that you are always building on a further target and that, you know, dependent on where you are that you are building to something else so people will maybe realise from that then that you are never finished that, you know, saying that we have literacy done isn't actually a valid statement at all because there's always something extra to be doing to it. (LFG2)

SSE Tracking Changes – Differences between the Groupings

The school leaders rather than the teachers appear to be more concerned about maintaining the momentum. This is hardly surprising as they are more than likely to see the successful implementation of SSE in their own schools as part of their management duties as 'the onus is on us as school managers to ensure that we comply with SSE requirements' (LFG2). Leaders seem to feel because of their management position in the school they had a duty to endorse SSE and this perhaps may explain why they were less critical and appeared less exacerbated than the teachers with the demands of implementing SSE. The school leaders in one of the schools also appeared to be more cognisant of some of the inherent contradictions at the heart of SSE by questioning whether an SSE process can ever be externally mandated as 'by telling us what to do, defeats the whole purpose' (LFG2).

5.4. May 2013: Final Series of Focus Groups

In May 2013, the final round of four focus groups took place. Following consultation with my supervisor, I decided that the final series of focus group sessions would revolve around the following four main areas:

1. Final comments about SSE?

2. Going forward, practical suggestions?

3. The respondents' views on how I had conducted the research?

4. An opportunity for any additional comments or concluding remarks?

I confirmed the recording times with all participants a week in advance of conducting the focus groups but on the actual day of recording a teacher focus group, one of the teachers was required elsewhere in the school, so while one of the teacher focus groups had five participants the other had four participants. Both school leader focus groups had two participants.

The plan was always to record the final focus groups in May, but I deliberately scheduled both visits for as early as possible in the month. The rationale for this was to deliberately minimise any possible disruption to the preparation of students for the end of year summer and state examinations. Graduation and prize-giving ceremonies tend to dominate the school calendar in the final weeks of the academic year so by holding the focus groups at the start of May meant scheduling conflicts with the focus groups would not be an issue.

I was hoping the candidates would speak candidly and be quite frank in their views as this was the final series of focus group sessions and I was not disappointed. The aim of this piece of research is to document shifts in the respondents' perspectives about SSE, so I revisited a lot of the themes that came up in the initial and middle series of focus groups. However, in this final round of focus groups there was also a strong emphasis placed on implementation practices.

5.4.1 Theme 7 - Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE

Concluding Comments - SSE Clarity - What Clarity?

While most of the respondents claimed to be more knowledgeable at one level about

SSE, they nearly all doubted whether they fully understood what SSE was about:

> I kind of still feel that I have the same amount of information about SSE that I
> did before. I still don't know a lot about it, but I still think it's probably a good
> idea to get some more feedback from students about your classes and about how
> you could improve. (TFG3)

This degree of uncertainty about what the finer details of SSE entailed was shared by

both teachers and leaders:

> I feel I know a little bit more and I know where I can get information about it,
> but would not consider myself to be very knowledgeable about it. I still don't
> feel I know enough about school self-evaluation. (LFG3)

This lack of clarity meant at times the SSE process was like one step forward, two steps

back and this seemed to be a source of frustration for many of the participants:

> I definitely didn't concentrate on SSE as the year went on; I was just
> concentrating on my own lesson plans and getting my own timetable up to
> speed. I had too much to do and I didn't think about the school self-evaluation
> and who's to do it? Am I to do it myself? I don't know, I still don't know. So,
> that's it really. (TFG3)

The leaders also share this sense of frustration about school self-evaluation:

> I do feel, and I still say, there are too many people talking about school self-
> evaluation from different angles, with different opinions, with different
> strategies, with different thoughts, with different perceived outcomes, and I'm
> sorry, but it is still rather confusing out there, speaking from a management
> point of view. (LFG3)

The above comments ties in with the fragmented nature of SSE which was identified as

a concern as discussed in the middle series of focus groups. This unresolved lack of

clarity seemed to be having an adverse influence on the willingness of some of the

participants to continuously engage with SSE processes:

> I would still be quite hesitant … I'd be more than willing to engage with school
> self-evaluation but I'd still be quite hesitant at the same time to engage in it
> because I don't think I know enough about it from the point of view of what's
> expected of us, when are we expected to start this, how are we going to
> document it? Is it going to be something that needs to be done a certain number

of times a year? Is it an informal process that should be done throughout the year and who is it that does it, do you stay within your subject department, do you cross into somebody else's subject department and evaluate their teaching when you've little knowledge of the public area? (TFG3)

Concluding Comments - Industrial Relation Climate

Reflecting what was happening nationally in schools at this time, the industrial relations climate in both schools deteriorated as the year progressed with an emphatic rejection in May 2013 by both second-level school unions (TUI and ASTI) of a revised Croke Park Agreement (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010). Colloquially referred to as 'Croke Park 2', the Haddington Road Agreement (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013) imposed a further series of cost saving measures on public sector employees effectively reducing take home pay and pension entitlements. While the Haddington Road Agreement was eventually accepted by both unions, the on-going negative impact of austerity is apparent in an erosion of goodwill towards SSE by school based personnel including the teachers and leaders who formed the focus groups for this study:

> I still feel that it would be extra work in light of Croke Park 2, its extra work for less pay, if they go to implement it. So I wouldn't be happy at all taking it on even though I didn't mind let's say at the second meeting. I thought it was a great idea whatever and I do think it is a good idea, but in light of what's happening why should we do it if they're going to pay us less money and it's extra work? (TFG3)

One of the contentious industrial relations issues in schools at the time of the focus groups was the moratorium on promotional posts of responsibility for which teachers receive a financial allowance. This meant there were very limited opportunities for teaching staff to gain middle management promotional posts in schools. Some of the school leaders suggested that this was a major barrier to the development and implementation of SSE in schools as posts of responsibility cannot be created in this area:

> I also think the non-existence of post of responsibility in schools, there's an issue there as well, because if things were a certain way at the moment you

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might ask maybe even a post holder to lead a self-evaluation exercise in the school. But, I think because we have so many other things to develop and we're new, while the staff are involved with agreeing it, it's nearly myself and the deputy has taken ownership of the actual process of doing it. We can't delegate that out because we've nobody to delegate it out to. I feel that that's another issue for a lot of schools at the moment and for many new schools where posts have been lost and it just becomes another thing then that's being asked of the management of the school. And, with the best will in the world we have to prioritise those things at the minute. (LFG3)

Concluding Comments – Reform Fatigue

Giving the context of the industrial relations climate just outlined above, it is hardly surprising that a suite of new policy initiatives including SSE would not receive a particularly warm and enthusiastic endorsement by some school teachers and leaders. A hostile attitude towards the range of initiatives being rolled out in schools and reform fatigue seemed a very real factor impinging on the attitudes of the respondents towards SSE:

> In my opinion the Government are trying to get us to do too much at one time; they're trying to be this redefining Government, who are redefining education and reconstructing everything that went wrong in the last few years. So hence we have Literacy and Numeracy, a new Junior Cert to contend with and now SSE. (TFG3)

The idea that resistance towards SSE could be linked to an over-ambitious reform agenda and austerity was mentioned by both school leaders and teachers:

> I know how to implement literacy and numeracy now and I'm only comfortable with that this year and all of a sudden now I have to do school self-evaluation on top of everything else. So I feel this government are like, "Sure let's just do everything at the one time and then let's cut their wages and see how they handle it." And, I think they're just going to push us too far and everyone's just going to say, "No, I'm not doing it. (TFG3)

This sense of frustration with the number of new initiatives including SSE was a feature of the middle series of focus groups but was now articulated with greater frequency. One respondent endorsed this sentiment with the statement that 'there's too many new things happening at the same time and not enough time allocated for any of them' (TFG3). Some of the respondents questioned the reasons for all these initiatives:

It just seems a bit overwhelming at the moment, that there are a lot of initiatives being brought about and you just wonder will any of them ever be following through completely? Or are all these initiatives just being brought out just for the sake of having some buzz words around school. And also, it seems to be just to justify, I feel as a teacher, I'm nearly always trying to justify almost, having the job, that it's not just about teaching anymore, that you're nearly explaining to people. (TFG3)

The idea that the pace of change in schools was having an overwhelming effect on the respondents is expressed in a forthright manner in the following comment:

We have to do self-evaluation, we have to do this', seeing as you're working in the public sector, that there's more to it than just teaching. It seems to be getting broader as the years go on, that there's more involved in it. But yet, obviously with the cuts and stuff you're not being, some would say, rewarded as much. (TFG3)

This comment captures the sentiment of both the school leaders and teachers respondents towards the attritional impact of reform fatigue and austerity on their perception of the SSE initiative been rolled out in Irish schools.

Concluding Comments – Differences between the Groupings

I did not detect any significant differences between the school leaders and teachers concerning their concluding comments on SSE. There was a large degree of commonality in their concluding comments. Both groups seemed highly cognisant of what SSE was about, but had reservations about what was achievable in the current industrial relations climate and educational context:

I would say SSE is a good initiative but timing is everything and it would have been better if a year or two was left between a few of the initiatives. They're all important and they're all kind of linked and yet no matter what, they are three separate, you know, we'd have to do separate process, SSE is a separate process and we have to produce a report and we have to do, you know and the junior cycle is a separate process. You know, so it just seems that there're layers and layers of change being introduced all of a sudden. It's just a little bit overwhelming. (LFG3)

5.4.2 Theme 8 – Going Forward – Practical Suggestions

I was keen to note any practical suggestions the respondents had concerning how SSE should be implemented in schools as this was the final round of focus groups. By eliciting practical suggestions from the research participants about SSE, I was eager to

learn how they felt it should move forward. This aligned with one of the main aims of this dissertation which was to look at how a SSE policy formulated at national level is perceived at local level and how this impacts on its implementation. Therefore I felt it important to identify any practical suggestions the respondents had about SSE as they represent the views at local level and would be expected to steer its future direction in their particular schools.

Going Forward - Greater Demand for a More Prescriptive Approach.

A lingering lack of clarity as identified in the previous theme, Theme 7 – Concluding Comments would appear to be a major barrier to the implementation of SSE in schools. This perhaps explains why a sizable cohort of the respondents are looking for a more directed approach to SSE:

> You'd definitely have to approach me with a specific task to do, and then I would be clear on what I had to do. But, telling me roughly, willy-nilly this is in the pipeline, it's in the air but if I'm not specifically given a task, I'm not going to take it on. (TFG3)

However this is a precariously balanced position because a cohort of the respondents also expressed the counterview that if you tell school based personnel what they must do in relation to SSE, this can lead to resentment as 'if you are going to be saying you need to do this, then that's going to create a lot of negative feeling around self-evaluation' (TFG3).

This tension between adopting a more prescriptive approach rather than allowing schools to adopt a more flexible approach identifies one of the main inherent contradictions at the heart of SSE which is can it ever be externally mandated? It could be argued that because SSE in Ireland is still in an evolutionary phase, this may explain why the demand for a more prescriptive approach is very evident in some of the responses from the research participants:

> I preferred to be shown what do beforehand so I know exactly what I'm doing. The Guidelines about SSE for me are away too general. They are not consistent,

it's just, "Here you go, here's what it is, now off you go." If they want us to consider this seriously then they need to show us seriously how to do it. (TFG3)

One school leader suggested the paradoxical dilemma identified above is an issue that the Inspectorate is cognisant of and this is why it allows for the schools to decide where they are at with SSE and then decide the best way to proceed:

> I think that the Department is well aware that schools are at different levels and I think that they were hoping that every school would move from where they are to a step further down along. That's why they left it big, but having said that, being a little bit more prescriptive might have brought us together as opposed to we're all sort of sailing our own ships to try and school self- evaluate, it's self-improvement, self-evaluation whereas if we're a bit more prescriptive from the department we could all help each other a little bit more, if you know what I mean. Rather than sailing a solitary journey. (LFG3)

The leader respondent quoted above believes the DES is deliberately ambivalent about SSE because all schools are at different stages along the SSE journey. The respondent would appear to advocate a more prescriptive approach for schools at the early stages as otherwise it may be possible for a school to embark on a solo run and go off course unintentionally.

Going Forward – In-School Dedicated SSE Teams and Localised School Networks

There seemed to be strong support from both the school teachers and leaders for a cross department approach within schools:

> I think maybe what I would suggest is to get a cluster of teachers within a school, from different departments and for them to take on a little bit and for them to pilot it nearly in your school, for them to come to the staff meetings then and give all of the feedback, like once they've kind of summarised it. And show how beneficial it was for them at a local level. (TFG3)

However concern that the SSE work done at local level needs some form of external validation lingers:

> Just on that, so yeah I agreed that there should be a team within a school that did it on a local level but it is self-evaluation. So, we need someone to evaluate if we are doing it correctly. How do we know as a school that we are evaluating ourselves correctly? (TFG3)

One possible solution is that the initial SSE is moderated by the Inspectorate:

We need input from whoever it is that's decided they want us do this which is the Department of Education. They want schools to self-evaluate, and if they're asking us to do that we need to be aware of how to do it correctly and they need to send someone out with fresh eyes or whatever to say, "Yes that's fine." Or, "Yes that's fine but this needs to be changed." Or, "No, good attempt, but you need to change x, y and z." If it's a process of evaluation we need to be evaluated. (TFG3)

One school leader advocated the benefits of a localised school networks to SSE by stating that 'instead of schools working independently on SSE, local schools would be better off pooling their ideas about SSE. That way we'd probably be more comfortable in what we're doing' (LFG3).

The prospect of local schools working in a cooperative manner as a cluster is interesting as local schools often compete against each other in relation to the enrolment of students. The possibility of schools pooling resources with other schools in their proximity about SSE is highly dependent on local circumstances.

Going Forward – In-School Workshop Sessions

Both school leaders and teachers expressed the viewpoint that PowerPoint slide presentations and lectures from external experts about SSE would not advance the SSE project in Irish schools. The research participants advocated a more practical approach of in-school workshops and one respondent stated that 'I've been to other courses on self-evaluation and it's always been someone standing at the top of the room giving a presentation on it and it hasn't been a case of, you know hands on' (TFG3). This sentiment for an in-house school based approach to SSE is cogently captured in the following comment that 'in order for SSE to filter down and through the whole organisation we need workshops in our school and that are really kind of hands on and things like that' (TFG3).

Tied in with the concept of in school workshops is that they should not be stand-alone but should be ongoing and part of a series of workshops seem to stem from the criticism

of the once off Inspector advisory support visits discussed in the previous round of focus groups:

> We've had in-service; we've had a person in to speak about school self-evaluation and the way that it was moving. But, I think that something like that needs to be acted upon afterwards as well. I felt when we had that in-service it was kind of left in the water and there was nothing really followed up by it afterwards or no exercises took place to kind of reinforce the message of school self-evaluation and to kind of move us towards that area. (TFG3)

As stated already the teacher respondents were more critical of the Inspector advisory support visits than the schools leaders but the expression of interest in an ongoing series of workshops was also endorsed by some of the school leaders.

<u>Going Forward – Differences between Groupings</u>

Both the school leaders and teachers articulated many similar practical suggestions about how to move forward with SSE in the future. While in general, the school leaders were more supportive of the involvement of external stakeholders this resonated with many of the findings explored in Theme 4 - Stakeholder Involvement from the initial series of focus groups. However one teacher did mention the possible involvement of an external stakeholder not mentioned in any of the previous focus groups. This suggestion was that subject associations of which many second-level teachers are professional members should play a more prominent role in supporting SSE in schools:

> I think you know subject departments vary in size and structure in most schools so maybe it needs to be directed more by subject associations. You know, say from a national point of view, like, this is, these are the templates that have work well in our subject area. So a combination of being pushed or promoted by your subject association in tandem with the official SSE website. So I think, from a subject association point of view, with your peers, would be very good to promote self-evaluation in schools. Particularly as it would be more subject specific. (TFG3)

This idea of subject associations playing a role in SSE reflects the position that not all the teacher respondents per se are opposed to the involvement of external stakeholders in SSE.

There were no major differences between the school leader and teacher focus groups in this final theme, Theme 8 - Going Forward - Practical Suggestions. This would seem to indicate the gulf between the school leaders and teachers respondents about the future direction of SSE is quite small and not a major source of contention.

5.5 Conclusion

In this findings chapter, I identified eight separate themes which emerged over the course of a series of focus groups I conducted with school teachers and leaders in two schools over the 2012/2013 academic year. These themes are broken down into various components which reflect the many similarities and differences between the various leader and teacher groupings. As the focus groups progressed from the initial round in October 2012, many inherent contradictions contained within the SSE process became apparent. The respondents themselves became more aware of the paradoxical tensions between public accountability and professional autonomy with some respondents questioning whether SSE can ever be externally mandated and if so this should only happen only at the start of the process:

> By imposing the idea of literacy and numeracy on us has restricted how schools perceive SSE. However opening the doors to school self-evaluation needs to start somewhere and, you know, in the future schools should be able to choose maybe, where they want to go with it themselves. (LFG3)

All respondents claimed to have increased their knowledge about SSE but this did not necessarily mean that they were any clearer about the best way to proceed with SSE. This piece of research reflects a recent specific time period in Irish history and it was possible to detect how socio-economic and political factors contextualised some of the responses of the participants. The national industrial relations climate when the research was conducted combined with the impact of austerity on public sector pay and conditions of employment at the time of the focus groups form the background mood music to some of the responses. Their impact came increasingly to the fore in the middle and final series of focus groups.

It was also evident from the research participants' responses they had reservations with both the wide range and about the number of initiatives at a national roll-out stage at that time. Prominent in the minds of the respondents concerning education were the range of changes on the horizon for schools in particular the *'National Strategy to Improve Numeracy and Literacy among Children and Young People'* (DES, 2011c) along with a proposed revised framework for the Junior Certificate Programme (NCCA, 2011). This suite of initiatives created a more hostile attitude towards the SSE model in both schools, a theme which I revisit in the next chapter when I discuss in more detail my interpretation of the findings which were presented in this chapter:

> You know, there were too many changes going on in schools this year. There were too many shifts in priorities and I understand how a process like this can be fluid, but to be stuck in the middle of it and for things to keep changing, made it very, very difficult to maintain momentum amongst the staff. (LFG3)

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The contribution of this dissertation to the literature about school self-evaluation is explored in this chapter. Firstly, it adds to a limited but growing body of knowledge about SSE. It does so from the perspective of school based leaders and teachers as 'the views of other school personnel, particularly those of teachers and of members of boards of management, would add significantly to further developing an understanding of evaluation in schools' (Mathews, 2010, 170). This dissertation brings their voices to the fore which I believe is important as they are the people who are at the frontline and who are expected to implement and deliver any evolving model of SSE in Irish schools. This study suggests that focus groups are an efficient and effective data collection method to elicit their views particularly in a rapidly changing educational landscape including an evolving model of SSE as 'focus groups excel at accessing responses to events as they unfold' (Barbour, 2007, 27).

One of the main contributions of this dissertation to the literature about SSE is it suggests that not only is the role of the school based practitioner under-researched but also that they play a pivotal role in whether any emergent model will have a significant impact to bring about school improvement. The findings of this dissertation indicate that if 'conceptual commitment' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 126) is not secured to SSE by school based practitioners, they are unlikely to embed SSE processes into their daily practices, thereby they will only superficially engage with SSE in a contrived compliance manner.

In the previous chapter, I presented my findings based on the series of focus groups held with school leaders and teachers in October 2012, February 2013 and May 2013 in two distinct second-level school settings. In this chapter, I compare and contrast those findings with the selected literature discussed in Chapter Two and Three, the contextual

and conceptual chapters. I use the research findings and the selected literature to extrapolate possible implications of my research in a coherent and academically rigorous manner.

This chapter starts by looking at the context in which SSE is being rolled out in Irish schools in the second decade of this millennium. This study was conducted in two particular schools during a very recent economically turbulent period and therefore is very context specific in terms of time and geographical location. In November 2010, Ireland signed up to a programme of financial support from the troika of the IMF/EU/ECB (Department of Finance, 2010). Drawdown of funding was subject to compliance with the conditionality set out in various programme documents (Department of Finance, 2010). While Ireland officially exited this bailout programme in December 2013, it is noteworthy that when the field research for this dissertation was conducted the national finances were considered by many to be precariously poised in a perilous state.

In an international context also at this time, the twin force of global policies of both neo-liberalism and new managerialism were very much in vogue and in the ascendency. The net effect of these contextual factors framed the parameters of the model of SSE which was emerging in Ireland. This helps to set the scene by providing a contextual backdrop to the various focus groups that I conducted with the school teachers and leaders about SSE.

After giving due consideration to the political, economic and social context, I proceed by discussing my findings in relation to the three parts of my research question concerning attitudes, emotions and implementation procedures of the respondents to SSE. I address these three parts of my research question through the lens of the conceptual framework that I designed for this dissertation, while paying particular attention to the eight themes identified in the findings chapter. My conceptual

framework as I discussed in chapter three revolves around the four P's of purpose, power, person and practice. These four P's while all are interrelated are initially presented as distinct stand-alone sections in the conceptual framework chapter. However as part of this discussion of findings chapter, I contend that the sequential order in which they are placed (purpose, power, person and practice) has significance in understanding how school based personnel engage with SSE at school level.

Following careful consideration of my research questions, conceptual framework and the eight themes generated from my findings, I present my main finding in this dissertation. This is that a professional practitioner (school leader or teacher) perception of the purpose and power implications of any policy initiative such as SSE will influence local practices, which ultimately will determine levels of compliance. Those levels of compliance may be contrived (box ticking exercise) or committed (proactive engagement).

6.2 Colliding Contexts Set the Parameters for SSE Evolution in Irish Schools

With 34 member countries that span the globe, the OECD is one of the most influential external influences on education systems throughout the world. The OECD produces international comparative data such as 'PISA'. Ireland's PISA's performance tends to be the subject of much scrutiny and media commentary. This is not surprising as MacBeath (2013) observes that these comparative statistics serve not only to create international league tables but are treated as indicators of a nation's educational health because 'OECD has captured the market on indicators, and is now the singular most authoritative source on the quality of educational systems internationally' (MacBeath 2013, 62).

While the OECD may be the lead transnational agency, there are many other global institutions such as the World Bank, EU, IMF and ECB which influence Irish educational policy. The sway of these international agencies intensified at a local and

national level in November 2010 when Ireland sought an international bailout due to the perilous nature of the State's finances (Department of Finance, 2010). Regardless of the fact that Ireland needed to seek international financial assistance, it could be reasonable to assume that in an increasingly globalised world that these international bodies were always going to be an influential force in framing the contemporary Irish educational landscape. However the international bailout probably cemented the relationship between the state and these various transnational bodies placing it on a firmer foundation.

In the contextual literature chapter, I explored the particular influences on public sector governance of neoliberalism and new managerialism. The implications of these twin policies are wide and varied and in many ways go beyond the scope of this study so in this dissertation, I confine my exploration to their impact on the education sector in relation to SSE. I believe that their relevance to this study is that they frame the narrative in which a model for SSE has emerged in Ireland. Limiting this narrative has implications for the SSE model that is evolving in the Irish education sector.

A concrete example of the manner in which new managerialism and neoliberalism may narrow the narrative about SSE is by framing the discourse used by professional practitioners and in particular dictating the language used in our schools when discussing this initiative. Sometimes the use of neoliberal language used at local level in schools can trace its origins to the language used at official level in policy documents. This means very often over a relatively short period of time the vocabulary of policy can become embedded within the educational lexicon. In relation to SSE, words such as improvement, accountability, transparency and autonomy frequently recur not just in recent official documents from the Inspectorate about SSE (DES, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) but are also repeatedly used by the respondents throughout the series of focus groups. I became increasingly aware as the research progressed that

these words have gained such a common currency that they were often seamlessly embedded in the focus group transcripts. One of the respondents referred to parents and students as 'customers' (LFG1). This ties in with the notion of the public sector as service providers to clients which is a concept which has gained traction in recent times when discussing public sector governance.

Another specific example of the use of 'the language of the marketplace' (MacRuairc, 2010, 230) is when a teacher respondent referred to SSE as a process requiring 'inputs' and 'outputs' and what happens in between is not just a process 'but if it's a process of evaluation, we need to be evaluated' (TFG1). Terms such as 'accountability' and 'transparency' were frequently used by both school leaders and teachers as a justification for SSE. This perhaps indicates the extent to which neoliberal and managerial language has seamlessly embedded itself into today's education lexicon.

The possible implications of new managerialism on school self-evaluation are broad and varied. One potential ramification is that the very notion of school self-evaluation could be viewed as internalising evaluation and surveillance and hence an internalisation of performativity and audit culture of new managerialism.

In the contextual literature chapter, I mention that the annual SIP that all schools are expected to draft should adhere to the SMART principles and contain the following headings 'target, actions, responsibility, timeframe, measurable outcomes' (DES, 2012a, 15). The narrow focus of SMART and SSE targets could be described as measuring the measurable rather than the qualitative aspects of education. A tightly prescribed managerial SSE model may also detract from the educational development objective of school self-evaluation in terms of professional development and holistic education.

Looking back now on the time period when the focus groups were conducted, it seems as if austerity in various shapes and formats was been presented as the best possible and

only credible panacea to the nation's financial predicament. Therefore it is hardly surprising that this then limited the narrow narrative in which the debate about SSE was discussed by the school teachers and leaders in the focus groups and the official literature emerging from the Inspectorate about SSE. As the 2012/2013 academic year progressed, resistance to such a narrow narrative about SSE appeared to emerge in the focus groups. I detected a broadening of the discourse and a willingness to look beyond the clichéd use of terms such as improvement and accountability and a willingness to track a vision for SSE going forward.

I explored in Theme 8 – Going Forward - Practical Suggestions the vision of the school leader and teacher respondents concerning SSE. Suggestions proffered included in-school dedicated SSE teams, workshops and localised school networks working in clusters. All of these options involve putting resources in place to improve implementation practices in relation to SSE. This suggests to me that while the emergent SSE model had very limited resources at the time of the focus groups, the respondents were beginning to consider how the model should be developed in less austere times.

By highlighting the impact of neoliberalism and new managerialism on the emerging model of SSE in Ireland, it is not my intention to offer a deep meaningful critique of the merits or otherwise of these grand policies. It is also worth stating that the aim of this study is not to make a judgement whether the influences of neoliberalism and new managerialism are benign or otherwise, but to acknowledge in an explicit manner their influential context on an evolving SSE policy initiative in contemporary Ireland.

Ireland is a small open economy which for better or worse is subject to globalised forces in general and the impact of transnational agencies such as the OECD. The power and influence of these external agencies show no signs of abating anytime soon:

> Governments are increasingly looking to international comparisons of education
> opportunities and outcomes as they develop policies to enhance individuals'

social and economic prospects, provide incentives for greater efficiency in schooling, and help to mobilise resources to meet rising demands. The OECD Directorate for Education and Skills contributes to these efforts by developing and analysing the quantitative, internationally comparable indicators that it publishes annually in Education at a Glance. (OECD, 2014, 5)

To me what is important to realise when examining the impact of transnational agencies and global policies is to recognise that these agencies and policies are a prevalent and pervasive influence on our education system. Education is about so much more than the creation of a knowledge economy and with the strong emphasis on performativity emanating from some of these transnational agencies there is a danger that 'knowledge is reduced to the status of an adjective in the service of the economy' (Lynch, 2010, 62). This in my view would be a regrettable development and I respectfully suggest the influence of transnational agencies such as the OECD needs to be made more visible and more widely understood by professional practitioners such as school teachers and leaders.

Discourse analysis is not just about naming our world and looking at the vocabulary we use to define it. It is also about unmasking that world to see what lies behind the language we use frequently in educational discourse. In relation to SSE, the concepts of personal accountability and professional autonomy are very prevalent in the literature and the often uneasy relationship between them as 'the emerging evidence in many countries that evaluation and quality assurance systems which seek to be both developmental and judgemental may be doomed to failure on both counts' (MacNamara, O'Hara and Sullivan, 2008, 510). MacBeath (2006a) cautions against 'an overemphasis on accountability, as shown by evidence from many countries around the world, reveal an attrition of teacher engagement and vitality' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). The tension between these two concepts was also a frequently recurring theme in the findings 'in many ways SSE is rendered redundant from the start because we have been told to start with literacy and numeracy' (LFG2). While I explore the accountability

versus autonomy dimension to SSE later in this chapter, any debate about the inherent tension between these two terms must recognise the discourse which gives these terms meaning and currency. In essence, it is my belief that if you try and divorce educational terms from the various background contexts informing their usage then you strip away their intended meaning. In this dissertation, my intention by identifying the contexts in which SSE has emerged in Ireland is to enhance meaning and therefore to unmask the world of SSE in order to give a deeper understanding to the findings discussed in this chapter

6.3 Understanding the Attitudes of the Respondents to SSE

The first part of my research question concerns the attitudes of the school leaders and teachers to SSE. I was particularly interested in establishing the attitudes of the respondents at the start of the research process and then track any possible changes in attitudes as they became more engaged with the SSE process throughout the academic year. This explains why I chose to commence the findings chapter and the initial series of focus groups with Theme 1 - Initial Impressions. As mentioned in the previous chapter most of the respondents at this stage were quite balanced and reasonable in their opening comments about SSE as reflected in the comments in Theme 2 - Perceived Benefits of the SSE process. The following leader comment aptly summarises this sentiment as 'you'll see what is working and what's not working and then you can sit down as a department with your colleagues and discuss how you could progress and improve' (LFG1).

It should be noted that in Theme 4 – Stakeholder Involvement, both the school leaders and teachers groupings were open to the meaningful involvement and inclusion of various stakeholders such as parents and pupils. Their main reservation concerned the degree of involvement of other stakeholders with school leaders in general more supportive than the teachers to the concept of greater involvement of parents and pupils

in the SSE process. It was also evident that the school leaders were more supportive and enthusiastic than the teachers about the SSE process, but this could be perhaps explained as they saw school self-evaluation as very much as part of their managerial remit due to their senior leadership position in their respective schools.

A hardening of attitudes came more to the fore during the middle series of focus groups as identified in Theme 6 – Tracking Changes of the Respondents about SSE when one respondent stated 'right this is going to happen, end of' (TFG2).

This hardening of attitude perhaps can be attributed to a myriad of factors. The school leaders and teachers were now more familiar with what SSE entailed and the specific requirements it would place on them. There was also a sense that school based personnel were under pressure on two fronts. Firstly, they were expected to engage with a suite of initiatives all of which had the potential to substantially increase their workload. Secondly, a series of public sector cost saving measures (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010, 2013) meant reduced take home pay and deteriorating terms and conditions of employment including additional working hours. This meant the respondents had more after school meetings and less favourable pension entitlements. Growing resentment towards SSE is palpable in the following comment that 'SSE is a new system and their attitude is we just have to get used to it' (TFG2).

The direct honesty evident in the above comment indicated to me, my approach to the research process was valid. I had spent a prolonged period of time in the field as 'the more experience that a researcher has with participants in their actual setting, the more accurate or valid will be the findings' (Creswell, 2009, 192). This perhaps explains why respondents were more open and frank with me during the middle series of focus groups. I had built up a professional relationship with them over several months and they seemed to trust me more and were less guarded in their comments. This possibility

mirrors my findings about building up trust which I outline later when I discuss the impact of SSE on emotions in the next section of this chapter.

The attitudes of the respondents towards SSE appear to soften and were more measured in the final series of focus groups. These focus groups took place at the end of the academic year and this was my final piece of field work with the research respondents. This may have made them more philosophical about the SSE process with one research participant stating that 'I think that the department is well aware that schools are at different levels and I think that they were hoping that every school would move from where they are to a step further down along' (LFG3).

I encouraged the school leaders and teachers to be reflective about SSE and to concerns practical ways to improve the SSE process in schools. Suggestions freely articulated by the respondents outlined in Theme 8 - Going Forward included in-school dedicated SSE teams and SSE dedicated localised schools networks. This shows a readiness by the research participants to engage with SSE processes. While the respondents were agreeable to advance ideas about how SSE should evolve in the future this should not be interpreted as unquestioned enthusiasm for the SSE project. One respondent stated that 'it just seems a bit overwhelming at the moment, that there are a lot of initiatives being brought about and you just wonder will any of them ever be followed through completely' (TFG3).

For many the jury was still out about SSE and I detected their support for the SSE model being rolled out in Irish second-level schools is very much qualified. The practical implications of this conditional support for SSE manifests itself in their level of engagement with implementation procedures. The implementation part of my research question I address later on in this chapter but my findings suggests that the attitudes of the respondents to SSE impacts significantly on the long term sustainability of the SSE policy initiative in Irish schools. This concurs with what others in the

educational literature say about schools and change because in order to 'embrace innovation depends not on whether outsiders think they need to, but on their own readiness to do so' (Evans, 2010, 1). This has also found to be true in relation to SSE which is recognised in the literature as a key area for consideration when implementing school self-evaluation as 'to what extent, are the relationships and politics across the system, school and classroom secure and trusting enough to promote an internally driven, bottom-up approach to self-evaluation' (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, 16).

6.3.1 Building Commitment by Articulating a Purpose for SSE

'What are we trying to achieve with SSE anyway? I am still confused' (TFG2). This comment was made in the middle series of focus groups and it typifies uncertainty amongst the research respondents about what exactly is involved by engagement with SSE processes. It reinforces the idea that any SSE policy needs a clear purpose for that policy which should be articulated at the start of the process. This resonates with the argument originally advocated by MacBeath (1999) for an overarching philosophy as an essential element of any school self-evaluation framework. The focus group discussions through the purpose lens suggest that school leaders and teachers can only buy into the SSE process if what it intends to achieve is made clear from the outset as 'it is only when there is a level of conceptual commitment to the idea of self-evaluation that it is possible to establish procedures and practical steps that will allow the vision implicit in the approach to evaluation to be realised' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 126).

I concur with this viewpoint, as my interpretation of the findings indicates that conceptual commitment is a prerequisite before successful or sustained implementation can take place as 'to be honest my engagement with SSE will be minimal unless I can see a good reason for it' (TFG2). This forms part of my contribution to the body of knowledge about SSE. I contend that before school leaders or teachers can commit to a

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concept they must first understand it and a good starting point to understanding any concept is to examine its purpose? This is why to understand the rationale for SSE, I used the first P in my conceptual framework, which stands for purpose. In October 2012, when I conducted the initial round of focus groups I started by asking each of the participants what does SSE mean to you? While I did not use the term purpose as the moderator of the focus groups when I posed this question, nearly all the responses contained a purpose dimension which I then categorised into one of the three logics identified by MacBeath (2006a) as discussed in the conceptual literature chapter.

6.3.2 Revisiting the Logics for SSE to Clarify its Purpose

The three logics identified by MacBeath (2006a) are accountability, improvement and economic. All three logics are explored in Theme 1 - Initial Impressions and Theme 2 Perceived Benefits. Both these themes illustrate that the school leaders and teachers have quite a varied perspective on what is the purpose of SSE. In my opinion MacBeath's three logics provide a useful framework in which to situate a discussion about the purpose of SSE.

The economic logic for SSE is perhaps the logic which out of the three logics can be most closely aligned with the rapid deterioration in the economic fortunes of the country's finances as discussed in the previous section. Therefore it is hardly surprising that this logic for SSE was proffered quite frequently by the respondents as a purpose of SSE and was subject to some adverse comment such as 'they are making us to do the work that is currently being done by Inspectors' (LFG2). Many of the respondents and in particular the teachers felt the primary raison d'etre for the introduction of SSE at that time was to make schools evaluate themselves and this would cut costs in the long run as 'the long and short of it is, it is all about saving money' (TFG2).

The premise of this argument is that SSE is a much cheaper alternative to the current model involving external inspections because it eliminates the need for Inspectors to

engage in the labour intensive process of evaluating schools, conducting individual class room based inspections and writing up time consuming individual evaluation reports which need to be prepared in a manner suitable for publication. Whether this in the long term would reduce the size and cost of the Inspectorate division of the DES is a debatable point. However, the findings suggest to me while the respondents recognise the possible economic benefits of SSE, if it is seen primarily as a cost cutting exercise it will be treated in a suspicious manner. I think it is important for the DES to be upfront with school based personnel about why it is prioritising SSE in schools. This means it needs to make a convincing case that it is not just about achieving cost savings. Otherwise local practitioners will be indifferent at best or hostile at worst in their attitude towards SSE and this will probably negate its successful implementation.

Of the three logics, school improvement is the logic most frequently referred to by the research participants in the focus groups. One of the respondents stated that 'it's as if what we are doing is not good enough, we constantly must improve, do better' (TFG2). The importance of improvement as a logic for SSE is also quite significant in the educational literature as 'a school improvement logic which holds that the process of reflection, dialogue, and concern for evidence is the motor of better schools' (MacBeath, 2006a, 1). MacBeath (2006a) considers improvement to be the most compelling of the three logics. However it is difficult to make a compelling rational counter-argument against the idea of school improvement. The identification of school improvement as a SSE logic appears to be appealing and attractive to the various educational stakeholders. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that school improvement is such a generic aspirational term that it can mean different things to different people. Parents and students may wish to measure improvement by analysing a particular school's State examinations results and comparing to national norms while

teachers in that same school may see improvement as about improving the quality of teaching and learning for all students.

School self-evaluation as it is being implemented in Ireland at the moment involves schools drafting SIPs annually starting with literacy and numeracy. It is envisaged then schools will have greater flexibility in designing and drafting SIPs and deciding on its contents. Perhaps only in the future when schools pick their own area for self-evaluation will we get an indication of what individual schools understand by the concept of improvement.

The drafting of an SIP was made compulsory by DES Circular 0040/2012 (DES, 2012b) and as discussed in this dissertation the current model of SSE links improvement very much to accountability. Externally mandating schools to engage with SSE and dictating the areas of literacy and numeracy for the initial SIPs generated considerable comment in the focus groups. This was an ongoing source of contention and one of the respondents stated 'by telling us we must start with literacy, that's not self-evaluation, that's an instruction' (LFG2).

This paradoxical dilemma between accountability and autonomy is explored later in this section about the attitudes of the respondents to SSE but I wish to note here that it is linked to what is the true purpose of SSE. Some of the focus group respondents argued that the SSE process was 'rendered redundant' (LFG2) by prescribing the areas of SSE process while others argued the process needed to be more prescriptive. While it is not possible to distil the purpose of school self-evaluation to just one dimension I deem it a worthy exercise to revisit the logics of SSE. I believe that the three logics help to clarify the purpose of SSE which also shaped the attitudes and approaches of the respondents to this elusive concept.

6.3.3 From Purpose to Power via a Deliberative Democratic Logic

All of the three logics outlined above are very evident in both the research literature reviewed for this dissertation and the findings generated by the various focus groups. However none of these logics adequately capture the demand in both the findings and the research for the greater inclusion of parents, pupils and the local community in the school self-evaluation process. While nearly all the participants were supportive of greater involvement of parents, the degree of involvement of external stakeholders in the SSE process was contentious as 'I am not saying others don't have a role but those working in the school have a better understanding' (TFG1).

In many ways, by discussing the degrees of involvement of stakeholders shifts the debate from purpose to the power element of my conceptual framework. In the findings, the respondents tend to refer to the impact of power in an implicit rather than explicit manner. This issue comes to the fore in Theme 4 – Stakeholder Involvement. My assessment is that the majority of respondents perceive that the power source currently resides in the gift of the DES as articulated in the following comment:

> The Department, they are setting their own criteria as to what level of involvement other stakeholders are going to have. They are going to dictate how often, how regularly they are involved and how much input they have. (LFG1)

Therefore in order to address this perceived power differential concerning school self-evaluation, the DES may need to frame SSE in a more democratic manner perhaps using a set of principles outlined in a series of books published in the 1970s by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas (1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1979) developed a concept of democracy grounded in a theory of communication and argues that if we could understand the conditions necessary for people to participate in full, free, and equal discourse, then we would have the theory of communicative action that would guide the operation of democracy. I realise that I am taking the Habermasian concept of communicative action as 'wherever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated

not through egocentric locations of success but through acts of reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1984, 286) and using it in a very specific context. I believe this approach has merit in promoting an environment in schools conducive to enabling the conditions for meaningful and productive school self-evaluations to flourish. By getting all parties to sign up to the principles of communicative action, Habermas's writings have highlighted to this author that there may be a deliberative democratic logic for school self-evaluation if it involves real engagement with all relevant stakeholders at community level. My endorsement of the consideration of SSE from a communicative action perspective is also an area where I would like to make a contribution to the body of knowledge about SSE.

I contend that the combination of Habermas's concept of communicative action and House and Howe's (2000) model of deliberative democratic evaluations present a compelling case for a deliberative democratic logic for SSE. Research about the effects of deliberative democracy on school self-evaluation is limited but I discussed in the conceptual literature chapter a piece of research by Davidsdottir and Lisi (2007) linking deliberative democracy and school self-evaluation. They identified many positive benefits as 'results indicated that evaluation worked best when schools took a democratic stance. Program fidelity was an indication of improvement within the school' (Davidsdottir and Lisi, 2007, 371).

Comments from the school leaders and teachers indicated they did not just want a token involvement in the school self-evaluation process as 'we must bring teachers on board in a more meaningful way rather than just using SSE as an opportunity to giving them more jobs to do' (LFG3). This stance is backed up by the literature on deliberative democratic process as 'a consensus arrived at in a discussion free from domination' (Habermas, 1970, 7).

House and Howe (2000) identify three main requirements for deliberative democratic evaluations. These requirements include an inclusion of all relevant interests such as the parents and pupils. Secondly, they advocate meaningful discussion that is dialogical, which enables identification of the real issues and interests of all parties and thirdly the actual school self-evaluation is deliberative in that results are discussed by the relevant parties. I presented in this section a brief analysis of some aspects of the work of House and Howe (2000) and Habermas (1970). My explorations of some of their ideas about deliberative democratic evaluations as discussed here, means that I would recommend that it is a topic worthy of further research beyond the dissertation.

6.3.4 The Inherent Contradiction at the Heart of SSE - Accountability versus Autonomy

> It is gradually becoming apparent that as the two key policy goals of greater school and teacher autonomy and increased accountability are difficult to reconcile in practise it follows that design and implementation of evaluative systems that can encompass both is problematic. (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 2)

Throughout the full series of focus groups, the inherent contradiction at the heart of SSE in the above comment kept coming to the fore. This was hardly surprising as it is also a prevalent feature of the literature about school self-evaluation. Interestingly for this piece of research the concepts of accountability and autonomy can be considered from both a purpose and power perspective, the first two elements of my conceptual framework. I discussed the tension concerning purpose earlier in this chapter and now I wish to view this paradoxical dilemma from a power perspective. Here the relationship between accountability and autonomy is more clear cut. The power of school leaders and teachers decreases if SSE makes school leaders and teachers more accountable for how they discharge their professional duties. However if SSE gives school based practitioners greater freedom and flexibility to how they practice their craft in their classrooms and schools this obviously pushes the power differential more favourably in their direction. The balance between the two is precariously poised and only time will

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tell how the model of SSE that emerges in Irish schools shifts the centre of power between the various educational stakeholders and in what direction.

Concerning the Irish SSE model, the designation of literacy and numeracy as the subject of the initial SIPs to be generated by schools probably negatively impacts on professional autonomy. However it is worth noting that many of the teachers and leaders in the focus groups were pushing for a more prescriptive approach to SSE particularly in the early years 'just tell me what to do and I will get on with it' (TFG3). This perhaps can be explained by a fear of an increasing workload pressure by asking educators to engage in school self-evaluation activities combined with the possibility SSE may lead to more external pressure from parents and other educational stakeholders.

By highlighting professional accountability and personal autonomy, I am conscious they are just two dimensions which are a feature of modern day school leaders' and teachers' working lives. I therefore recognise that isolating both these issues and placing them on a spectrum in one sense is an artificial construct. However I deem it a worthy exercise as placing both these terms on the one continuum makes many of the inherent contradictions of SSE more visible and apparent. Those apparent contradictions are identified as a central and recurring feature in the findings chapter of this dissertation.

One of the respondents cogently captures this dilemma with the question 'can an internally driven process such as SSE be externally mandated?' (LFG2). This tension between accountability and autonomy is evident in the responses generated by the focus groups and offers insight into the attitudes of the respondents towards SSE and goes to the very crux of the inherent paradox at the heart of the SSE process.

The focus group findings mirror the debate evident in the selected literature reviewed for this dissertation about this contested concept. Another way of expressing the autonomy versus accountability debate is whether SSE is about school enhancement (to

improve) or creating evidence about standards in schools (to prove)? My findings add the voices of school leaders and teachers to this recurring debate in the literature about SSE. Those findings support the idea that while the relationship between the accountability and autonomy dimensions to SSE is quite dynamic, it also contains the opposing elements of cooperation and competition. I believe any SSE model will always contain traces of both as they are not mutually exclusive. However I did detect differences between the two groupings of school leaders and teachers on where the balance should reside. It appeared that teachers had a greater concern about the accountability dimension concerning classroom performance while leaders had greater faith in the possible autonomous benefits of SSE. The following leader comment reflects the autonomy dimension favoured by school leaders by stating that 'school self-evaluation gives us greater flexibility to steer the school in the right direction' (LFG2).

6.4 Unmasking Emotional Responses Triggered by the SSE Process

The second part of my research question concerns the emotional responses of the respondents to school self-evaluation. During the initial series of focus groups, the discussion was very much centred on the attitudes of the research participants to SSE. While the respondents were forthcoming in their contributions to the focus group discussions, I would categorise their responses as more logical and procedural than emotional at this stage as reflected in the following quite measured comment about SSE that 'it is only a matter of recording what we are already doing and putting a bit of structure on it' (LFG1). This comment is typical of what school leaders and teachers envisaged was involved in the evolving model of SSE at that early data gathering stage of the field research process, October, 2012. It was during the middle series of focus groups that the respondents were more vocal and at times vociferous in discussing the impact of SSE on their professional lives with one respondent stating that 'well why are we expected to do this work outside of our teaching hours if all they are doing is take,

take, take' (TFG2). I had built up a professional relationship with the research participants at this stage so this probably meant they were now more open and direct in their comments to me about SSE. However, I think that their frankness was also in large part due to the emotional toll of the combined impact of austerity and initiative overload was having on their daily lives. One of the respondents stated that 'we seem to be doing more for less. I don't know if anyone really has the time to be doing this as well as everything else' (TFG2).

The overall mood emanating from the middle series of focus groups indicated to me a heightened sense of concern and frustration with how contextual factors both economic and educational were impacting on their standards of living and their everyday working lives. Discussing SSE offered an opportunity for this pent up anger and frustration to surface. This thread is also evident in the final series of focus groups particularly in Theme 7 – Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE:

> There is just too much going on in schools at the moment. It is full on. Even if I wanted to engage more with SSE I don't have time. The bottom line is it is all about paying us less and squeezing more out of us. (TFG3)

This comment resonates with the sentiment expressed in some of the educational literature which states that SSE should not be rushed as 'it is acknowledged that the process may take more time in the early years' (DES, 2012b, 2). There also can be a tendency for policy makers to try and force change in too short a time span but 'all change requires internalisation by the participants if it is to be owned. Such internalisation takes a long time and very often policy makers completely underestimate the time that is required' (Heywood, 2009, 260).

In the next section, I turn my attention to how some of the power differentials can be addressed as a means to allay fears about SSE. I explore three different dimensions to trust of personal, systemic and social trust and how my findings compare to the literature concerning this concept. In the final part of the section, I discuss how

strengthening cooperation between the various SSE stakeholders may help to bridge the

gap between trust and fear.

6.4.1 Addressing Power Differentials to Allay Fears about SSE

I discussed in the literature review chapters how change can cause a spectrum of

emotions:

> but at best our reactions are likely to be mixed. For though the public meaning
> of change, as it is typically promoted, are cast in terms of growth and
> development, progress and renewal, and though these can often be the ultimate
> result of change, its private meanings are about resistance, not acceptance: they
> start with loss and include, among others, incompetence and conflict. (Evans,
> 2010, 1)

I categorise under the umbrella of fear those emotions which increase anxiety for the

professional practitioner. The role played by fear as a by-product of change brought

about by the SSE initiative is obvious in the responses from the participants during all

three phases of the various focus groups discussions. Fear manifests itself in many

guises and fear of change and fear of criticism are just two of the subthemes explored in

Theme 2 – Perceived Barriers of the initial series of focus groups. A parting comment

made during a discussion at the end of one of the middle series of focus groups by one

of the teachers gets to the crux of this issue which questions 'who is going to use the

data generated from SSE and how is this data going to be used' (TFG2).

These questions brings to the fore the issue of the true purpose of SSE which I already

discussed in relation to the attitudes of the respondents to SSE. They also highlight why

the respondents may view the emerging model of SSE that schools must now formally

engage with as a hegemonic practice. School teachers have real concerns that SSE has

the potential to centralise power by lessening their professional autonomy. Those

concerns are very real. The Teaching Council of Ireland recently announced that it will

soon be able to investigate parental complaints about teachers following proposed

amendments to legislation dealing with fitness to teach. All second-level teachers must

be registered with the Teaching Council and the intention is they will be able to issue

sanctions where they judge there is a degree of underperformance by teachers (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2014). This prospect reinforces any fears that some teachers may have that the information gathered as a result of SSE may be used in a negative way against a teacher and makes the above questions about the true purpose of SSE more pertinent.

Power can be exercised by various means and methods and one such method which has particular relevance to this study is surveillance. Like power, surveillance can take many forms and can have many guises. One of the most obvious forms of surveillance involves the use of closed circuit television. CCTV is frequently used in Irish schools as a crime deterrent and detection device. However despite the increasing use of video security technology in the school environment, it is more subtle forms of surveillance which has greater relevance for this study.

Based on the findings from the focus groups it is my considered view that SSE could lead to a greater degree of self-surveillance by school leaders or teachers. This links in with the argument that school self-evaluation could be a management tool of new managerialism designed to not just to increase performativity but also leads to greater levels of self-monitoring by employees in the workplace. Foucault (1984) calls this 'techniques of the self' which are 'those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (Foucault 1984, 10-11). Examples of self-surveillance in the findings are 'it is as if what we are doing is not good enough and we must strive to do more' (TFG3) and 'we are constantly evaluating what we are doing anyway' (LFG3).

If school based personnel fear how data generated by SSE may be used in an adverse way to cast judgements on their professional conduct, this will inevitably lead to a

reticence about engaging with SSE processes. Apart from articulating a clear purpose for SSE, addressing the potential power differential concerns of the local practitioners may create a productive space that may allay fears that school leaders and teachers have about engaging with SSE processes. The creation of a non-threatening environment to engage in SSE, in my view is conducive to the possibility of enriching any evaluation processes in schools. It should lead to greater and more honest reflection by school leaders and teachers about their professional practices, with the emphasis placed on striving for improvement.

To summarise, I would say it is important that any fears generated by the potential power that SSE may give to external stakeholders such as the Teaching Council or Departmental Inspectors should be addressed. An interesting aspect of this is the idea of parental power who are a group who currently have limited powers but huge indirect influence in many schools. Professional autonomy as discussed in this dissertation is a possible benefit of SSE, but is unlikely to be realised if teachers overly engage in self-surveillance practices. Hegemony is about how we consent to power over us, but it is always backed up with the threat of coercion as 'hegemony can be described as the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interest of others who have power over us' (Brookfield, 2005, 94).

I contend that if SSE is to flourish, hegemonic concerns needs to be addressed. Ensuring SSE decentralises power away from all ready powerful stakeholders is a necessary requirement to allay fears the respondents may have about SSE as 'it is not as if we have any choice, we must do it' (TFG3).

6.4.2 Personal, Systemic and Social Trust - Essential Ingredients

In the previous section, I discussed how dealing with any power differentials may allay fears that the respondents may have in relation to SSE. At the opposite end of the

emotional spectrum to fear is the concept of trust. In this section, I use the overarching emotion of trust as a conduit to gain an insight into the emotional mind-set of the respondents. Trust is considered an essential ingredient in facilitating school reform as 'trust in schools is essential in successful school reform and it contributes to marked improvements in student achievement' (Mathews, 2010, 50).

It is probably reasonable to assume if a person emotes fear this tends to increase anxiety whereas trust tends to have the opposite effect. Therefore, I suggest that fear and trust are two emotions which can be placed on an emotional continuum. I am mindful that this continuum is a very crude indicator of the emotional mind-set of the respondents but I do feel it is useful in unmasking the emotional responses triggered by the SSE process.

Initially when I started scrutinising the findings from the focus groups, fears about the SSE process were pretty easy to detect and were expressed in an explicit manner in the various focus group discussions. This sentiment is evident in the following comment which ask the questions 'who is going to use this data and what exactly do they want if for' (TFG2).

In Theme 3 – Perceived Barriers which formed part of the initial series of focus groups, the fear is expressed that SSE may be a time consuming task that could lead to personal criticism of the way individual teachers discharge their professional duties as 'there's an inbuilt sense with most people that what they're doing is right and sometimes it's difficult even when people look in on the way that they're doing things to nearly accept that there could be another way, a better way and their way is not always the right way' (LFG1). Such fears about SSE are a thread which weaves through all three stages of the data collection phase of the field research. Those fears are often quite latent and bubble beneath the surface of individual responses. A teacher respondent stated 'I'm not sure

that SSE will focus in a correct manner on my school or the individuals who work in it' (TFG3).

My contribution to knowledge about SSE is that by placing professional practitioners' emotional responses on a fear and trust continuum offers a mechanism leading to a deeper understanding of how those fears can be allayed. This should lead to a greater possibility of minimising fears about school self-evaluation, thereby ensuring that SSE can be successfully implemented and embed itself in school based practices.

Trust is a complex emotion, which in many ways defies singular definition as it can mean different things to different people as 'there is a general fear of not doing enough and I'm the opposite keep it small' (LFG2). In the conceptual literature chapter, I discuss trust as an emotional attitude and it 'may be understood as some general pattern in the way the world or some part of the world is perceived by an individual' (Lahno, 2001, 171). I contend that perceiving trust as an emotional attitude is relevant for interpreting the responses of the various school leaders and teachers who participated in this study. It highlights the role of relational trust when considering SSE and brings to the fore the following three questions, do we trust ourselves, our colleagues and the institution and structures in which we work? The findings in this dissertation, suggests breaking down barriers to SSE via personal, systemic and social trust in schools will create a more conducive environment for SSE to flourish. Tackling the trust dimension is important as it was obviously a critical issue when a respondent stated that 'I would be worried about how they are going to use the information gathered' (TFG1).

Personal trust involves school teachers and leaders examining whether they trust themselves to exercise professional judgement at all times when they discharge their professional duties. Lack of personal trust may explain a tendency by some school leaders and teachers to overly engage in self-surveillance practices if fearful of the potential power differential from SSE as discussed in the previous section of this

chapter. My interpretation of the findings is that personal trust is a pre-requisite to systemic and social trust. I say this because I believe school leaders and teachers must trust themselves before they can have faith in SSE systems and processes.

Systemic trust to me is external in nature and from a second level school's perspective concerns the myriad of educational policies and practices which blend together to create a unique organisational culture in each school setting. School leaders and teachers who have a high degree of systemic trust in their own particular school are likely to be less fearful of new policy initiatives such as SSE. If a school leader or teacher are suspicious about how the data generated by SSE will be used this may be a possible manifestation of wider trust issues in that organisation.

Social trust is the third form of trust I identify as a pre-requisite for SSE processes to flourish in a school environment. This relates to all human interaction within a school environment. A salient feature of school life is the personal interaction between the various educational stakeholders and the school teachers and leaders in the localised school setting. While I earlier identified personal trust as a prerequisite for systemic and social trust concerning SSE, I believe social trust plays a pivotal role in whether SSE embeds itself into a school's culture. I say this as I contend that social trust has the potential to minimise systemic trust issues in schools. The reason why I believe this to be the case is because if you do not trust your colleagues you are unlikely to collaborate with them in a meaningful way as envisaged in the evolving model of SSE as 'effective school self-evaluation involves the principal, deputy principals, teachers, boards and patrons working together in a climate of trust' (DES, 2012a, 13).

In the literature, Bryk and Schneider (2002) refer to relational trust as a critical component to enable school improvement. They define relational trust as the interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a school community:

> There are many exchanges that take place in a school community; principal to teacher, teacher to teacher, teacher to student and parent to teacher. Each party

in a relationship maintains an understanding of their role obligations and hold expectations about the role obligation of others. (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 1)

To this researcher the terms social trust and relational trust are interchangeable but perhaps relational trust brings the issue of fostering positive professional relationships more to the fore, thereby giving it greater prominence. What I think is useful for this piece of research is the four criterion Bryk and Schneider identify to build relational trust. Those criterion are respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity:

> Respect involves the recognition of the role each person plays in a child's education. Competence in the execution of a role is the ability one has to achieve the desired outcomes. Personal regard for others is the perception of how one goes beyond what is required of their role in their caring for another person. Lastly, integrity can be described as the consistency between what people say and what people do. (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, 3)

Building trust in schools is not easy but identifying the four values above and trying to position them at the heart of professional relationships in schools may be a good place to start.

6.4.3 Moving From Fear to Trust by Strengthening Cooperation

Fear and trust are very much the dominant emotions at the heart of much of the focus group responses concerning the attitudes and disposition of school leaders and teachers to SSE. It is hardly surprising that these competing emotions are relevant to this research project about SSE, as these emotions are quite universal and are very often a feature of most human interactions. In this section, I discuss ways to allay fears and build trust within schools in relation to SSE, but I do not wish to oversimplify the nature or scale of this daunting task. Fears are deep rooted within the human psyche and not easily changed as they 'are artifacts of our own psychologies and experiences' (Robin, 2004, 2). Trust involves operating outside one's comfort zone because if we know exactly what's going to happen when dealing with another person, the issue of trust never arises. Trust does involve a leap of faith and fears are not easily dislodged, so I suggest strengthening cooperation may be a panacea to bridge the gap between fear and

trust. Richard Sennett (2013) in a recent book '*Together*' argues that in the modern world what is needed now more than ever is cooperation. He argues it requires more than just goodwill gestures and it is a craft that requires skill. He articulates a compelling case for strengthening cooperation. But this is not a simple endeavour:

> Cooperation oils the machinery of getting things done, and sharing with others can make up for what we may individually lack. Cooperation is in our genes, but cannot remain stuck in routine behaviour; it needs to be developed and deepened. This is particularly true when we are dealing with people unlike ourselves; with them, cooperation becomes a demanding effort. (Sennett, 2013, iv)

The final two themes of the final series of focus groups reflect the complex nature of the emotional mindset of the respondents. In Theme 7 – Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE, there is ample evidence of heightening anxiety about lack of clarity with SSE and obvious frustration with the industrial relations climate and reform fatigue. While in Theme 8 – Going Forward – Practical Suggestions the respondents are not openly hostile to continuing to soldier on with the SSE journey, but do have some reservations. Trust and fear exist side by side along with the other myriad of emotions which contribute to the human psyche. What was useful for this study by isolating these two emotions and placing them on a continuum is that it offers a unique insight into the differences between the school leader and teacher grouping about SSE. The findings would suggest that the school leaders are weighted more towards the trust element about SSE than the responses of teachers. This may be the situation because leaders are in a powerful position in schools because of their management status. I infer from the findings that lack of trust is a greater barrier to the implementation of SSE for teachers. Therefore building trust between teachers and the external stakeholders in SSE should perhaps start with the concrete goal of strengthening cooperation.

Bridging the gap between fear and trust is an onerous and at times arduous task and like all worthwhile tasks it is easier said than done. Strengthening cooperation helps build that bridge. In my view strengthening cooperation is an important weapon in the

armoury of making the rhetoric about SSE a reality. Modern work environments places an expectation on employees that they work in a collegiate manner as 'social relations at work are an important factor' (Heywood, 2009, 179). I think strengthening cooperation reinforces the personal, systemic and social trust issues explored in this dissertation. The concept of strengthening cooperation breaks down trust by making it a more realistic and obtainable target. School employees tend to lead very busy working lives and this often involves building strong working professional relationships. It is my considered view that strengthening cooperation is a prerequisite and a practical strategy to enhancing trust in schools.

6.5 Interrogating the Implementation Practices of the Respondents to SSE

'The nub of cooperation is active participation rather than passive presence' (Sennett, 2013, 233). This quote is an apt link between the previous section and the third part of my research question which concerns the school self-evaluation implementation practices of the research respondents. In this section, I explore SSE implementation practices through the lens of compliance. I identify two possible types of compliance, contrived and committed. The defining characteristic of contrived compliance, I suggest is passive resistance, whereas the salient characteristic of committed compliance is proactive engagement. The respondents' views on SSE implementation practices were not really addressed in the first series of focus groups but are a dominant thread through the middle and final series of focus groups. In Theme 5 – SSE Support Mechanisms, I explore the three main techniques intended to assist with the implementation of SSE in all Irish schools. They are a booklet of national guidelines (DES, 2012a), an official SSE dedicated website www.schoolself-evaluation.ie and a school based presentation about SSE delivered by an Inspector to the staff of all primary and second-level schools. These three initiatives, while welcome, all have significant shortcomings as identified by the research respondents in the focus groups discussions.

In relation to the Inspector's advisory visits one respondent stated 'the Inspector was just going through the motions and it was a case of click the PowerPoint' (TFG2).

In summary, the guidelines which contain 90 pages were seen as turgid and lacking clarity and visibility, while awareness of the dedicated SSE website was minimal. The one off Inspector support visits were viewed by many of the respondents as mere tokenism as typified by the following comment that 'I did not get a lot out of it if I am to be honest' (TFG2). In my views these criticisms are valid and a greater degree of impetus and innovation by the Inspectorate towards the design and delivery of SSE initiatives is required. These SSE initiatives also need to be backed up with more meaningful resources and inter-active school based workshops, if SSE is to become more embedded into Irish schools systems and structures.

6.5.1 Pathways to SSE Practices – The Craft of Compliance

The final P of my conceptual framework stands for practice. Schools like all complex organisations have policies some of which gather dust in filing cabinets and others which can be observed in daily school rituals. In my view, over a period of time the habitual nature of some rituals and routines become seamlessly embedded in schools so that they become an established school practice deeply integrated within school systems and structures. The wearing of school uniforms is one such tradition prevalent in many Irish schools. School leaders and teachers have an influential role in practices gaining a firm footing in schools and it is in this context I wish to consider the practice dimension to SSE. Perhaps the most significant factor in determining whether a practice gains traction is whether it is a compulsory or an optional requirement. Some of the respondents pointed out that the only reason why SSE was now on their radar was because it was now a mandatory process for all Irish schools as 'this is a new system and whether we want to or not we have to to get used to it' (LFG2).

A DES circular (DES, 2012b) as already discussed in this dissertation made formal engagement with SSE processes a compulsory requirement for all schools. While not disputing the DES's rationale for adopting this approach to advancing the SSE project in Irish schools, my consideration of the findings suggest this has had an adverse impact on levels of engagement by school leaders and teachers at local level with SSE processes as 'we have no choice in whether to engage with it or not' (TFG2).

SSE requires pressure and support if is to be implemented in a meaningful way and getting the balance right between the two is a considerable challenge. Any attempts to impose SSE in a top-down manner may be counterproductive in the long run as school teacher and leaders have a pivotal role to play in supporting SSE implementation. It may have been wiser to bring them on board at an earlier stage and in a more meaningful way. Policy initiatives such as SSE, if to be successfully implemented can lead to sustainable change in practices at school level but in my view the degree of engagement of the professional practitioners should not be taken for granted. To summarise, mandating SSE processes in schools is a perilous task as it requires not just pressure, but support mechanisms. Those support structures influence the extent to which professional practitioners commit to these processes, which is pivotal and is dependent on a positive level of engagement by school leaders and teachers with SSE.

Concerning SSE practices, I examine two different types of compliance. I suggest that compliance concerning practices may be contrived or committed. I am cognisant that it is possible that some school leaders and teachers could support SSE in such a manner which goes beyond the status of compliance. However, I contend as discussed in Theme 7 – Concluding Comments of the Respondents about SSE, that the context of an overloaded reform agenda and the industrial relations climate make an enthusiastic endorsement of SSE by school leaders and teachers a highly unlikely scenario. The net effect of the current contextual factors discussed in this dissertation suggest there is a

limited appetite for school self-evaluation. This probably means SSE in its current guise is unlikely to be a truly transformative experience for most Irish schools.

I contend that there may be various degrees of compliance and levels of compliance that occur along a continuum. The two polar opposite levels of compliance on this continuum are contrived and committed. Like all continuums, the two extremes are mainly for illustrative purposes and in reality most schools and the professional practitioners who work in them are situated somewhere along this compliance continuum along with variations within the staff cohort of each individual school.

6.5.2 Contrived Compliance – Passive Resistance

While SSE is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland, my interpretation of the findings suggests both schools are situated on the contrived compliance side of the continuum. The educational literature suggests that this is a threat to SSE as 'despite rhetoric extolling the virtues of self-evaluation and practitioner empowerment, such systems may in practice simply require schools and teachers to research their own processes and practices according to externally imposed templates and methods' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 28). By the time of the final series of focus groups, both schools had drafted a SIP in relation to literacy. However to a large extent the research respondents saw this very much as a box ticking exercise to be completed with minimum time and effort.

Concerns with the efficacy of top-down mandates is a recurring theme in the literature for the last quarter of a century 'many staff development initiatives take the form of something that is done to teachers rather than with them, still less by them' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1991, 27). The school leaders rather than teachers were more knowledgeable about the existence and contents of their SIP about literacy which is hardly surprising as SSE falls within their managerial remit. The attitudes of the school teachers towards drafting a SIP about literacy seemed quite perfunctory in nature. They

treated it very much as a task almost like a homework assignment to be completed with minimum effort and once handed up, it requires no further action as 'tell me what I have to do and I will get on with it' (TFG3).

In many ways taking a contrived compliance stance is made easier by the Inspectorate adopting a very prescriptive approach to SSE. Perhaps, because of the school leaders' concerns for the overall impact of SSE on their schools and a recognition of the importance of maintaining momentum, they were more cognisant of possible shortcomings in this approach. These concerns are identified in the very first theme, Theme 1 – Initial Impressions when some schools leaders are critical of the potential long term damage to SSE processes by a prescriptive approach. Some of the school leaders felt by micro managing the process of SSE by stating schools must start by looking at literacy and numeracy 'rendered the process redundant from the outset' (LFG2). One could also surmise that if the research participants perceive that SSE from the very beginning appears to be more about accountability rather than autonomy, this may prohibit the autonomy potential of SSE from ever flourishing. This suggests it may have been wiser when the Inspectorate were launching the SSE project in all Irish schools to pay greater attention to the task of planting the seeds of professional autonomy.

I contend that the findings suggest both schools that agreed to be the field sites in which to situate this piece of research are weighted more towards contrived compliance as they appear to be adopting a chore like approach to SSE implementation. While they are prepared to carry out their mandatory requirements such as to draft an annual school improvement plan, they did so with little concern for the phase beyond mere formulation of a SIP. The subtext of feedback on Theme 5 – SSE Support Mechanisms suggested the support structures encouraged a checklist approach to SSE. The support

mechanisms need to encourage schools not just to draft an annual SIP, file it away and for it to only see the light of day if a DES inspector visits the school.

This notion of contrived compliance can also be considered from a Foucaultian perspective. While writing very much in a different context and different time, one of the key concepts associated with this prolific writer is that there is always some form of resistance to the exercise of power. He argues that power never flows just in one direction and there is always the by-product of some resistance as 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault, 1977, 95-96). Contrived compliance is one means by which the school leaders and teachers who are at the heart of this dissertation can adhere to mandatory SSE processes but actively resist it at the same time. I suggest that this counter-flow to power is just as powerful and manifests itself by the respondents adopting a passive resistance stance to SSE.

My reasoning for making this claim is that because school self-evaluation is now a mandatory process, this places specific requirements on school leaders and teachers. In essence this is about the exercise of power executed by the Inspectorate placing obligations on professional practitioners at school level. It aligns the current model of school self-evaluation within the parameters of a new managerialism performativity and audit culture with some possible adverse consequences. The respondents' resentment towards the imposition of additional duties created by engaging with SSE is evident throughout the series of focus groups but is particularly charged in Theme 6 – Tracking Changes of the Respondents towards SSE as 'we seem to be doing more for less. I don't know if anyone really has the time to be doing this as well as everything else' (TFG2).

The source of this frustration in schools is not just school self-evaluation. The national roll out of SSE is seen as one of the contributory causes to an almost siege like

mentality to initiative overload. It is hardly surprising then in this situation to finds traces of the Foucaultian concept of a counter-flow to power of resistance. One possible pathway for this by-product of power to manifest itself is by the respondents adopting a contrived compliance approach to SSE. This form of passive resistance explains why in the findings, there is a reticence by some teachers and leaders to drafting a SIP but if required to do so, will do so with minimum amount of energy and time as 'I suppose if I have to do it, I will, but I am not going to do more than I have to' (TFG2).

In Theme 3 – Perceived Barriers, reservations about paperwork and time are offered up as a rationale for opposing SSE. While I do not doubt that these are obstacles, I would suggest that the real significant barriers to school self-evaluation are much more rooted in deeper concerns with how teachers and leaders perceive their limited participation in processes which are drafted at official level and in which they have little or no input. This feeling of voicelessness and being subject to the whims of more powerful forces is evident in the following comment that 'the Department would have been much better off to implement one new initiative well rather than rushing through three initiatives simultaneously' (LFG3). This comment reflects a sentiment expressed by many of the school leader and teacher respondents.

The ongoing impact of austerity and initiative overload are dominant threads through the middle and final series of focus groups. It is doubtful, if in such a climate engagement with SSE could ever advance beyond a superficial level.

6.5.3 Committed Compliance - Proactive Engagement

The findings indicate a greater level of support by the school leaders for SSE than emanates from the school teachers bearing in mind that 'forcing a group of teachers to team together doesn't make them good or willing collaborators' (Evans, 2010, 4). Generating commitment to SSE will involve a level of engagement by school based

practitioners beyond mere compliance and will also require a certain degree of force beyond mere persuasion as 'pressure helps to promote commitment' (Evans, 2010, 4). The willingness of all four school leaders to comply with SSE requirements is hardly surprising. They are administrative leaders with no teaching hours so therefore their primary objective is to manage the schools in a competent manner which involves complying with DES guidelines and circulars. Whether their commitment is because of their position as full time administrators or is genuine commitment to the SSE project, I would suggest as an area for future research.

It is probably safe to assume that the Inspectorate wish to achieve a high level of engagement by school leaders and teachers with SSE. This will require steering school based personnel further along the contrived–committed continuum than their present position. This is not an easy task as it will necessitate the establishment of new practices and embedding them deeply into current school systems and structures. The findings generated in this dissertation indicate that this may require a paradigm shift in the attitudes and emotional mind-set of professional practitioners at grass roots level. The findings also suggest to me that SSE must be considered in the wider context of the current industrial relations climate in schools and an ambitious reform agenda. SSE is just one of a suite of initiatives underway in Irish schools that school leaders and teachers are grappling with at the moment. I get a strong sense from the research respondents that if SSE is to be a priority for the Inspectorate, then this can only be achieved if one of the other two current initiatives in Irish schools is temporarily put on hold. One respondent stated that 'I'd prefer to do one initiative well rather than many badly' (LFG3).

When I conducted the focus groups, suggested changes to the Junior Cycle was a source of contention for school leaders and teachers. A joint directive was issued by both the TUI and ASTI second-level school unions to their members not to cooperate with its

introduction in any manner (Teachers Union of Ireland, 2014). This directive prohibited members from attending meetings and professional in-service about the revised Junior Cycle Programme. This directive and protracted dispute in many ways meant that the proposed Junior Cycle Reforms had become a major battleground for the resistance to the reform agenda in schools. It had pushed SSE off the radar to some extent and therefore this could be another reason to explain the lack of evidence for real critical engagement with SSE in this piece of research.

While it is still early days for SSE in Ireland, as mentioned in the conceptual literature chapter, McNamara and O'Hara (2008a) suggest that there should be an overarching philosophy for SSE that must be clear at the outset if SSE is to be successfully integrated into the social fabric of schools. They argue without this 'conceptual commitment' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008a, 126), SSE will not establish a firm footing in Irish schools and the findings generated by this dissertation would support that assertion. Conceptual commitment while a necessary starting point, it is not enough on its own. Once the relevant stakeholders, particularly school leaders and teachers sign up to conceptual commitment, the findings suggest that this must be followed up by establishing practices and cultures which will help embed SSE in school systems. In other words apart from conceptual commitment, school leaders and teachers must also choose pathways to practicing commitment. Those pathways may be committed or contrived and the findings in this dissertation indicate they are tending towards the latter.

It is important to clarify my use of the term compliance concerning school self-evaluation. This is an inductive piece of research which to me means the findings inform the theory which is then explored in an academically rigorous manner. The findings to me did not at any stage indicate a willingness on the behalf of the

respondents to engage with SSE in a state beyond compliance. I would respectfully suggest proactive engagement is as good as it gets.

Proactive engagement by local stakeholders with SSE is a realistic prospect for meaningful and committed compliance as 'we will drive for change if we believe it will help us' (Heywood, 2009, 263). However, in this dissertation, I have deliberately steered clear of using language which suggests engagement with school based policies such as SSE can be transformative. In my view the use of such lofty language possibly alienates the research respondents. One of the leaders in the first series of focus groups stated that 'SSE is far too fluffy and it is like up there in the clouds' (LFG1). When I asked that same respondent in the final round of focus groups had the fluffiness gone away, the response was 'not completely' (LFG3). This suggests to me that if the language used about SSE is too aspirational this causes it to lack credibility. In my view, the use of such language is at best off putting to the research respondents and at its worst patronising.

6.6 Proposing a Sequential Order to My Conceptual Framework - How a Person's Perception of Purpose and Power Determines Practice

The conceptual framework, I designed for this dissertation involves looking at SSE through the lens of purpose, power, person and practice. While my initial idea was to isolate each element of the 4 P's enabling a stand-alone examination of each P as a singular and discrete concept, the findings indicated a high degree of inter-connectivity between all four elements. My awareness of the level of cross-over between the four elements became increasingly apparent when I began to extrapolate the eight themes from the transcripts of the twelve focus groups while drafting the findings chapter. However not only did the generation of the themes and findings from the focus groups indicate a high degree of cross pollination between the various elements of my conceptual framework, but they also offered the prospect that there may be a logical way to sequence them. As this piece of research was carried out in an inductive

manner, this meant that the realisation of a possible sequential order to the 4 P's only occurred to me after I designed the conceptual model of the 4P's. It was only after I had coded the data from the focus groups did I deem that a sequential order to my conceptual framework may be worthy for consideration as a separate finding.

The sequential order I infer from the findings is person, purpose, power and practice because I believe, based on my careful consideration of the focus group transcripts that a person's perception of purpose and power determine practice. The twelve focus groups with school leaders and teachers were a central feature of my overall methodological design, enabling me to address all three parts of my research question. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the person dimension comes to the fore as the most prominent element in my conceptual framework. Placing person as the first or primary P also influenced the content and structure of this discussion of findings chapter. I contend that a person's perception of the purpose and power implications of SSE determines practice. I make the argument in the previous part of this chapter that there are varying degrees of compliance concerning SSE. It is my considered viewpoint that the person is the critical factor in determining levels of SSE compliance.

This has implications for how new policy initiatives such as SSE are rolled out at national level and perhaps explains why effective educational reform can be difficult to achieve as discussed in the literature section of this dissertation. By emphasising the role of the person at the localised level, it suggests a bottom-up approach may be more successful than the traditional top-down approach often favoured by some policy makers. It helps address some of the paradoxical dilemmas often associated with school self-evaluation by shifting the emphasis of SSE towards supporting an internally driven process and away from a pressurising externally mandated process.

My main finding about my conceptual framework is that a person's perception of purpose and power determines practice but also that the person who is expected to

implement the change at local level is the most significant element of the 4 P's concerning SSE. My rationale for making this assertion is that the person at the localised level is the all-important conduit that forms the bridge between policy formulation and implementation. More importantly, it is that person's perception of SSE that ultimately will determine the level of compliance. While I am aware any comment I make about the internal thought processes and emotions of the research participants are questionable as I am not a trained psychologist, my categorisation of emotions are deliberatively quite general. My intention by focusing on just two overarching emotions is to gain an insight about what the research participants think about SSE and how this shapes their attitudes and influences their emotional responses towards the SSE process. Gaining insights into those same attitudes and emotions also has a bearing on their implementation practices concerning SSE, which has enabled me to address all three parts of my research question.

6.7 Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings directly. My aim in this chapter was to take those findings and not just compare and contrast them with the selected literature discussed in chapter two and three but also to explore my personal interpretation of those findings. I used these research findings and the selected literature to extrapolate possible implications of my research in a coherent and academically rigorous manner.

My epistemology informs my view that any policy initiative such as SSE must be understood with due reference to the time period in which it occurs along with the geo-political and economic factors prevalent during that particular era. This chapter started by looking at the context in which SSE is being rolled out in Irish schools in the second decade of this millennium. This study was conducted in the setting of two second-level schools during a very recent and specific time period and therefore is very context specific.

I proceeded by re-examining the themes identified in the findings chapter through the lens of all three parts of my research question. The first part of my research question concerns the attitudes of the school leaders and teachers in the localised setting of two second level schools over the course of the 2012/2013 academic year to a new policy initiative in education. In this chapter, I addressed the first part of my research question by an examination of the purpose and power elements of my conceptual framework.

I explored the second part of my research question which revolves around the emotional responses of the school leader and teachers to SSE. The emphasis here is on the person element of my conceptual framework. I focused in on the two general emotions of trust and fear. I chose these two categories because I deem them to be sufficiently broad enough to provide insights about SSE while minimising the risk of unfairly categorising or misrepresenting the responses of the focus group participants. In reality, the respondents displayed several emotions, but I detected from their responses that most had a pre-disposition towards fear or trust which influenced their practices in relation to SSE. I stated the case for why I believe the best way to reduce fear and increase trust about the SSE process is by working on the quality of professional relationships in the localised school setting.

I addressed the third part of my research question interrogating the implementation practices of the respondents to SSE. I suggested that the craft of compliance is indicative of levels of engagement of the respondents with SSE. While it may be contrived or committed, the latter status, I believe will lead to a more enduring legacy for school self-evaluation.

In the final part of this chapter, I proposed a sequential order to my conceptual framework as a separate finding. In many ways, I consider this to be my main finding of this dissertation - that a professional practitioner (school leader or teacher) perception of the purpose and power implications of any policy initiative will influence local

practices which ultimately will determine levels of compliance. Those levels of compliance may be contrived (box ticking exercise) or committed (pro-active engagement). The reason why I believe this particular finding to be important is that it summarises the salient aspects of many of the other findings presented in this dissertation.

In this piece of research, I have traced the journey of SSE as it moves from conception towards compliance and I argued that while the long term success and sustainability of this initiative is still to be decided, the role of the professional practitioner at local level in determining the outcome should not be underestimated. This I believe is a major contribution to the limited research about the evolving model of SSE in Ireland. My research is not only original but also is very timely with the fact that SSE is now a compulsory requirement for all second-level schools since September 2012. One of the main implications of this piece of research is that it offers a conceptual framework of the 4 P's which could possibly be used for examining other policy initiatives within and beyond the education sector.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of my journey tracking the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of school leaders and teachers in two second-levels schools in Ireland concerning school self-evaluation. SSE is a relatively recent educational development in Ireland and this has meant in many ways for me and the research participants, it was a journey into unchartered territory. What is significant about this study is that it explores school self-evaluation from the perspective of the emotional mindset of school based leaders and teachers.

The relationship between the evolving model of school self-evaluation and new managerialism along with the 4 P's conceptual framework I designed for this study enhances knowledge and makes this piece of research distinctive. I explore the implications for theory, policy and practice of my research. I follow this up by stating the case for the contribution of this study to the quite limited canon of research at present about SSE in Ireland.

I identify areas which I deem worthy for further research about school self-evaluation and I explore the significance of my research. This study makes a contribution to the knowledge about school self-evaluation as it offers insight into a contemporary model of SSE which was launched by the Irish Inspectorate in November 2012. Considering it was also made mandatory for all schools to engage with SSE in a formal manner at the same time this piece of research offers fresh insight into recent developments in this domain.

I contend further research is critical if SSE is to proceed with confidence to be an integral part of the educational landscape and not end like so many other reform initiatives in the past that fade away below the radar to be subverted by the latest rising stars of reform initiatives some not yet even conceived.

7.2 Theory, Policy and Practice Implications of this Study

Conceptual Framework

The implications of my findings about SSE are that they offer a conceptual framework which I think can be applied in a much wider setting. Theory by its nature offers a simplified version of reality in order to gain insight into a particular idea or concept. Critical to the credibility of any theory is the implicit and explicit assumptions on which it is predicated. The assumptions on which my conceptual framework is based are quite simple and straight forward. They suggest that any analysis of policy initiatives needs to take account of four components which I call the 4 P's. Since the concept of the 4 P's was first used to describe the four basic elements of the marketing mix of Product, Place, Price and Promotion (McCarthy, 1960) their legacy as an aide-mémoire and conceptual tool in the business world has endured. I export this concept and relabel those 4 P's to Person, Purpose, Power and Practice for this dissertation. I realise that this is a radical re-interpretation of the original framework but I do this because it allows me to explore key SSE concepts such as MacBeath (1999) three overarching logics for SSE under the "purpose" element. A second significant example of the suitability of my conceptual framework is that it also affords me the opportunity to examine 'the evidence to date that suggests schools in Ireland have a very limited capacity for self-evaluation' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, 80) under the "practice" element of the framework.

The 4 P's are critical determinant factors in gaining deep meaningful insights into policy formulation and implementation and are a central feature of this dissertation. I would suggest that by looking at these four dimensions separately and then jointly enhances understanding of other public sector policy initiatives but this would require further research. Public policy initiatives tend to have a strong purpose element, power implications, involve people and face implementation challenges when trying to bring

about changes in practice. Therefore, I would contend that the conceptual framework I present in this dissertation offers a unique and comprehensive mechanism to examine policy at a national level in other sectors of the public service and should be the subject of future academic research.

Policy

Policies such as school self-evaluation are not created in a vacuum but reflect the context in which they are initially imagined. The social, political economic and global contexts are hugely influential on the evolution of modern day policy development and they need to be given ample consideration.

Policy formulation and implementation is a time consuming complex process and if that policy is to be rolled out on a national basis, it requires not just a lot of support and structures but also the backing of an influential state agency. In the case of SSE, the state agency charged with this responsibility is the national Inspectorate. This piece of research suggests the Inspectorate needs to take a more proactive role in supporting school self-evaluation to realise some of its potential benefits outlined in this dissertation. In Theme 5 - SSE Support Mechanisms, the respondents are quite critical of the paltry level of resources and supports currently being allocated to SSE. I do not detect that there is an appetite or willingness by the Inspectorate or the DES to bolster their level of support for SSE. New initiatives have a limited time span in order to gain traction and the clock is ticking on the current model of SSE to build a solid foundation within the educational infrastructure to ensure it gets on a firmer footing in Irish schools.

Another implication of my findings for SSE policy are that they indicate that the current stance of the national inspectorate which is to pursue a top-down mandated approach to SSE is likely to have a limited impact in terms of stakeholders' interest and active engagement with SSE processes. I infer from the findings that this became particularly

apparent at the implementation phase of SSE, when all schools were mandated to draft their initial SIPs in the area of literacy and numeracy. A logical inference of the findings presented in this dissertation is that without bringing on board local practitioners at an earlier stage in the policy process, SSE is unlikely to go beyond a stage of contrived compliance. The reason why I consider this to be an unwelcome but likely scenario is because this means the potential autonomous benefits of SSE will not be realised.

Practice Implications

In the short term future, the most likely scenario I envisage for the evolving model of SSE is that SSE will hover below the radar for the next few years and will probably be superseded by other policy initiatives. In many ways this is an apt description of the current situation in July 2015. At second-level proposed changes to the Junior Certificate State Examinations involving teachers assessing their own students is a major source of contention between the two main second-level unions and the DES. ASTI and TUI have issued a joint directive (Teachers Union of Ireland, 2014) to its members not to cooperate in any manner with the introduction of a completely revised junior cycle programme (NCCA, 2011). My reading of the present situation is that SSE is not viewed as a priority by any of the main educational stakeholders while this directive remains in place. While SSE has not gone away, the momentum has dissipated and is unlikely to gain prominence in the foreseeable future.

Concerning the implications for practice of my research, I reference two types of compliance in relation to SSE in this dissertation which I label contrived and committed. Practicing commitment involves sustained effort as 'commitment can be tested in a straightforward way: how much are you prepared to sacrifice for it' (Sennett, 2013, 258). The implications of my findings for SSE practices in schools is that contrived compliance is the most likely outcome in practice with committed compliance

unlikely to reach a critical mass on the horizon any time soon. Compliance is mentioned in the literature about SSE and in particular whether 'self-evaluation leading to improvement rather than passive compliance with an externally driven agenda' (SICI, 2013, 3). A major factor in determining whether this happens will probably be influenced by how committed school based personnel are to the SSE project. To put it more bluntly, committed compliance if it does occur in Irish schools is likely to be the exception rather than the norm and furthermore if it does, this is likely to be by accident rather than design. I say this because I cannot see Irish schools developing the capacity to self-evaluate with the current minimal levels of external supports and scarcity of resources to ensure its effective implementation.

7.3 Contribution of this Study to SSE Research

There is a limited amount of research about SSE in Ireland at present:

> It is interesting to note that despite the existence of a national school evaluation system from the early part of the last decade very little serious research has been undertaken in the field. What does exist has tended to be conducted under the auspices of a single University research centre, DCU (CEE). (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, 90)

I would concur that there is a dearth of research into school self-evaluation in Ireland. This dissertation adds to the limited body of knowledge about SSE. More importantly it does so by highlighting the role of school based leaders and teachers. The voices of this group of school based professional practitioners have been muted in official discourse about SSE. I would argue that this is regrettable as this piece of research suggests their role is pivotal if a sustainable and robust system of school self-evaluation is to become established over the next few years beyond a mere tokenism presence and superficial levels of professional engagement.

I would further suggest that this study indicates that the data collection method of focus groups may be an under-utilised tool in schools. Currently when the Inspectorate conduct a formal WSE or WSE-MLL in a second-level school they survey a sample of

parents. The Inspectorate meets representatives of the Parents Association as part of the WSE or WSE-MLL process. This involves a semi-structured interview with three or more of the officers. While not a focus group it complements the quantitative data gathered through questionnaires. I would suggest that focus groups may provide more meaningful data rich information than that obtained by surveys or semi-structured interviews. When the school leaders and teachers discussed the use of focus groups for this piece of research they suggested it was a beneficial means of communicating their ideas in an open and frank manner as 'I liked the use of focus groups as it encouraged me to say things I would not necessarily write down on a questionnaire' (TFG3).

However, more importantly teachers felt their view points were validated by others listening to them and it encouraged them to consider the perspectives of others as 'it was nice to be asked for my contribution and it also gave me the opportunity to consider the viewpoints of others' (TFG3).

While focus groups are an expensive and time consuming process they do offer a range of benefits. One such benefit is the concept of social reflexivity which I reference in the methodology chapter. The respondents were quite positive about the use of focus groups when they discussed the research process in the final series of focus groups in May 2013. A leader respondent stated that 'I enjoyed participating in the focus groups and found it useful to clarify my views about school self-evaluation' (LFG3). This study makes a contribution to SSE research by indicating that the use of focus groups should be encouraged as an evaluation tool when schools are conducting a school self-evaluation

7.4 Suggested Areas for Future Research and Research Significance

In this dissertation, I deliberately prioritise the voice of the professional practitioner following Mathew's recommendation:

> The views of other school personnel, particularly those of teachers and of members of boards of management, would add significantly to further developing an understanding of evaluation in schools. (Mathews, 2010, 170)

I contend that the absence of the voice of teachers and other stakeholders such as parents and pupils in research about SSE is regrettable. Pupils and their parents have a vested interest in schools so surely they have a role to play in any meaningful school self-evaluation process. Therefore I believe future research about SSE needs to focus more on ascertaining the views of pupils and their parents about this topic.

A potential issue for further research might be to look specifically at power relations between the DES, the Inspectorate, school leaders and teachers. This could involve developing models of participation in educational policy between stakeholders including parents and pupils based on the principles of deliberative democratic evaluations as explored in this dissertation.

This piece of research highlights the virtues of strengthening cooperation between the various educational stakeholders. It presents a compelling case for an inclusive model of school self-evaluation built on a deliberative democratic logic which also can help build personal, systematic and social trust between the various educational stakeholders. An investigation of the potential benefits of incorporating a deliberative democratic evaluation into the evolving school self-evaluation in Ireland is worthy of further research

This piece of research was small scale only involving two second-level schools however, this study can contribute to a better understanding of processes such as SSE. Similar studies in other schools would certainly constitute a valuable contribution to the overall body of knowledge in this area.

I contend that the conceptual framework of the 4 P's designed for this particular study may have an applicability enabling a forensic examination of other policies in the public sector. Purpose, power, person and practice are critical determinant factors in gaining

deep meaningful insights into policy formulation and implementation and are a central feature of this dissertation. I would suggest that by looking at these four dimensions separately and then jointly, it may enhance understanding of other public sector policy initiatives but this would require further research. Public policy initiatives tend to have a strong purpose element have power implications, involve people and face implementation challenges when trying to changes practices. Therefore the conceptual framework I present in this dissertation offers I believe a unique and comprehensive mechanism to examine policy at a national level in other sectors of the public service and should be the subject of future academic research.

I would suggest that research should be carried out into how schools could self-evaluate the range of co-curricular activities they provide such as school musicals, drama, sporting events, cultural trips, participation in Young Scientists etc. Non-classroom based learning is an invaluable aspect of any child's social and academic development and this seems to be peripheral to the whole SSE process at the moment which in my view is regrettable.

This dissertation about school self-evaluation is significant because the international and national policy context has heavily influenced the emergent SSE model in Ireland since the DES published its then seminal document *'Looking at Our School'* just over a decade ago (Department of Education and Science, 2003). I contend that the Irish SSE model that is evolving pays homage to the twin forces of neoliberalism and new managerialism which are currently prevalent features in public governance throughout the globe. This is evident from the findings when a respondent stated 'I suppose the model that is being put forward is looking for people to put forward clearly measurable targets that you can say we achieved x, y or z' (LFG). This piece of research contributes to knowledge about understanding school self-evaluation from a new managerialism perspective. The long term consequences of adherence to a new

managerialism approach in the education sector are unknown and require further investigation. Therefore, the impact of the promotion of performativity and an audit culture in school self-evaluation in Irish second-level schools is in my view an area certainly worthy of future research.

7.5 Conclusion

This dissertation tracked the attitudes, emotions and implementation practices of a group of school leaders and teachers to school self-evaluation in two second-level schools. Possible benefits of SSE particularly in relation to public accountability are very evident in the literature and were clearly articulated by the respondents in the initial series of focus groups. Less obvious but perhaps more powerful are the professional autonomy benefits for school leaders and teachers. The research findings in this study present a compelling case for listening to the local professional practitioner of school based leaders and teachers and including them in a more meaningful way in the model of SSE which is evolving in Ireland as only then will the true potential of SSE be realised.

This dissertation contended that a person's perception of purpose and power determines practice. Bringing about significant change in implementation practices concerning school self-evaluation requires gaining the trust of professional practitioners. The importance of trust is often lauded in contemporary literature as a vital ingredient in modern day organisations but can be difficult to achieve in practice as it can be an elusive concept. SSE offers a practical means to strengthening the quality of professional relationships in schools and build trust between the various educational stakeholders. However success in this endeavour is only likely if the perspectives of the local practitioners are respected.

This piece of research proposed that in the future any changes to the ongoing policy development and evolution of school self-evaluation in Ireland should incorporate

bringing on board those at the chalk-face in schools in a real and more meaningful way which goes beyond mere tokenism. In my opinion only then will the true potential of school self-evaluation be realised.

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH PROJECT ABOUT SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION

RESEARCH PROJECT PROVISIONALTITLE:

A case study of the experience of school teachers and leaders concerning school self-evaluation in two second-level schools in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

I am a full time teacher who as part of my doctoral studies with NUI Maynooth is doing a dissertation about school self-evaluation. Should you need to contact me, you can do so by phone or email. My supervisor for this project is based at the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth and may be contacted via the Department of Adult and Community Education administration office.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

I am a teacher of Business and Maths at a VEC Community College for the last thirteen years. For the past seven years, I have also been an Assistant Principal. My Post of Responsibility duties have involved been a Year Head to all years from First to Sixth Year and currently I am a Transition Year Co-ordinator for ninety five students. In the past, I have also acted as both Maths and LCVP Coordinator within the school. I have also chaired many School Committees (Whole School Development, School Assessment, Learning and Teaching and Management Advisory Committee to name just three influential groupings in the school). A major part of my remit was to act as a conduit for collaborative policy formulation and to ensure effective policy implementation.

In 2009, I completed a Masters of Education in which I submitted a dissertation about School Self Evaluation.

NOTE ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The project will involve getting a voluntary team of staff members together to look at how second level schools can incorporate self-evaluation principles in a formal manner to their present structures. It would be my intention, to meet the group at the start of the process in September 2012 and at the end of the process in May 2013 to see how they found the process and was it a worthwhile endeavour. Throughout the process, I would also be available to give support, assistance and advice. From January to June 2012, I would liaise with a senior member in the school to look at the design and structure of the School Self-Evaluation Model. This would involve three to four meetings in which I would be very flexible to designing a programme which best meets the school's needs.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I am acutely aware that schools may have many valid concerns about getting involved in such a project. However, to be quite clear, I see my role as one of Support and Guidance, and my agenda will be strictly one of facilitation. As somebody who has a proven track record in this area, I will adhere to the highest possible ethical standards. My aim is to assist school improvement and not to make judgements, cause controversy or impinge in a negative manner on the school's ethos or culture.

Any data you provide will be treated in a confidential manner, will be anonymised and will only be used by the researcher for the purpose of this research project and may be archived with the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA). **The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)** is a central access point for qualitative social science data and provides online access to all new qualitative data generated within the Irish Social Science Platform, and to selected existing data. The archive also frames the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative data within the Irish research community.

At all stages, I intend to adhere to the highest ethical standards as outlined in the British Educational Research Association – Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS AND USE OF FINDINGS

If you agree to be a research participant for this project, I will ask you to keep a record of the various self-evaluation tools and methods you use from April 2012 to June 2013. I will also ask you to participate in a focus group at the start, middle and end of the process to elicit your views and opinions about your experiences of using self-evaluation techniques.

The findings of this research project may be used to assist any school in Ireland with how to engage in meaningful school self-evaluation. As an electronic and hard bound copy of the final dissertation will be filed with NUI Maynooth Library, the findings may be of use to educational researchers and practitioners.

WITHDRAWAL OF CONSENT

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

Finally, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project, and should you require further information or clarification on any point mentioned above please do not hesitate to contact me at the above mentioned email address or phone number.

AMENDED INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH PROJECT ABOUT SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION

RESEARCH PROJECT PROVISIONAL TITLE:

A case study on tracking the experiences of school teachers and leaders of engaging with school self-evaluation methods in two second-level schools in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

I am a full time teacher who as part of my doctoral studies with NUI Maynooth is doing a dissertation about school self-evaluation. Should you need to contact me, you can do so by phone or email. My supervisor for this project is based at the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth and may be contacted via the Department of Adult and Community Education administration office.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

I am a teacher of Business and Maths with a VEC Community College for the last fourteen years. For the past eight years, I have also been an Assistant Principal. My Post of Responsibility duties have involved been a Year Head to all years from First to Sixth Year and currently I am a Transition Year Co-ordinator for one hundred and thirty five students. In the past, I have also acted as both Maths and LCVP Coordinator within the school. I have also chaired many School Committees (Whole School Development, School Assessment, Learning and Teaching and Management Advisory Committee to name just three influential groupings in the school). A major part of my remit was to act as a conduit for collaborative policy formulation and to ensure effective policy implementation.

In 2009, I completed a Masters of Education in which I submitted a dissertation about School Self-Evaluation.

NOTE ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The project will involve tracking the experiences of school leaders and teachers in two second level schools of engaging with various self-evaluation methods and tools over the academic year 2012/2013. Hopefully by analysing the experiences of two second level schools incorporating self-evaluation principles in a formal manner to their present structures will provides point of interest which may be useful to other second level schools. It is my intention, to have a separate focus group of teachers and school leaders in each of the schools. I intend to conduct three focus groups with each grouping. They should take place in October 2012, February 2013 and at the end of the process in May 2013 to see how they found the process and was it a worthwhile endeavour. Throughout the process, I would also be available to give support,

assistance and advice. From January to June 2012, I have liaised with the school leaders in both schools to look at the design and structure of the School Self Evaluation Model to be used. This involved three to four meetings in which I attempted to be very flexible in designing a programme and school improvement plan which best meets the school's needs and complies with recently issues Draft Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools on School Self-Evaluation issued in January 2012.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I am acutely aware that schools may have many valid concerns about getting involved in such a project. However, to be quite clear, I see my role as one of Support and Guidance, and my agenda will be strictly one of facilitation. As somebody who has a proven track record in this area, I will adhere to the highest possible ethical standards. My aim is to assist school improvement and not to make judgements, cause controversy or impinge in a negative manner on the school's ethos or culture.

Any data you provide will be treated in a confidential manner, will be anonymised and will only be used by the researcher for the purpose of this research project and will be archived with the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA). **The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)** is a central access point for qualitative social science data and provides online access to all new qualitative data generated within the Irish Social Science Platform, and to selected existing data. The archive also frames the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative data within the Irish research community. Data will be kept secure at all times and any relevant data is available to data subjects at their discretion.

At all stages, I intend to adhere to the highest ethical standards as outlined in the British Educational Research Association – Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS AND USE OF FINDINGS

If you agree to be a research participant for this project, I will ask you to keep a record of the various self-evaluation tools and methods you use from September 2012 to June 2013. I will also ask you to participate in a focus group at the start, middle and end of the process to elicit your views and opinions about your experiences of using self-evaluation techniques. Please note that these focus groups of about thirty minutes duration will be audio recorded.

The findings of this research project may be used to assist any school in Ireland with how to engage in meaningful school self-evaluation. As an electronic and hard bound copy of the final dissertation will be filed with NUI Maynooth Library, the findings may be of use to educational researchers and practitioners.

WITHDRAWAL OF CONSENT

If during your participation in this study, should you wish, you may withdraw from this research project at any time or may withdraw data up until the final version of the dissertation is published. If you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process,

please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Finally, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project, and should you require further information or clarification on any point mentioned above please do not hesitate to contact me at the above mentioned email address or phone number.

WRITTEN CONSENT OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I agree to be a research participant for this project provisionally titled 'A case study on tracking the experiences of school teachers and leaders of using self-evaluating methods and tools in two second level schools in Ireland.'

Research Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please note as stated above if during your participation in this study, should you wish, you may withdraw from this research project at any time or withdraw your data up until the final version of the dissertation is published.

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