Can heads of department be agents of change? Preparing for the new curriculum for Wales in a Welsh secondary school

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wife Alice. Your unwavering support, encouragement, and faith in me have been my greatest source of strength and inspiration throughout this journey. You have not only shared in my challenges but celebrated every small victory along the way, reminding me of the joy in perseverance and the value of hard work. Your wisdom, kindness, and belief in my potential have been a guiding light, and I am endlessly thankful for your presence in my life. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine, and it stands as a testament to the love, partnership, and resilience we share. This work is dedicated to you, with all my gratitude and love.

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Abstract

This study explores heads of department agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015; Biesta *et al.,* 2015) in the context of implementing the new Curriculum for Wales within a Welsh secondary school, investigating how heads of department navigate curriculum reform as agents of change. The *Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021*, passed March 2021, establishes a new framework for the curriculum for pupils of compulsory school age in maintained schools and pupil referral units in Wales. The subsidiarity framework of Welsh Government (2019) underpins a significant policy shift in the design, implementation and evaluation of the new Curriculum for Wales (Newton, 2020). Heads of department are positioned as proactive designers and implementers of educational experiences.

This is a small-scale study of seven departmental leads across all Areas of Learning Experience (AoLEs) using a qualitative, constructivist approach (Cresswell, 2020). Data were generated through two sets of semi-structured interviews conducted over a single academic year (September 2021 to July 2022), allowing for in-depth insights into how heads of department understand their agency, decision-making, and the challenges posed by curriculum reform.

This study developed a conceptual framework which integrated Schwab's (1973) *Commonplaces* of curriculum development, Walker's (1971) *Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development*, and Eisner's (1976) *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism* to better understand the achievement of teacher agency within the ecological model of Priestley *et al*. (2015) and Biesta *et al.* (2015).

Findings show that heads of department express agency through risk-taking. Emotional risk affects this risk taking, either positively through the promotion of self-

esteem or negatively through the fear of failure. Trust in professional relationships at the micro-level of heads of department agency is essential to reducing these negative emotional risks. At the meso-level of heads of department agency, engagement with educational research broadens professional discourse, reducing emotional risk through re-negotiated norms and culture of the school, enhancing the achievement of agency in curriculum development.

Deliberation emerged as a key process for supporting the achievement of agency. Deliberation supports heads of department to critically evaluate alternatives, align decisions with long-term normative purposes, and integrate professional values with practical realities. However, the study identified limitations in the quality of deliberation amongst the participants, particularly a reliance on objective driven discussions and prescriptive evaluative methods, which constrain the participants' ability to envision and justify curriculum changes.

The implications for professional development focus on educational connoisseurship (Eisner, 1994;1976) as a means of enhancing heads of departments' capacity for meaningful deliberation in curriculum development. Connoisseurship positions curriculum development as an artistic problem, highlighting the emergent and evaluative aspects of teaching over rigidly objective driven methods. Integrating connoisseurship into deliberative practices supports critical engagement of emotions – felt experience – and long-term aspirations, providing heads of department with the tools to navigate the complexities of curriculum development.

Recommendations include the prioritisation of strategies that reduce emotional risk for heads of department undertaking curriculum changes; supporting heads of department engagement with educational research; and integrating deliberative

processes that prioritise the pupil milieu and longer-term educational purposes. This study contributes to the understanding of heads of department agency in curriculum change by bridging the gap between research based knowledge and its practical application in a school setting providing recommendations for this study's school and more widely across Wales.

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Acronyms used

AoLE – Area of Learning Experience

BERA – British Educational research Association

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

HoD – Head of department

NPEP – National Professional Enquiry Project

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

Introduction

This study explores head of department (HoD) agency in the context of implementing the new Curriculum for Wales within a Welsh secondary school, specifically examining how HoDs, sometimes referred to as middle leaders, navigate curriculum reform as agents of change. Grounded in Priestley *et al.* (2015) and Biesta *et al.* (2015) conceptualisation of agency, this research integrates Schwab's (1973) *Commonplaces* of curriculum development, Walker's (1971) *Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development*, and Eisner's (1976) *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism* to better understand the act of doing and undergoing (Dewey, 2005; 2001) by teachers as they implement curriculum change in their context. By identifying the key factors that enable middle leaders to navigate curriculum reform effectively, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on supporting middle leaders' agency, ultimately informing strategies to enhance curriculum implementation across Wales

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How do heads of department understand their achievement of change in their educational setting?
2. What factors influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?
3. What factors of the new Curriculum for Wales policy influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

4. To what extent does the school organisation influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

For the purpose of clarity, the term heads of department is used interchangeably with middle leader and refers to a teacher with teaching and leadership responsibilities. They manage and lead other staff members and are also accountable to senior management of the school in which they work. Titles for middle leaders are numerous, covering heads of department, faculty lead and directors of learning to name a few. In this study the middle leader participants are all heads of departments. Although this study focuses on heads of department, it intentionally refers to participants as "teachers" throughout. The rationale behind this decision is intended to enhance accessibility and clarity for a diverse readership, both within and outside the field of education. The term "teacher" is universally understood and conveys the fundamental professional identity of the participants, irrespective of their formal leadership titles. Therefore the study facilitates broader engagement with readers unfamiliar with educational structures of leadership titles and are more able to connect with and appreciate the research insights presented.

1.1 Context

Wales is changing the way children and young people learn in schools through the introduction of the new curriculum for Wales which became statutory for secondary schools in September 2023. The curriculum review process, in common with other areas of education policy formation post devolution has been characterised by consultation. The process involved Welsh Government, regional consortia and school-based practitioners known as curriculum pioneers. The pioneer schools

formed part of an all-Wales partnership with higher education institutions, Qualifications Wales and Estyn; comprising the Pioneer Schools Network which started collaborating in autumn 2015 (Welsh Government, 2020a). From the beginning of 2020, the new curriculum and assessment arrangements were made available to relevant settings and schools to begin preparing curriculum content in line with the guidance framework (Welsh Government, 2021a).

The introduction of progressive education reform in Wales, which allows for a considerable degree of classroom teacher autonomy in terms of content and delivery, embedded within a performance culture, provides an opportunity to examine how differing teacher perceptions of control impact implementation and individual responses to the new curriculum for Wales. There is an established literature that highlights the process through which national education policy is facilitated within the relevant local contexts, (Maguire, 2012; Braun *et al.,* 2011, 2010; Gerwirtz *et al.,* 2009; Day *et al*., 2007; Brain *et al.*, 2006; Swann and Brown, 1997; Ball, 1994, 1990).

The focus is directed towards the interaction of national policy, the school context and teachers' personal experiences as they suggest teachers re-work policy priorities in line with these experiences. Bowe *et al.* (1992) stated that education reforms in England were re-created rather than implemented. Spillane (1999) describes teachers as the final policy brokers of education reform, arguing that teachers make their own sense, and operationalise for their own practice any changes made by reformers. All of which suggest there are unpredictable outcomes of education reform agendas on actual classroom practice. To understand the outcomes reached in the school, an examination of the deliberation and decision-

making processes is required, in order to avoid repeated mistakes when the curriculum is implemented at department level, or even, in other schools in Wales.

Welsh policy context – scene setting

The Government of Wales Act in 1998 devolved to the National Assembly for Wales a wide range of powers that had formerly been the preserve of the U.K. government. Devolution of powers to construct its own policies and priorities as well as power to spend the block grant as it saw fit was a landmark in the history of Wales. It could be argued that devolution was designed to improve delivery of services to better suit local need, rather than being designed to generate different policies. In the area of education however, Wales has provided an alternative path to the one provided in England. That policy opportunity to innovate was furthered by the ability of Welsh Government to generate primary legislation in 2006. Prior to devolution Wales implemented policies that were jointly England and Wales in orientation, although within education there was a greater degree of adaptation reflecting cultural issues and the Welsh language. Wales in comparison with the other devolved nations, Scotland and Northern Ireland, diverged in educational changes from England rapidly, which in a relatively short space of time has developed a Welsh alternative of education. Scotland had historically been exercising its own powers anyway, resisting U.K. centralised educational changes, for example Scotland resisted standardised national tests. Northern Ireland had fewer powers devolved to exercise.

Subsidiarity

A central component of curriculum reform in Wales, according to Newton (2020), is the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity serves as a guiding principle placing trust in decision-making at the level closest to those who have to enact them (Welsh Government, 2019). This decentralisation is intended to align educational practices with local socio-economic contexts, and address inequities in pupil outcomes. The subsidiarity framework (*ibid,* 2019) underpins a significant policy shift, positioning teachers not merely as implementers but as proactive designers of educational experiences, which aligns with broader objectives of fostering professionalism and innovation in education (Evans, 2023). As Evans (2023) states, the teachers know their learners best, and Donaldson (2015) championed this as a transfer of responsibility for curriculum design from government to teachers. However, this assumes both a willingness on the part of teachers to engage in such transformational practice and assumes existing skills and knowledge to do so successfully.

The Curriculum for Wales positions teacher agency as central to educational reform, reflecting a broader recognition that sustainable changes in education require engaging the expertise and creativity of educators (Evans, 2023). Teachers' empowerment aligns with the principles of subsidiarity by enabling local adaptations to meet community specific needs, encouraging risk-taking and innovation in pedagogical practices, and positioning teachers as critical actors in bridging gaps between national policy objectives and classroom realities.

The shift from a prescriptive curriculum to one that offers flexibility is intended to empower teachers and enhance their professional status (Evans, 2023). This

approach aims to increase teachers' sense of control and commitment. Despite the positive aspects, questions remain, such as the need for adequate professional support and addressing socio-economic factors that impact what schools can achieve. Questions relating to systemic constraints, such as worsening budgetary constraints as well as performance accountability measures in schools also present the concept of teacher agency, and how curriculum implementation can be a success as posited by Donaldson (2015) as one worthy of development.

Welsh policy context – curriculum process

The 2009 Wales PISA results sparked a national debate on the quality and future of education in Wales. This resulted in a broad consensus on the need for change. In 2011 Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform and introduced a wide range of polices to improve the quality and equity of its school system. Reform of initial teacher education was followed by the Donaldson Report, *Successful futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* (Donaldson, 2015) which provided 68 recommendations to improve the Welsh curriculum, these recommendations were accepted in full by Welsh Government.

The Welsh government published *Qualified for Life: A curriculum for Wales, a curriculum for Life* (Welsh Government, 2015), beginning the process of curriculum development and implementation of Donaldson's recommendations, which the Pioneer Schools Network carried out in three strands. The first was to set out the strategic design of the new curriculum. This covered:

- Assessment and progression
- Cross-curricular responsibilities
- Enrichment and experiences

- Welsh dimension, international perspective and the wider skills

(Duggan *et al.,* 2017)

The second strand sought to set out high-level scope for each Area of Learning Experience - AoLE. *Successful Futures* replaced discrete subjects with six AoLE's, they are:

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Humanities
- Languages, literacy and communication
- Mathematics and numeracy
- Science and technology

(Donaldson, 2015)

Strand 2 set scope and boundaries of each of the areas, central concerns, and how the components of each area were presented. Strand 3 which began in late 2017, set out the common framework across the AoLE's to be applied across the whole curriculum.

In order to refine the new curriculum, and to consider issues around how the curriculum works in practice, a representative sample of pioneer schools were invited to become innovation schools and embed aspects of the new curriculum into their teaching and learning process. This aimed to generate learning around how the curriculum worked in practice, and the activities and initiatives that are required to embed the new curriculum effectively. At the conclusion of the 2018/19 school year innovation schools were asked to reflect on the curriculum itself, and offer

suggestions as to how the guidance could be improved. The resulting national guidance for the new curriculum did not want to set out comprehensive or exhaustive syllabi or a guide for organising timetables, but a framework schools can use to build their own curricula. The framework set out broad expectations for learners for each area of learning and experience at each progression point. The main challenges and areas for improvement put forward by the innovation schools related to assessment guidance and reporting by schools against the principles of progression. Assessment guidance was published early in 2020. Innovation schools also highlighted difficulty in finding time to be innovative and plan for the new curriculum whilst also balancing the old curriculum and continuing with day-to-day teaching assessment. This is of particular concern to secondary schools as the new curriculum will be phased in with the new year 7 intake (age 11 to 12) in September 2022, or year 7 and 8 from 2023, and then continue to be phased in fully over five years. The third concern centred on teachers' knowledge about the new curriculum and their confidence to teach the new curriculum (O'Prey *et al.*, 2019).

The curriculum process places schools and teachers at the centre of development, theory and practice. While this is a novel approach and forward looking, it places a responsibility on schools and teachers in a way they have not had for over 30 years. The innovation schools identification of three main challenges; reporting against assessment objectives, balancing old and new curriculum planning and delivery, and curriculum knowledge, could be viewed from the perspective that the innovation schools make problematic the performativity culture of schools, the relationship between established interests and new, and how teachers re-produce knowledge as writers of policy not readers. In my view it is vital then, that the implementation process of the new curriculum by teachers – given the varying factors that influence

the achievement of teacher agency and the structure and culture of the school environment – is examined further to help determine effective planning and roll-out methods within the school, but also more widely across secondary schools in Wales.

1.2 Rationale

The research questions in this study are grounded in my experience as a senior leader in a Welsh secondary school, with a particular focus on leading improvements in teaching and learning, designing professional development programs, and implementing monitoring processes. As Wales embarks on its most significant curriculum reform in decades, the new Curriculum for Wales introduces an innovative framework that provides schools with an unprecedented level of freedom in determining curriculum content and delivery. This shift calls for a deeper understanding of how teachers navigate their roles as agents of change and the factors that support the achievement of their agency in this transformative process.

My role in educational leadership involves supporting teachers as they adapt their practice to meet both new curriculum standards and school specific priorities. This experience has demonstrated the importance of agency in achieving meaningful, sustainable change at the classroom level. In preparing for the curriculum's implementation, it became evident that teachers' perceptions of their role, the importance of deliberative practices, and the influence they wield within the school environment significantly affect how they approach the demands of curricular reform. These observations inspired the first research question, which seeks to understand how teachers understand their agency and the way that can effect change within their educational setting.

The Curriculum for Wales, with its emphasis on interdisciplinary Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), requires teachers to rethink traditional subject boundaries and integrate broader learning outcomes. This structural shift adds complexity to teachers' roles, necessitating an achievement of agency that is both adaptive and

reflective. As a leader tasked with supporting this transition, I observed that teachers' sense of agency is influenced by a range of factors, from institutional support to individual professional development opportunities. This observation underpins the second research question, which aims to identify the factors within the school environment that impact teachers' agency.

The third research question addresses the specific policies embedded within the new Curriculum for Wales that impact teachers' agency. This question arose from witnessing how national policies, even those with broad frameworks like the new curriculum, can shape teachers' interpretations of their roles and their decision-making processes. My involvement in school leadership during this reform period has highlighted the duality of policy as both an enabler and a constraint, thus necessitating an inquiry into how policy requirements intersect with individual agency.

An essential component of effective curriculum reform lies in understanding the relationships within the school organisation that support the achievement of agency. In my leadership role, I have seen firsthand how the dynamics between departments, the culture of trust among staff, and the existing hierarchies affect teachers' readiness to adopt and implement changes. Consequently, the fourth research question examines the extent to which these relationships influence agency, recognising that supportive, collegial environments are vital for fostering innovation and resilience during periods of change.

Finally, this study aims to explore the broader implications of these insights for the development of teacher agency, both within this study's school and across the Welsh education sector. By identifying the key factors that enable teachers to navigate

curriculum reform effectively, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on supporting teachers' agency, ultimately informing strategies to enhance curriculum implementation across Wales. Through these research questions, this study seeks to build a comprehensive understanding of what successful curriculum implementation can look like in Welsh secondary schools, and how educational leaders can best support teachers in this process.

1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to apply curriculum development frameworks from seminal thinkers (Schwab, 2013, 1973, 1969; Eisner 1976; Walker, 1971) to better understand how teachers in secondary schools achieve agency and arrive at defensible decisions in the context of preparing to implement the new curriculum for Wales. The research questions are the result of bringing together the domains of curriculum development by teachers (Schwab, 2013, 1973, 1969; Walker, 1971), school organisation (Maguire *et al.,* 2015; Ball, 2011; Braun *et al.,* 2011) and the conceptual framework of teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015; Biesta *et al.,* 2015). Taking place within a Welsh secondary school in the academic year 2021/22 proceeding statutory implementation of September 2022/23, this study will seek to add to the debate on how the education community of Wales can best support teachers in the achievement of their agency during the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales in secondary schools.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do heads of department understand their achievement of change in their educational setting?
2. What factors influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?
3. What factors of the new curriculum for Wales policy influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?
4. To what extent does the school organisation influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

This study takes the form of qualitative study with a participant researcher. It takes place in a Welsh secondary school over an academic year, as they plan for the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales. This study focuses on the experiences of heads of subjects across each of the new curriculum's areas of learning experiences, both as leaders of change within their respective departments and as members of a curriculum working group, which meets every half term [six times across the academic year] to discuss implementation planning at a middle leader level.

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following sections will briefly set out the relevant theorisation of agency followed by an exploration of the teacher as an agent of change and how it applies to this study thus providing the most relevant body of knowledge for this study to draw on, while allowing for a thorough dialogue of ideas and tensions.

In approaching this literature review, I have structured it into three interrelated sections: teacher agency, curriculum development, and school organisation. This structure was intentionally chosen to reflect the critical components underpinning my research questions and the broader framework of the study, which examines how teachers in a Welsh secondary school enact agency within the context of implementing the new Curriculum for Wales. By dissecting these three areas, I aim to provide a comprehensive exploration of the literature that not only clarifies the theoretical and empirical foundations of my study but also foregrounds the complex intersections that shape teachers' experiences and capacities as agents of change.

The first section, Teacher Agency, addresses the concept central to my research focus. Understanding teacher agency is crucial, as it provides insight into how teachers perceive their autonomy, decision-making power, and professional identity within the constraints of policy and school structure. Teacher agency lies at the heart of curriculum implementation, as it influences teachers' ability to interpret, adapt, and respond to curricular demands. By exploring how agency is defined, developed, and exercised in the educational literature, I seek to understand the factors that enable or constrain teachers in enacting change, particularly within a reform setting that calls for innovative, student-centred learning approaches.

The second section, Curriculum Development, focuses on the processes and principles involved in designing and implementing curriculum reforms. Given that the new Curriculum for Wales promotes a flexible, interdisciplinary approach to learning, it is essential to explore how curricular frameworks are constructed, the role of teachers in this process, and the theoretical underpinnings of effective curriculum development. This section examines seminal works on curriculum theory and recent studies on curriculum reform, setting the stage for understanding how the Welsh curriculum's design either aligns with or diverges from established practices. In doing so, it underscores the potential for teachers to be active participants in curriculum creation and adjustment, rather than passive recipients of prescriptive guidelines.

The third section, School Organisation, considers the institutional and structural aspects of schools that impact the exercise of teacher agency and the implementation of curriculum reforms. School organisation encompasses the hierarchical structures, leadership practices, departmental dynamics, and collegial relationships that collectively influence teachers' professional actions. By analysing literature on school organisation, I aim to understand how these organisational factors can either support or inhibit the realisation of teacher agency within the context of curriculum reform. This section is essential in highlighting the role of school culture, leadership support, and organisational alignment with reform goals in fostering an environment where teachers feel empowered to act as agents of change.

Overall, this literature review is grounded in a commitment to examining the interplay between individual agency, curriculum frameworks, and organisational structures. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how these dimensions intersect to impact teachers' abilities to adapt, innovate, and take ownership of

curriculum changes. By synthesising literature across these domains, this review lays the theoretical and empirical groundwork for understanding how teacher agency can be effectively supported in the context of the Curriculum for Wales, ultimately contributing to more responsive, teacher-driven reform in Welsh secondary schools.

2.2 Theorising Agency

Ontology is the consideration of being, what it means for somebody or something to be. The identity of an individual, and that individual's development or process of change in a situated context, is fundamental to understanding agency and its conceptualisation. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation begins by asking how temporally embedded actors reach decisions that can retrospectively be interpreted as rational. Their theorisation of agency seeks to move beyond the Kantian dualisms of instrumental and normative approaches that had dominated the argument to that point. Emirbayer and Mische turn to John Dewey and George Herbert Mead of American pragmatism who argued the means and ends of action, in conjunction with the situated context, are consistently re-evaluated and reconstructed by the individual. This is important as this re-evaluation and reconstruction is reflection and deliberation that leads to defensible decision-making. The Chordal Triad of agency (1998), which Emirbayer and Mische developed as a conceptualisation and analytical tool of human agency, defines agency as:

> The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.
>
> (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)

Their definition draws on Mead's (1959) understanding of human consciousness, which moves through three levels of experience – contact, distance and sociality in communicative interaction. Mead argues that this process is driven by "awakening delayed and conflicting responses" (Mead, 1959). Biesta *et al.* (2015) argue that

one's beliefs and attitude are important to achieving agency. Priestley *et al.* (2015) ecological approach, which builds on the Chordal Triad, stresses the interplay between an individual's capacity to innovate and have a questioning mindset within and between environing conditions.

The wider sociological debate surrounding agency, sometimes referred to as the 'agency-structure' debate (William, 1992), pits the understanding of human behaviour between those who argue structural forces take primacy, and those who see the agency of individual's as most important. Giddens's Structuration theory provides a perspective on social behaviour built on a synthesis between the dualism of individuals and society. Giddens (1993) suggests that instead of giving primacy to one or the other, one should focus on the reproduced practices that result when individual agents act in accordance with normalised societal expectations. Structuralists would argue that the behaviour of individuals is largely determined by their socialisation to that structure, for example conforming to expectations with respect to gender. In contrast proponents of agency theory argue that individuals can possess the power to act in spite of the institutional constraints, they can possess the ability to exercise choice. Giddens's (1993) theory of structuration is placed at the nexus of structuralism and agency theories, where an individual's autonomy is influenced by structure, but these structures are maintained and adapted through individuals exercising agency. In this way social action cannot be fully explained by structure or agency theories alone. Agents operate within the context of rules produced by social structures, and only by acting in a compliant manner are these structures reinforced. Therefore, social structures have no inherent stability outside human action as they are socially instructed. Following this,

by agents acting reflexively they are able to modify the social structures, as Giddens explained, everyone is following the rules and simultaneously reinterpreting and rewriting them (1993). The behaviour of teachers within a school context can be viewed through the context of structuration theory. The teachers' view of self and their identity is stable, and the teachers' behaviour is constrained by the structures of their own professionalism, the purpose of school in the community, and the view of teachers in society. In this way teachers act in accordance with an expected and implicitly agreed upon belief about how they should behave. Yet within this agreement there is an ongoing reconstitution of these normative ways of behaving. Teachers engage in reflexivity, through discussions, professional development practices, and other forms of critical practices. Teachers, through this reflexivity are reinterpreting these constraints.

According to Priestley *et al.* (2015), agency is the ability to critically shape one's responses to complex situations. The notion of teacher agency generally describes the effort to make choices and act in ways that make significant differences *(*Toom *et al*., 2015). In the context of this study, the teacher who is agentic would be one who feels they have control of their thoughts and actions. A teacher with agency has to make decisions and exercise judgement, while also being able to manoeuvre between differing repertoires. Teachers must also reserve the ability to do otherwise, to resist, and to say no. All of these conditions would be examples of a teacher who has agency. There is, however, an inherent problem with framing teacher agency in this way. The idea that a teacher *has* agency is problematic. If one has agency then surely another may not, or certain teachers are better at exercising agency than others. This suggests that the success of curriculum reform would be dependent on

the quality of teacher a school employs and would justify the focus of resources on improving the ability of the teacher to be more agentic. The focus on a teachers' ability to be agentic ignores the structure and culture within which they work and how that influences their agency. Rather than a focus on ability it is more useful to view it as an achievement, thereby recognising development is possible, but arrestment or damage is as well. One's sense of achievement is limited or promoted by structures of relational networks, for example a hierarchal relationship against a collegiate one. One's sense of achievement is also affected by the culture of the environment, the norms and values held, for example a performative culture of meeting targets against a pastoral culture where pupil wellbeing is paramount. The ecological view of teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015) is one where agency is achieved rather than being seen as an ability, and is the result of the interaction of individual and the social and material environment in which one operates. For example, if schools wish to improve the sense of teacher achievement of agency they would have to consider the structures of the school and how to make space for improvements. Schools would also need to consider changes to the networks and pattern of relationships that operate within the school. Once school structures are considered one would need to address the cultures by which the school and its employees operate. These norms shape everyday practices and set expectations, without suitable consideration teachers would find themselves constrained not by the school but by the opinions of their peers. By paying attention to the interplay between an individual's sense of achievement and the environmental conditions and relationships that make up the system in which a teacher works, I will be able to conduct a conversation of sorts between the literature and my findings that illuminates possible paths that support teachers in achieving agency within their context.

Priestley *et al.* (2015) ecological approach is a development of Emirbayer and Mische's chordal triad of agency (1998). The triad refers to the temporal dimensions of agency, and the analytics of the engagement of actors within different structural environments. The temporality of agency according to Emirbayer and Mische concerns an actor's forms of action and how they are orientated towards the past, future and present. Key to this conceptualisation is the understanding that actors are not static, but dynamic, meaning that they respond to emerging events through a reconstruction of these dimensions. A further key element of this conceptualisation is that these responses by actors are dialectic in nature. Dialectic across social engagements, and dialectic within one's reflective capacity, importantly resulting in an actor's ability to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations. In the context of this study then, it is relevant to acknowledge that teachers' responses to changes of curriculum cannot be predicted by looking at their responses to other changes or initiatives, the process is reconstructed and transformed. Seeking to replicate change processes from the past alone will not necessarily be successful. The second implication to this study is that the dialectical nature of teacher agency requires opportunity for such reflexivity to be provided, it cannot be assumed to take place, or more importantly, that by providing an abundance of opportunities the quality of outcomes can be positively affected. The temporal dimensions of the Chordal Triad can be found in all examples of human action, but are likely to be found in varying degrees, and do not always come together "harmoniously" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Interestingly though, the authors argue that a single dimension tends to predominate in varying examples of action. I will briefly elaborate on each dimension further, in order to better ground

this study's theorisation of agency, before exploring the relevant literature of curriculum development by teachers, school organisation and teacher agency.

The iterational dimension

The past dimension of the Chordal Triad is referred to as the iterational dimension. This analytic category draws on an actor's past experiences and how they affect the choices of the present. Crucially, one's past experiences are not to be aggregated and somehow seen as a constant precursor to any decision-making, but rather a set of experiences that the actor can select after recognising their relevance to a particular situation, "actors selectively recognize, locate, and implement such schemas in their ongoing situated transactions" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 975, emphasis removed). Priestley *et al.* (2015) employ this in the ecological approach by differentiating between personal and professional histories, including personal beliefs and values. As a teacher, they argue, the day-to-day experiences in school, for example discussions with peers, the interactions with school culture and any professional engagement, are important in affecting one's professional history. As does one having experience of working in other professions outside education. The ecological approach incorporates the iterational dimension by seeing the teachers' repertoire of professional experience as an important factor in teachers achieving agency. These experiences are being formed all the time, and the iterational should not be seen as an historic and fixed dimension. The closeness of professional experiences, one's values, one's beliefs, and Priestley *et al.*(2015) emphasis on paying attention to capacity building of teachers – in terms of skills and knowledge – recognises how a teachers' professional identity in part forms the critical decisions

they make, and that by providing opportunities to develop skills and knowledge one not only raises the teachers' capacity but also allows a teachers' identity to evolve, giving a greater repertoire on which to draw when making choices. By ensuring a wide repertoire of professional experience, both in considering time served and experiences outside of the school, may have a positive impact on the capacity to take control of a complicated and contentious period of change.

The projective dimension

The dimension concerning the orientations towards the future is called the projective dimension. This dimension concerns an actor's creative reconstruction of future possibilities. The actor engages in a reflective process, whereby they distance themselves from the way something is always done – either relating to their own habits, or the societal structures and norms – and can imagine a different outcome. The projective dimension occurs in the face of conflicts and challenges in social life, and is seen by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as a "critical mediating juncture" between the past and the present. Reflectivity is key here, the actor wants to change, or achieve a result that the present situation does not offer, and crucially the past experiences of the actor do not provide the solution to this, therefore the actor must reconstruct the possible future. Priestley *et al.* (2015) develop the projective dimension in their ecological approach by locating it in terms of a teachers' aspirations in respect of their work. This is further divided into short- and long-term aspirations. Priestley *et al.* (2015) give greater prominence to the influence a teachers' past experience has on the projective dimension of agency. They state the projective is "rooted" in the iterational (Priestley *et al.,* 2015, p. 20) which implicitly

suggests that a teachers' ability to imagine possible futures is constrained by their repertoire of experiences. This again gives importance to the process of building teacher capacity in skills and knowledge, because it is not only argued to evolve a teachers' values and beliefs but also give greater scope to reflect and imagine alternative future outcomes for themselves in their practice.

The practical-evaluative dimension

The present is referred to as the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. This is the concrete context-for-action, what Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 994, emphasis removed) describe as the "contextualisation of social experience". The moments where decisions must be made in circumstances that are sometimes changing, so adjustments are necessary, or decisions need to be made where there is ambiguity or conflict. The practical-evaluative requires actors to be reflective and interpretive when exercising situationally based judgements. Fundamental to understanding this dimension of agency is the primacy of the communicative process with others or even internally. The ecological approach highlights that a teachers' day-to-day decision process is rife with conflict between teacher aspirations and school demands, and often involve compromise, hasty decisions, and Priestley *et al.* (2015) argue, decisions that do not provide for sufficient professional dialogue and reflection. This is significant as the communicative process described above would be manifest in professional dialogue and reflection. Priestley *et al.* (2015) offer two themes that act as part of the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency; conflicts in teachers' work, and relationships in school. The first theme relates to tension between curriculum implementation and the quality improvement initiative.

Schools will need to convince teachers that transitioning into a new curriculum will not result in negative performance management outcomes. The second refers to the lack of horizontal structures that engender trust and promote collegiate working environments, and also refers to relationships that are inward facing, or the lack of relationships that reach beyond the school community. The curriculum working group in this school may be an example of a horizontal structure, but this may not in itself address how relationships can be developed that are outward facing within the school and out of it. This study will aim to add to Priestley *et al.* (2015) body of work on teacher agency, specifically in relation to the concrete contexts-for-action that teachers find themselves in when attempting to implement the new Curriculum for Wales. In order to explore the ways that the teachers who are subject leaders, could facilitate curriculum implementation and in doing so improve the communicative process described, this study will employ Priestley *et al.* (2015) conception of teacher agency in which to make sense of its findings.

2.3 The teacher as agent of change

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) state, agency requires engagement in concrete context-for-action. This context is affected by structural environments. As Priestley *et al.* (2015) stress these environments, both structural and cultural have significant influences on the quality of this engagement and therefore in enabling teachers to achieve agency. The context however influenced is non-the-less a socially constructed one, it is a contextualisation of social experience. It is necessary then to explore what one means by experience. Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1997) sets out his theory of experience, which through a continuum of experience one can discern or attribute value to different experiences. The experiential continuum sees education as growth, and education as coming about through experience. That does not equate all experiences as beneficial to education. Experience is something that can build and improve one's growth and capacity to benefit from future experiences. Experiences can also damage or reduce the capacity to benefit from future growth. At the root of the continuum of experience is habit, where attitudes and beliefs are formed, it affects the actor both emotionally and intellectually. The quality of a teachers' engagement with the new curriculum, in many ways is heavily influenced by that teachers' attitude towards it and specifically their attitude could determine their view on the possibility of making changes, a crucial factor in determining the quality of that engagement. The habit formed by experiences then could be seen as a fixed quantity where any mis-educative experiences have already arrested the teachers' capacity to grow with future experiences. Not so argues Dewey, the principle of continuity means that any new experience has the ability to modify the quality of those which come after. Providing genuinely educative experiences for teachers in relation to curriculum will allow growth from future experiences. Attitudes

then should not be viewed as fixed, and greater focus needs to be given to how experiences for teachers can be made genuinely educative. Dewey explains these positive experiences firstly as an internal process, in what the experience arouses in a person, and what it moves that person towards. Dewey describes experiences as moving forces. The evaluation of the effectiveness of an experience achieving, say an arousal of curiosity in the new curriculum or a desire to discuss further how it could be applied in their subject, is down to judgment. The judgement of the expert. Now this may well mean that experts on curriculum design and implementation are needed to deliver development sessions to teachers, but if one is trying to build an ongoing capacity for high quality engagement in exploring the possibility of change, the ongoing development as teachers as agents of change, then there needs to be a way for individuals themselves to make these judgements. Dewey argues that one needs to be on alert for what attitudes are being developed. This metacognitive process is certainly something that teachers, or school leaders can develop themselves, through a mixture of empathy and critical evaluation a teacher could judge what their experiences were moving them towards. In addition to the internal process described, Dewey also explains positive experiences as changing the objective conditions under which the experiences are had. The conditions or the environment, be those structural, cultural or material, all have influence on the experiences that have come before for a teacher, and if one recognises what environing conditions are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth, it would be possible to utilise those environments to maximise the positive experience, thereby changing the influence those environing conditions have on teacher growth. Rather than accepting the environments in which teachers are operating in as given they should be seen as malleable overtime and eventually vital to supporting the

internal aspects of genuinely educative experiences. Together the internal and external factors Dewey describes interact to create a situation. Interaction of the personal needs, desires and purposes with the environment create the experience had. This conceptualisation of the context-for-action that is fundamental to enabling teachers to achieve agency in implementing the curriculum.

Let us assume for one moment that the responsibility for ordering and utilising these school environments falls to a subject leader, who Ball (2011) argues are predominantly the ones responsible for curriculum delivery. This ordering could result in the removal of necessary freedom or autonomy of the teacher needed to achieve agency. This could lead to an individual teachers' attitude towards the possibility of future change being negatively affected. Priestley *et al.* (2015) argues that agency is not synonymous with autonomy, and Dewey (1997) again suggests the temporal element of these limitations or restrictions need to be considered. The continuity of experience suggests that any restrictions now should be justified by the future development they allow. This requires again, an intelligence, an emotional and intelligent judgement that ensures the higher goals are paramount in the decision maker's mind, but also the limitations imposed increase the force of the experience in moving one towards the experience needed in order to benefit from future experiences.

Continuity and interaction underpin the educative experience. Teacher agency when referring to ecologies in which agency is enabled, understands the importance of continuity, where previous experience is carried over to new ones, and importantly stresses the relative importance of interactions which recognises the structural and cultural environments of the traditional school, and how crucial it is to consider the ordering of these environments to allow for interactions that enable agency.

Enabling teacher agency then requires the careful design of educative experiences for teachers, continuity means that past attitudes can grow and therefore the future possibilities for change have to be taken into account at all times. Preparation for future activities is not achieved simply by engagement with the policy documents for the new curriculum. There is a need to arouse curiosity, a need to develop concepts that allow teachers to turn policy into practice, a need to explore each individual's philosophy on education. Through reconstruction of these experiences teachers can benefit from future growth and move towards an attitude in which the quality of the engagement with possible ways of doing things differently is evaluated critically and congruent with the new curriculum. The social experience which is educative also requires interaction of a teacher in their particular environment. This environment is made up of ecologies: structural – the networks and relationships needed for communicative experiences; cultural – the norms, values and expectations of the institution; material – physical space, time, and financial resources (Priestley *et al.,* 2015). All of these ecologies need to be considered when providing experiences conducive for teacher agency. The concrete context is multi-faceted and resource dependent, so decisions on these resource allocations will be critical in enabling teacher agency in curriculum implementation.

Defining Teacher Capacity to act

Teacher agency is something achieved through the act of doing and undergoing (Dewey, 2005; 2001). In *Art as Experience* (2005), Dewey writes that experience always involves an active component – the doing – and a receptive component – the undergoing. The doing refers to an individual's active interaction with the

environment – actions that express intentions, desires, or purposes. The undergoing refers to the way the environment responds to these actions and how the individual absorbs or is affected by the consequences of this interaction.

Dewey elaborates on this relationship in *Democracy and Education* saying:

"When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return"

(Dewey, 2001, p.145)

This is different from a framing of teacher agency as solely a function of one's personal capacity. There is an opportunity cost to an act of doing, trade-offs to be considered and choices to be made, which suggests the better one is at making these choices, at analysing a given situation and the competing pressure on resources, the more positive the consequences. Consequences of action for the individual teacher, their pupils and school as an organisation will not only have an effect in the moment they are made, but the present also becomes the individual and collective experience on which teachers draw upon when making future choices. It is therefore necessary to consider the components that makes one teacher better at making practical negotiations of choices than another, or the elements comprising teachers' capacity for choice.

Biesta *et al.* (2015), frame the capacity for choice as being enhanced through having a broader repertoire of responses to draw upon. One could understand this as a teacher with more experience makes better choices than a teacher with less experience. For Dewey (2005), experience is all-encompassing and dynamic – it is in effect all the time. It is our transactional existence (Dewey, 2005). In this sense one cannot solely understand the repertoire of responses as a collection of

experiences. There is a suggestion that the choices available to a teacher when determining what action to take are constrained simply by what that teacher has done in the past, their knowledge and skills informed by past experience. This would imply older teachers by virtue of years served have a greater capacity for the practical negotiation of choices. There is also an emphasis on the cause and effect of action. Dewey (2022) in *How we Think* describes wholeheartedness, responsibility and open-mindedness as essential attributes for reflective thinking. These attributes support critical thinking and thoughtful action in education. They allow the shaping of how individuals perceive and respond to their environments and ensure that actions are intentional and grounded in thoughtful deliberation. The more one does, the greater the opportunity for mistakes to be made, and the through reflecting on why those mistakes occurred, the less likely those mistakes will be made in the future. The teacher here will likely make better choices over time, but the process framed this way is overly instrumental. Trial and error are not what I mean to argue underpins teacher agency. Biesta *et al.* (2015), broader repertoire of responses include teachers' knowledge and skills, but also include teachers beliefs, values and purpose. It involves a sense of authorship and responsibility for one's actions and the ability to exercise influence in the world. Biesta's (2020) purposes of education, highlights the influence of the educational environment on a teachers' agency. The environment can support or hinder a teachers' capacity to act in terms of his three domains: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. The environment can affect a teachers' capacity for qualification by providing or limiting opportunities for professional development. Teachers need access to resources, such as quality training programs, workshops, and collaborative learning opportunities, to enhance their knowledge and skills. An environment that values and

supports continuous professional development enables teachers to expand their qualifications and stay updated with the latest educational research and practices. Conversely, a lack of resources or an unsupportive environment may hinder a teachers' ability to acquire new qualifications and improve their instructional practices.

The environment can significantly shape a teachers' capacity for socialisation. The school culture, administrative policies, and collegial relationships within the educational community play a vital role in fostering an environment that supports positive socialisation. When teachers work in a collaborative and supportive environment, they are more likely to have the agency to establish positive relationships with pupils, parents, and colleagues. On the other hand, a toxic or unsupportive environment can impede a teachers' ability to establish meaningful connections, build trust, and engage in effective socialisation processes.

The third domain of Biesta (2020) is subjectification. Biesta (2020) argues that subjectification is a delicate process that involves recognising and nurturing the uniqueness of individual pupils. An environment that values and supports pupil agency, autonomy, and individuality empowers teachers to engage in subjectification. When teachers have the freedom to adapt their instructional practices to meet the diverse needs and interests of their pupils, they can foster their pupil's sense of identity, purpose, and agency. Conversely, an environment that prioritises standardisation, rigid curriculum, and high-stakes testing may limit a teachers' capacity to promote subjectification, as it may constrain their ability to cater to individual pupil differences and aspirations.

The concept of subjectification involves the essence of our freedom as human beings, specifically our ability to choose whether to act or refrain from action. It goes beyond theoretical or philosophical ideas of freedom and instead focuses on the everyday experiences we encounter in our lives. In these situations, we always have the possibility to say yes or no, to stay or walk away, to conform or resist. Encountering this possibility holds significant meaning.

However, it's crucial to recognise that the freedom inherent in education as subjectification is not simply about doing whatever one wants. Subjectification instead entails a “qualified freedom” (Biesta, 2020, p.95), one that is intimately connected to our existence as subjective beings. This existence is never isolated; it is always intertwined with the world around us. It involves our relationships with fellow human beings, other living creatures, and the physical environment that serves as more than a mere backdrop.

This environment forms a complex network through which we act, and it also sustains and nurtures us. While it sets real limits on our actions, part of embracing subjecthood involves understanding these limits, distinguishing which ones are genuine and should be respected and which ones are the result of power abuses and should be resisted.

The environment in which teachers work has a significant impact on their capacity to act. Recognising and addressing the influence of the environment on teachers’ agency is crucial for creating conditions that empower educators and increase capacity to act.

In conclusion, teacher agency emerges as a complex, dynamic quality shaped by the interactions between a teachers’ internal beliefs, attitudes, and values, and their

external educational environment. Dewey's concept of experiential continuity emphasises that educative experiences, influenced by both personal and environmental factors, can progressively enable teachers to engage more deeply and critically with curriculum changes. By fostering supportive environments and encouraging reflective practice, school leaders can help teachers overcome potential restrictions on their autonomy, guiding them toward purposeful, sustained engagement with curriculum reform.

The achievement of agency is not solely dependent on an individual but is significantly shaped by the structural, cultural, and material conditions within the educational setting. Teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment in the face of educational change is further influenced by their personal repertoire of experiences and their access to resources for professional development. By addressing the ecological factors that shape teachers' qualifications, socialisation, and capacity for subjectification, schools can enhance teachers' agency, supporting them to act as autonomous, impactful agents of change in curriculum development.

The following section will delve deeper into the concept of teacher agency, particularly examining its critical relevance to curriculum development. Through an exploration of curriculum theory and the practical applications of teacher agency, this discussion will highlight how agency can drive effective, sustainable curriculum reform and empower teachers to be active, intentional participants in shaping educational practices.

2.4 Risk-taking in education

Understanding risk-taking in education, particularly in the context of reform, is essential for examining how teachers navigate change. Ponticell (2003) highlights the need to explore teachers' risk-taking behaviours, highlighting their importance for innovation and improvement. Biesta (2015, p.1) argues that if one takes the risk out of education, 'there is a real chance we take out education altogether'. Le Fevre (2014) connects risk-taking to effective change processes across disciplines, arguing for its critical role in educational research.

However, Biesta (2015) identifies a risk aversion that pervades contemporary education, where the fear of pupil failure and its repercussions, coupled with performative pressures, often leads teachers to minimise risk, prioritising examination outcomes over innovation. Le Fevre (2014) outlines three key elements shaping risk perception: loss of something valued, the significance of that loss, and the uncertainty of outcomes. Loss is at the foundation of risk taking, for a situation to be considered a risk, the individual taking that action must believe there is a potential for loss (Yates, 1992). The significance refers to the value one places on what is lost, which is valued differently by each individual. The greater the value to the greater the risk. When situations have the potential for the loss of something perceived as high value, the individual responds emotionally with caution or resistance. Emotion has an important role within the concept of significant loss (Harris, 2021). Positive emotions facilitate risk, as individuals seek to maximise emotional benefit – their self-esteem. The reverse also holds, as individuals seek to minimise emotional load – their fear of failure – they reduce their exposure to risky situations (Yates, 1992). There is a question of uncertainty that the individual has to weigh. Uncertainty is the chance of realising the losses anticipated and is

foundational to understanding risk (Harris, 2021). The greater the chance of a loss happening and the greater the significance that one attaches to the possible consequences of a loss, the greater the associated risk. Uncertainty is further increased if individuals are surprised by losses that were not anticipated (Yates, 1992) further demonstrating that risk and an individual's sense of exposure or vulnerability to potential loss can affect a teachers' interpretation of their cultural and structural environment in a way that inhibits agency.

Harris (2021) found these factors are exacerbated by weak relational trust, limited teacher input in reforms, and challenges to deeply held values and beliefs. Lasky (2005) describes vulnerability in teachers as a multidimensional and fluid emotional experience, shaped by their identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence. It is not a fixed state but fluctuates based on how teachers perceive their current circumstances. For teachers, vulnerability is intimately tied to their professional identity, particularly as it relates to risk-taking, empathy, and the creation of trusting classroom environments. This dynamic state can be both a challenge, triggered by critical incidents, and an opportunity for personal and professional growth (Lasky, 2005). As a group, teachers often exhibit conservatism, favouring traditional methods and resisting curricular or instructional changes (Ponticell, 2003). Risk-taking pushes teachers to challenge this conservatism, heightening the perceived potential for loss (Yates, 1992). The significance of loss is another important factor in teacher risk-taking, as school culture heavily influences teachers' willingness to experiment. Ponticell (2003) argued that aligning with a school's culture ensures acceptance, while deviating from it can result in isolation or professional difficulties. This cultural dynamic creates a reasonable fear of rebuke or retaliation from colleagues when trying new ideas that clash with established practices. Although

educational change inherently involves uncertainty, the policies, accountability systems, and organisational structures within schools are often designed to minimise or eliminate uncertainty, further discouraging risk-taking and innovation.

Exploring these dynamics in curriculum development, particularly during periods of significant educational change, offers critical insights into how teachers balance innovation with perceived risks. Harris and Burn (2016) provide an example through their study of history teachers during substantial curriculum changes in England, where debates about the content and nature of the curriculum added complexity to decision-making in a high-stakes examination culture. These findings highlight the need to better understand how teachers' perceptions of risk influence their curricular decisions and their ability to engage meaningfully with reform initiatives.

2.5 Curriculum Development

The new curriculum for Wales emphasises the role of teachers as agents of change, and alongside Scotland's curriculum for excellence and other curriculum developments worldwide, Wales adds to the emerging tendency to construct teachers explicitly as professional developers of the curriculum (Goodson, 2003). Newton's (2020) writing on subsidiarity, and its unintended consequences, posits that Wales' policy of transferring decision-making to the most relevant local level is seen as a way of fostering a sense of responsibility. Gately (2020) joins Newton (2020) in arguing that there is a lack of clarity in curriculum policy on how teachers are to align practices with educational goals. This has led to increased nervousness among teachers who are uncertain about how to effectively implement the new curriculum and what specific changes will be required in their teaching practices (Power *et al.,* 2020). This uncertainty can create stress and anxiety as teachers navigate the transition. Smith (2024) for example states the term experience is referenced over three hundred times in the policy document and argues that the lack of theoretical clarity that is necessary in guiding teachers in their interpretation of these experiences can hinder the efficacy of curricular work.

Subsidiarity of curriculum reform is presented as a model that allows for national level consistency regarding national qualifications and standards, while also providing discretion for the practitioner to make decisions that best suit the local context. Priestley *et al.* (2013) describe this design as combining the best elements of top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum planning and development. When considering teacher led curriculum development in the literature, there are numerous explanations as to why such endeavours are so difficult to realise. Reeves (2008), describes teachers who are faced with contradictory policy

imperatives, which lead to conflicts in their work. Supovitz and Weinbaum (2008), see these conflicts as a difference between policy intention and classroom practice and refer to it as an implementation gap. Further to this gap Supovitz (2008) argues that policy is translated as it moves from setting to setting, increasing the magnitudes of these implementation gaps. Whether the difficulty in teacher led curriculum development is the result of contradicting layers of policy, or as a result of the differences between the written curriculum and the perceived curriculum (Braun *et al.,* 2010), it is clearly relevant to this study and to the wider implementation process of the new curriculum for Wales to better understand what is needed in order to minimise the inevitable problems teachers are going to face in a complex and conflicting environment.

Multiple studies on the aforementioned curriculum changes in Scotland have found a number of issues with teachers carrying out the curriculum development process (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014; Priestley and Biesta, 2013; Priestley *et al*., 2013; Priestley *et al.,* 2012). While engagement by teachers and schools was generally positive and at a consistently high level, the studies found that there was considerable anxiety amongst teachers when trying to consolidate new teaching practices with assessments. There were significant levels of variability between schools in their approach to implementation of the curriculum; a disjuncture between teachers' theories of learning and the new curriculum; and considerable tension between policy and practice, in that the developmental goals of the new curriculum were at odds with the engrained culture of accountability within schools. Priestley *et al.* (2013), also comment on the lack of clarity on the process of implementation, as well as time constraints and a lack of collegiate cross-school structures that enhance teacher relationships, which the authors argue are essential for a collaborative

professional culture. I will now briefly take each issue in turn to discuss in further detail how relevant they could be for this study. The first issue raised by Priestly *et al.* (2013) was that of anxiety in relation to assessments and how they will be carried out. As already mentioned in the introduction, the innovation schools' findings on challenges for the new curriculum for Wales highlighted the need for guidance on assessments and reporting against the progression steps (O'Prey *et al.,* 2019). If teachers are held accountable for pupil outcomes as part of a performance management strategy, it is not surprising that they will be concerned about the ambiguity relating to how the pupils' outcomes will be measured. In September 2021 the Welsh Government updated the relevant legislation to enable them to give Headteachers direction on the requirement to develop assessment arrangements that assess the progress made by learners in respect of the adopted curriculum (Welsh Government, 2021b), highlighting the performativity related to pupil outcomes is still part of the education culture in Wales. The culture of accountability that still persists in schools as a remnant of the era of de-professionalisation (Smyth, 2003), and how, if at all, that is addressed by the heads of department is likely to have an impact on the success of any implementation process.

Priestley *et al.* (2013) identified key issues in curriculum development, including variability in school approaches, differences in teachers' theories of learning, and the tension between policy and practice. These issues, often considered barriers to successful curriculum implementation, may also be interpreted as natural outcomes of a teacher-led development process that prioritises professional collaboration and critical reflection. In a pupil-centred curriculum, one that is tailored to the unique context of each school, variability in approaches between schools aligns with the goal of authentic, locally-responsive education. Similarly, in a curriculum designed to

promote progressive ideologies – such as co-construction of knowledge, pupil-centred design, and interdisciplinary learning (Welsh Government, 2021b) – differences in teachers' approaches across schools and subjects are to be expected, as individual educators adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their specific classes and contexts.

The tension between policy and practice, rather than being an obstacle, may arise as a natural part of reflective and autonomous professional practice. In environments with thoughtful, reflective teachers, it is reasonable to expect some divergence from policy expectations as educators tailor their practices to align with both statutory requirements and the unique needs of their pupils. A consistent element across these observations is the need for teachers to approach these tasks with criticality, engaging thoughtfully with curriculum content and pedagogy.

Priestley *et al.* (2013) also found, in their study of a Scottish local authority, that when curriculum guidance shifted from providing superficial pedagogical advice and prescriptive assessment practices to emphasising principles of educational collaboration – such as participation, dialogue, and engagement – teachers could exercise discretion in selecting techniques that they believed would support specific educational goals. This approach fostered a space for critical discussion, moving away from the uncritical adoption of pre-packaged solutions and toward building capacity for critical discourse, creative thinking, and an exploration of foundational educational principles.

Within this context, an effective evaluation should consider how well heads of department foster these critical discussions, rather than assessing how closely their outcomes align with external expectations of curriculum design. This focus

addresses the broader aim of building teachers' capacity to engage in reflective and collaborative processes.

Nonetheless, a key question remains: how can a school cultivate a culture of critical discussion and effectively guide these conversations? Priestley *et al.* (2015) offer valuable insights through their work on teacher agency, which is central to the teacher-led curriculum development model in Wales. Their research emphasises the importance of cultivating school cultures and structures that enhance agency among teachers, ultimately fostering a setting where educators can engage in curriculum development with both criticality and confidence.

Risk taking in curriculum development

In the context of curriculum development, risk-taking (Howard *et al.,* 2018a; Howard *et al.,* 2018b; Biesta, 2013) emerges as a vital element for fostering teacher agency and ensuring the meaningful adaptation of pedagogical practices. The educational landscape emphasises innovation and adaptability, particularly as the curriculum for Wales encourages teachers to exercise autonomy within the broad framework provided. The link between curriculum development and teacher risk-taking is explored in the literature (Harris, 2021; Clayton, 2007), underscoring its importance for changing entrenched beliefs and practices within schools. Research on effective schools, for instance, supports risk-taking as a means for teachers to disrupt traditional models, fostering a climate where experimentation and reflective practice are encouraged (Howard *et al.,* 2018a).

In the sphere of professional development, teacher risk-taking has been explored as essential for fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of curricular changes.

This shift often requires teachers to venture beyond their comfort zones, adopting new pedagogical approaches that align with broader educational goals yet challenge conventional methods. Risk-taking in this context is not without its challenges. Teachers frequently navigate conservative school cultures resistant to rapid change, where established practices and hierarchical structures may hinder innovation. This structural resistance reinforces the need for environments that explicitly support calculated risk-taking as part of professional growth.

The literature also highlights how risk-taking intersects with teacher identity and emotional dynamics (Lasky, 2005; Ponticell, 2003). Risk-taking often involves a degree of vulnerability, as teachers share ideas that may diverge from traditional approaches or face scrutiny from colleagues. Lasky (2005) discusses how teachers' willingness to embrace professional vulnerability is essential for fostering agency, particularly within a context of curriculum reform. This vulnerability is intrinsically tied to emotion and identity, teachers engaging in risk-taking may face emotional risks such as fear of failure, doubt, and uncertainty. Yet as Ponticell (2003) found, positive emotional states can facilitate a willingness to innovate, while negative emotions often inhibit such behaviours.

Teachers have identified specific risks associated with curricular changes, including emotional, relational, and accountability-related risks. Emotional risks encompass the potential embarrassment or stress that may arise when implementing novel strategies that deviate from established practices. Relational risks relate to the dynamics with pupils and colleagues, as teachers attempt to balance maintaining authority with the desire to foster collaborative, pupil-centred learning environments. Additionally, in high-accountability contexts, risk-taking can be challenging as teachers fear judgment or repercussions, which may inhibit open and innovative

pedagogical practices. As Howard *et al.* (2018a) observe, effective curriculum reform requires not only that teachers embrace the possibility of failure but that institutions create supportive frameworks to sustain this mindset.

Through these perspectives, risk-taking becomes not merely an individual disposition but a systemic necessity for curriculum development. Emphasising support mechanisms such as professional development tailored to address these risks, schools can foster an environment where risk-taking aligns with broader curricular aims, ultimately leading to a more adaptive and resilient educational community.

Emotional safety is fundamental for creating a culture of risk-taking among teachers, enabling them to experiment and innovate in their teaching practices. When teachers experience a secure, supportive environment, they are more inclined to try new pedagogical approaches, ultimately contributing to more adaptive and responsive educational practices (Howard *et al.*, 2018b). Emotional safety therefore serves as a foundational element, allowing teachers to engage in professional experimentation without fear of negative repercussions.

An essential aspect of emotional safety in this context is vulnerability, as teachers need to feel safe to expose themselves to potential failure or embarrassment. This willingness to be vulnerable is crucial for professional growth, as it enables teachers to build stronger relationships with their pupils and create a learning environment that encourages exploration and mutual discovery (Palmer, 1993). Such vulnerability often involves a readiness to face uncertainty and to navigate untested instructional methods, which, while potentially risky, are also essential for the evolution of effective teaching practices. This support can reduce the perceived threat of negative consequences, such as criticism from peers or complaints from parents,

making it easier for teachers to step out of their comfort zones (Lasky, 2005). In this respect, emotional safety is not simply an internal state but is deeply embedded within the external environment and culture of the school. A supportive school culture, fostered by leaders who value open communication and constructive feedback, allows teachers to approach change with confidence.

The emotional dynamics associated with risk-taking also play a critical role. Research indicates that positive emotions can enhance the likelihood of risk-taking by encouraging openness to new ideas and a readiness to embrace novel instructional techniques (Ponticell, 2003). Conversely, negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, can inhibit teachers' willingness to engage in experimental practices, leading to a more conservative and risk-averse approach to curriculum implementation. Therefore, an emotionally supportive environment where one mitigates fear and promotes positive emotional states can becomes instrumental in fostering a willingness to innovate within the teaching community (Keyes, 1985).

Creating a culture of shared responsibility within the school is another important factor in encouraging teacher risk-taking. Both teachers and leaders share the responsibility to cultivate an environment that normalises risk-taking as a valuable component of professional development. By acknowledging and addressing teachers' fears, and by providing resources and encouragement, school leaders can foster a collective commitment to experimentation and growth. This sense of shared responsibility can reinforce teachers' sense of security and embolden them to explore new pedagogical strategies without fear of adverse consequences (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

Phenomenological insights into teachers' lived experiences offer valuable perspectives on how emotional safety influences their willingness to take risks. This approach provides a deeper understanding of teachers' personal experiences with risk-taking and can inform policies and practices designed to support them in their professional journeys. Reconceptualist curriculum theorising emerged as a response to traditional approaches that stressed efficiency, standardisation, and measurable outcomes, instead focusing on curriculum as a lived experience (Smith, 2024). This perspective draws on existential and phenomenological insights to prioritise human experience and democratic educational arrangements. William Pinar's concept of *currere* (1975, in Smith, 2024) exemplifies this approach, using autobiographical reflection to analyse and interpret educational experiences, revealing how they shape values, identities, and practices. By highlighting reflection reconceptualist thinking reframes curriculum as a dynamic and subjective process, aiming to liberate educators from reductive structures and encourage more inclusive and democratic practices (Smith, 2024). By considering teachers' lived experiences, schools can tailor their support structures to address specific emotional and relational needs, thereby enhancing their readiness to engage in transformative practices (Van Manen, 2016).

In summary, emotional safety is a critical component for promoting teacher risk-taking, as it lays the groundwork for vulnerability, facilitates positive emotional experiences, and nurtures a supportive environment. By embedding emotional safety within the school culture, teachers are encouraged to embrace new ideas and methods, contributing to a dynamic and innovative educational landscape.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The work of Elliot Eisner (1976), Joseph Schwab (2013; 1973; 1969), and Decker Walker (1971) similarly provides foundational perspectives on curriculum theory and development, each focusing on educational philosophy, pedagogy, and the art and science of teaching. Collectively, their research promotes a more humanistic and reflective approach to curriculum design – one that values deliberation, collaboration, and the subjective dimensions of teaching and learning. Their combined contributions have laid the groundwork for contemporary views on curriculum as a dynamic, context-sensitive, and teacher-driven practice. This section will now examine the work of these researchers to explore concepts and frameworks that school leaders might adopt to foster a culture of critical discussion and guide these curriculum conversations constructively

To establish a framework for understanding curriculum deliberation and teacher-driven curriculum development, it is sensible to begin with the work of Joseph Schwab (2013; 1973; 1969), whose theory positions curriculum as a deliberative and collaborative process. Schwab introduces the concept of the four commonplaces – teachers, learners, subject matter, and milieu – as the essential elements that ground curriculum development (1973). They are “necessary, ‘concurrent preliminaries’ to the actual process of making a defensible curriculum” (Schwab, 1973, p.504). His approach emphasises the importance of balancing these elements through critical discussion, providing a strong foundation for exploring curriculum as a dynamic, context-sensitive process.

Building on Schwab’s (2013; 1973; 1969) theoretical foundation, Decker Walker (1971) offers a practical model for curriculum development that stresses adaptability

and evidence-based decision-making. Walker's naturalistic approach to curriculum design aligns closely with the goal of fostering critical discussions among educators, as it advocates for iterative feedback and responsiveness to real-world classroom conditions. His model emphasises the need for curriculum to evolve in response to educational contexts, promoting a flexible and reflective approach to curriculum development.

Concluding with Elliot Eisner (1976), I will turn to the evaluative and interpretive aspects of curriculum. Eisner's work on educational connoisseurship and criticism introduces a focus on the aesthetic and subjective dimensions of teaching. He underscores the role of educators' interpretive skills and reflective capacities, encouraging teachers to engage deeply with the qualitative and experiential aspects of curriculum. Eisner's perspective enriches the deliberative process by highlighting the importance of understanding the affective and nuanced elements of educational experiences, furthering a comprehensive view of curriculum as both structured and deeply personalised.

This sequence – moving from foundational principles (Schwab), to practical implementation (Walker), to interpretive and evaluative dimensions (Eisner) – provides a cohesive framework that supports a reflective, teacher led approach to curriculum development.

In Schwab's seminal paper, *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum* (1969), he presents a compelling critique of traditional curriculum theory, arguing that theory often fails to account for the complex realities of educational practice. Schwab identifies three primary limitations of curriculum theory: scope, abstraction, and plurality. According to Schwab, theory lacks the necessary breadth to fully address

the diverse needs within education, tends to be overly abstract, making it challenging to apply in practical contexts, and is often fractured across multiple, incompatible perspectives.

In response to these shortcomings, Schwab advocates for a shift from purely theoretical approaches toward what he terms the practical. He emphasises that, unlike theory, the practical aims at producing decisions tailored to particular, context-dependent educational situations. Schwab describes this practical approach as inherently deliberative, relying on an iterative and reflective process in which educators collaboratively weigh options, contextual needs, and desired outcomes to reach workable solutions. This process, known as deliberation, requires educators to not only identify specific problems in their context but also consider multiple perspectives and remain adaptable in their decision-making.

Schwab's (2013) concept of deliberation is a foundational element for understanding curriculum development through teacher agency and risk-taking. By recognising the practical as a space for collective decision-making, Schwab enables a view of curriculum development that places educators as central agents of change. This framework emphasises that curriculum should not be viewed as a fixed set of directives but as a flexible, evolving practice shaped by those who enact it. Schwab's (2013; 1973; 1971) ideas underscore the importance of empowering teachers to exercise their professional judgment, particularly in collaborative settings, to address the unique needs of their students and communities.

Walker's naturalistic model of curriculum development, presented in *A Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development* (1971), diverges from the classical curriculum model by emphasising a context-driven descriptive approach. In this model Walker

identifies three central elements that guide curriculum development: the platform, deliberation, and design. The platform includes the foundational beliefs, values, and assumptions that curriculum developers bring to decision-making – both an understanding of current educational realities and a vision for future possibilities. This platform serves as the basis for the deliberation process, where educators discuss, reflect, and engage with both practical needs and theoretical principles to make informed decisions about the curriculum.

Deliberation, as Walker (1971) outlines is an iterative, flexible process that encourages curriculum developers to generate and evaluate various alternatives exploring the consequences of each potential choice. Walker (1971) aligns with Schwab's (2013; 1973; 1969) view of deliberation as a core component, where educators must consider multiple perspectives and explore alternatives rather than simply adhering to prescriptive objectives. This approach reflects a focus on defensibility and adaptability. The aim is to make decisions that are contextually justified and responsive to the needs of the educational environment. In Walker's model, deliberation is not linear but dynamic, allowing curriculum developers to continuously revisit and refine decisions.

The final element, design, emerges from the deliberative process as a set of structured relationships, materials, and instructional elements that reflect the curriculum's goals and platform values. This design however, is flexible, encouraging an ongoing dialogue between the intended curriculum and the realities of its application in classrooms. Walker's model by emphasising adaptability and reflection, suggests that curriculum development should empower educators to make context-specific decisions, providing a framework that promotes creativity, agency, and responsiveness to evolving educational needs. This framework seeks a holistic

approach where curriculum is not only a plan but also a lived experience. The next and final concept in this framework aims to harness the imagination of the teacher, and understand how arrive at their expert judgement and how their vision for the future can be orientated towards a more artistic understanding of the curriculum.

Eisner's work on *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism* (1976) underscores a distinct perspective within curriculum theory, prioritising the interpretive and aesthetic dimensions of educational practice. His central concept, educational connoisseurship, frames teachers as connoisseurs who, like critics of fine arts, bring an intuitive perceptive approach to their practice, engaging deeply with the nuances and qualities of the educational experience. Eisner argues that educational evaluation should transcend mere quantification, proposing instead that effective evaluation is grounded in a nuanced appreciation of classroom interactions and an understanding of the individual qualities that each educational experience brings to bear on student development.

Educational connoisseurship demands a level of expertise and insight similar to an art critic's appreciation for subtlety, where a teacher perceives the fine details within their instructional environment. According to Eisner, teachers not only observe and understand these complexities but also respond creatively and flexibly, making evaluative judgments that respect the individuality of their students and the diversity of learning contexts. This approach contrasts with the more standardised, objective models of educational evaluation, which Eisner critiques as limiting, arguing that they often overlook the affective and experiential aspects of learning that are essential to genuine educational engagement.

Eisner's dual framework of connoisseurship and criticism provides a pathway for educators to refine their practice through reflection and aesthetic appraisal, promoting a form of curriculum evaluation that values adaptability and personalisation. In this model, educational criticism becomes the act of articulating and sharing insights drawn from educational connoisseurship, enabling teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue about instructional practices and curriculum goals. This interpretive process encourages teachers to continuously reflect on their experiences, thereby fostering a responsive, pupil-centred curriculum that aligns with the lived realities of the classroom.

Integrating Eisner's concept (1976) with Schwab's (1969) and Walker's (1971) models of curriculum deliberation highlights a holistic approach where curriculum development is a lived experience. While Schwab and Walker emphasise the procedural and participatory elements of curriculum design, Eisner focuses on the interpretive, aiming to enrich teachers' and pupils' engagement with the educational process. In this view, curriculum development is as much about cultivating an environment conducive to exploration and insight as it is about content or methods, supporting a school that embraces complexity and promotes self-understanding and sensitivity in its learning experiences.

Conceptual framework of the formation of teacher agency in curriculum development

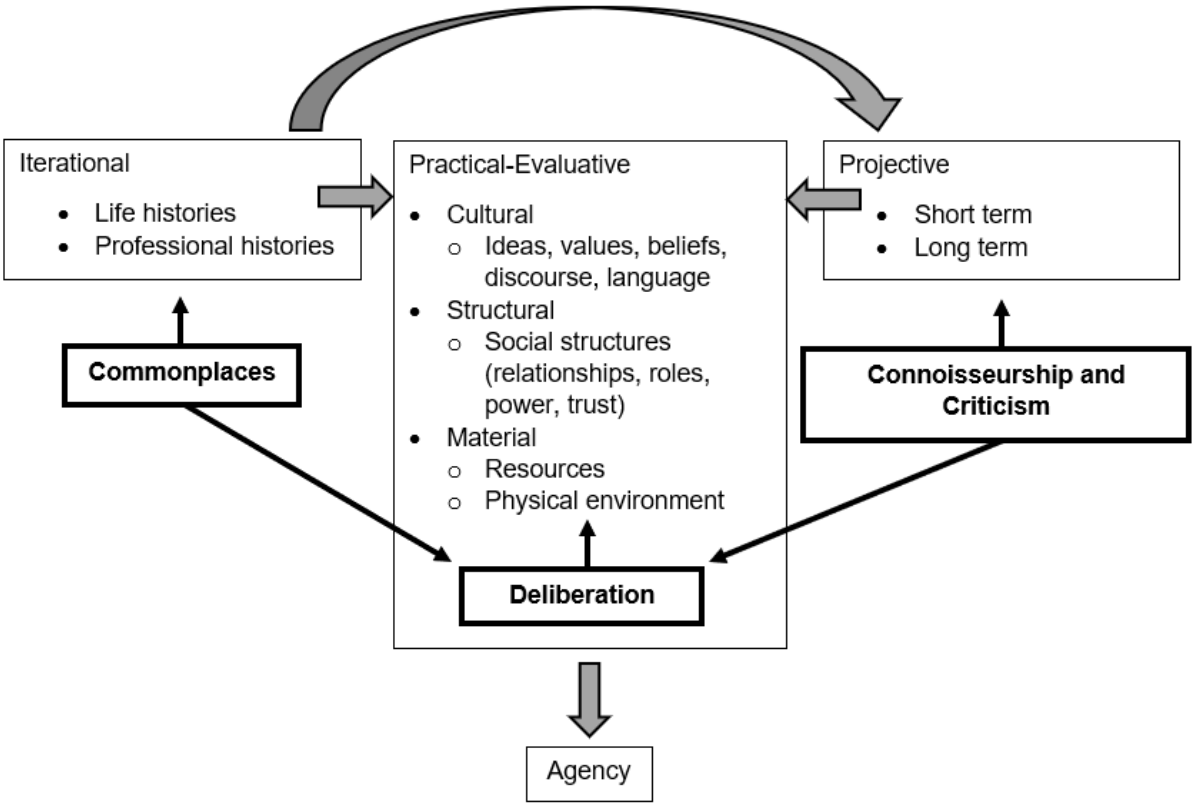

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the formation of teacher agency in curriculum development (adapted from Biesta *et al.,* 2015; Priestley, *et al.*, 2015 *ecological model of teacher agency*; Schwab's (1973) *Commonplaces* of curriculum development; Walker's (1971) *Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development* and Eisner's (1976) *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism*)

This conceptual framework integrates Schwab's (1973) *Commonplaces* of curriculum development, Walker's (1971) *Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development*, and Eisner's (1976) *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism* to support the achievement of teacher agency within the ecological model. Agency, as described by Priestley *et al.* (2015), is a temporal and relational achievement that emerges through interactions with cultural, structural, and material contexts-for-action, shaped by past experiences (iterational), present judgments (practical-evaluative), and future aspirations (projective).

Schwab's (1973) commonplaces; learner, teacher, milieu, and subject matter, provide guiding principles for curriculum development, highlighting the transactional nature of decision-making in context-specific situations. These commonplaces provide categories of equal rank that are necessary for defensible educational thought. In this way they support deliberation directly by providing necessary areas of consideration during all deliberations. The commonplaces also support this study's understanding of the iterational dimension of agency as they can be used as an analysis tool to understand the varying discourses teachers apply to their professional histories – their knowledge, beliefs and values. Walker's (1971) naturalistic model of deliberation offers a practical process for navigating contextual challenges, and the process of facilitating defensible judgments. This helps understand the practical-evaluative dimension of agency as it focuses on interpreting and navigating temporary situations by weighing alternatives and making contextually appropriate decisions (Priestley *et al.,* 2015). Eisner's (1976) connoisseurship and criticism supports deliberation by positioning teacher evaluative processes as a form of educational criticism thereby illuminating constraining or supporting evaluative practices that allow teachers to arrive at defensible decisions. Eisner's (1976) connoisseurship and criticism also helps this study's understanding of the projective dimension of teacher agency by conceptualising teaching as an art. This conceptualisation allows analysis of teachers' understanding of long-term normative purposes of education and gives insight into potential educational discourses that would enhance teacher agency.

2.7 School Organisation

In the third section of this literature review the focus shifts to school organisation, exploring how structural, cultural, and material conditions within schools influence the effective implementation of curriculum reforms and consequently the achievement of teacher agency. The literature on school organisation is essential to understanding how curriculum development practices are enacted within specific institutional contexts. While the previous sections on teacher agency and curriculum development have highlighted the central role of teachers as agents of change, the effectiveness of their efforts is profoundly shaped by the organisational environments in which they operate. School organisation therefore provides the framework that supports teachers' ability to innovate, collaborate, and engage in reflective practices essential for curriculum reform.

Examining the literature on school organisation builds upon the concepts explored in curriculum development by addressing how schools, as structured entities, create environments that shape educational practices. Effective curriculum implementation demands coordinated systems of support, communication, and resource allocation that enable consistent and sustained change. This section will explore how factors such as relationships, culture, and resource choices intersect with curriculum development.

School organisation literature bridges the gap between teacher-driven curriculum design and its sustained application in practice, emphasising that the achievement of teacher agency and the success of curriculum initiatives ultimately rely on well-coordinated, responsive organisational structures.

Micro-Politics of a School

Ball (2011) describes the relationship a school has with its environment as interactive and dialectical, meaning that the school is not contained in a way that allows it to operate without some degree of influence or conditioning from outside agents. Ball goes further and stresses that these interactions are not fixed from the outset, they change with each action taken by the organisation, causing reactions which feedback into the school and impact on how future decisions are made. Outside influences could be political, societal or parental, and Ball's accounts of school case studies show a wide selection of schools who have operated to varying degrees of success within and with their environment. Ball's analysis uses conflict to frame how schools make decisions and looks at the way in which different parties assert their dominance over the process. The conflict described can be broken into three main areas of interest: the first being definition of the school itself, what sort of school it is trying to be and importantly who has control of these definitions; the second looks at disagreements in how varying groups think changes should be made, these cover audiences outside of school but crucially also cover different groups of teachers within the school; finally the third area of interest when framing control is how these disputes are communicated to outside parties, be they school decisions to outside parties or select groups within the school communicating to the rest of the school body. The interplay of individuals asserting dominance of an ideology, as well as protecting and promoting factional interests, while all the while trying to control the way in which these struggles are communicated, in essence trying to stop the realisation of internal conflicts to a wider audience, provides a useful framework in which to analyse decision-making within a school.

Curriculum change within a school is possibly the most contentious and destabilising change that could occur. The new curriculum for Wales asks teachers to address what they teach by asking them to think about why they teach the content they do (Welsh Government, 2020b). By having these conversations, tensions between knowledge and skills curricula, or academic and pastoral approaches, will inevitably lead to a differing of views, and as Ball (2011) observed, these differences of ideology can become more important than achieving a sense of shared institutional reality. It may be important to observe the way in which a school's ideology towards the new curriculum for Wales develops when answering questions about teacher agency and the effectiveness of implementation. More specifically it may be relevant to ask whether the speed and conviction of any such decision helps moderate the potential for ideological partisanship, or whether it alienates and entrenches the differences more deeply.

When considering factional interests, the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales has organised subjects into areas of learning experience. Donaldson (2016) intended this as a measure to ensure breadth of learning for the pupil, it could, however, actually lead to a disruption of personal and material interests for schools and their teachers. A school for example, that decides to combine multiple subjects from within an AoLE, and deliver it as one subject, affects the personal interests of the teachers concerned. Those whose lose out due to loss of prestige, for example, as an individual subject the teacher was an expert in that field, and the calibre of pupils that opted for that subject traditionally had been top achievers academically, is suddenly faced with a situation where their expertise is too narrow for the content which needs delivery, and also the pupils they teach are more mixed in ability. In effect the status of the teacher and subject is diminished. The winners, if you will, in

this zero-sum game, could be teachers whose subject was seen as irrelevant to many pupils, or the school was happy to employ generalists in that subject rather than subject experts, suddenly find their adaptability is of greater value. Ball highlights that changes to material interests, namely, the re-allocation of resources and facilities, have considerable impacts on decision-making processes. Any reorganisation, but particularly one as all-encompassing as curriculum change, will cause concern for vested interests and therefore it is important to consider who benefits, and who does not, when assessing how to implement changes and also when evaluating how successful they are. Ball recognises that curriculum delivery is predominately the province of departments within secondary schools. Ball refers to these vested parties as “barons” (2011, p. 230), and argues that control of curriculum change will not be given up easily. It is the relative influence of these departments over decision-making that will determine the extent to which change occurs or is resisted. It is therefore crucial to consider the impact departmental influences have on change processes and how impacts on the achievement of teachers’ agency.

Many schools, following guidance from Welsh Government (2020b), are attempting to implement a learning process of design, trial and reflect, when designing their school’s new curriculum for Wales. This in practice, is likely to lead to a narrow group of experimenters, as whole school trial and improvement may be seen as too disruptive to learners. This has the potential to create a situation where communication of any trials and findings can become very powerful tools in advancing certain interests. Ball (2011), identified two areas of micro-politics here that can impact on decision-making: containment of internal conflicts, and management of the relationship with external audiences. Differences in opinion in relation to any school trial of a new curriculum are likely to occur, maybe for the

reasons argued above. Ball observed that if these differences stop a common message from being delivered to the wider audience, in this example the rest of the school teaching body, then the teachers outside the experimental group are invited to take sides, which according to Ball entrench these differences. The narrative is lost by those in charge, and subsequently a breakdown in team work and critically there is a breakdown in the relationships within the team. It is relevant then, when considering a group of teachers who come together to discuss and implement curriculum change, to look at how teamwork and the efforts expended to maintain these relationships affects the success of any outcome.

Ball is not suggesting that the three areas of analysis; ideology differences, the zero-sum game of factional interests and the containment and delivery of group differences to wider audiences, are equally important, nor that they are likely to present themselves in equal measure. He is arguing that the subjective nature of the school and the setting will likely see overlap and interplay between all three elements, and that the specific setting of the school, the make-up of the teaching staff, and the history of community interactions will result in varying hierarchies of one factor over another. In one way it is clear that the new curriculum for Wales has allowed teachers to openly discuss their practice in terms of ideology in a way that could have been seen as reactive or subversive by school leaders previously, which provides an opportunity for control of the vision of a school to swing towards the teaching body away from the head teacher, which one could argue benefits teacher agency and empowers those teachers to enact change in their classroom for the benefit of their pupils. However, an overly focussed debate on ideology could result in an ultimately destructive balkanisation of teacher groups, to the detriment of a sense of shared objective. The determination of the head teacher to impose their

own vision, and therefore steer the debate within the school, I feel may be an important consideration when exploring this point. A persistent informal critique of the curriculum for Wales from teachers is that information is not clear or complete. It is a process which requires schools to develop their own solutions to their particular subjective needs, using the framework from Welsh Government (2020b). This inevitably means that questions asked by teachers in school cannot be answered fully, or at all, by school leaders straight away. This ambiguity Ball (2011) describes as a vector for rumour and gossip. Rumours fill missing information, and during times of uncertainty spread like wild-fire to provide "respite from collective insecurity and individual ignorance" (Ball 2011, p. 243). This suggests the flow of information and the management of rumours during any school design, trial and reflect process for the new curriculum, could have significant impacts on teachers' perception of agency in implementing curriculum change. What is also clear from Ball's analysis is the influence established subject departments have on any change process. It will be crucial to understand the conflict of interests between subjects that the new curriculum for Wales creates during implementation, as these "baronial departments" (Ball 2011, p. 243) are likely to have great influence over outcomes.

Ball (2011) argues the importance that micro-politics has on school decision-making needs to be recognised in studies of curriculum change, including ones like this study, he also argues that all too often the analysis of the negotiated order which is arrived at and changed by the social network of relationships is undervalued or ignored. The findings of this study, if they are to benefit development of the new curriculum for Wales in the study's school or more widely, will need to recognise the micro-politics of conflict and what effect, either beneficial or detrimental, this has on the implementation process.

As a participant researcher I feel it pertinent to cast the above discussion on micro-politics within a school in a slightly different, and one might argue compassionate way, towards teachers. It could be argued that many teachers do not fear change, but it could be fair to say many fear loss. The new curriculum presents an opportunity for change, which many teachers may find exciting, but I would argue, as Power *et al.* (2020) do, in equal measure there is a fear of losing as a result of the changing curriculum. Power *et al.* (2020) reported nervousness relating to resources and changing to teaching methods which led to fear of loss of familiarity and potential loss teacher effectiveness. This could be personal, or material, either way it presents the school and the heads of department with a task that requires sensitivity and requires recognition that while the child is at the centre of the new curriculum, the school must see teachers as people with hopes and fears, and not as units of labour to be shuffled nor as entrenched baronies to be broken up. This study seeks to exercise compassion for worthy professionals at all times, and respects immensely the difficult task that curriculum change brings.

This following section examines how the organisational structure within schools influence the enactment of curriculum reform, with a particular focus on the micro-political dynamics that shape teachers' engagement with change. Building on Ball's (2011) analysis of micro-politics, which highlights the interplay of power, interests, and ideologies within school environments, I will now explore how these forces affect teachers' agency and the overall success of curriculum initiatives. Schools are not only sites for policy implementation but also complex organisations where leaders and teachers navigate competing priorities, resistances, and collaborative efforts.

I will first of all explore organisational culture and how the underlying norms, values, and traditions within schools influence teachers' openness to change, emphasising

the importance of fostering a collaborative environment that encourages critical engagement with new initiatives. The second section addresses the role of communication structures in reducing ambiguity and managing the flow of information within schools, as effective communication is critical to prevent misunderstandings that can hinder reform efforts. Finally, the section on conflict resolution explores how leaders can navigate and mediate differences among staff, fostering a negotiated order that aligns diverse perspectives and interests with the school's curricular goals.

Together, these elements provide a framework for understanding the organisational influences on curriculum reform, underscoring that effective curriculum change relies on a supportive and collaborative school environment where teachers achieve agency.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture within schools plays a pivotal role in the achievement of teacher agency, especially when considering curriculum change. As Maguire *et al.* (2015) argue school leaders are integral to shaping a culture that aligns with collaborative and innovative norms, which are essential for empowering teachers to take active roles in curriculum development. A supportive school culture requires deliberate cultivation by leaders who are attuned to the values, beliefs, and professional needs of their staff. By promoting a culture of openness school leaders can create an environment that values teacher voice, supports risk-taking and encourages adaptation to curriculum changes.

A key aspect of cultivating a supportive culture is establishing shared beliefs and a shared vision among staff members. Maguire *et al.* (2015) argue that when teachers and leaders align in their goals and educational values, it builds a foundation for unity and purpose. Leaders foster this alignment by involving teachers in decision-making processes, encouraging them to contribute their insights and expertise. This shared vision cultivates a sense of belonging and investment in the school's goals, which is essential for teacher agency, as teachers feel more empowered to make decisions and drive change when they see their values reflected in the school's mission.

Ball *et al.* (2011) further elaborate on the importance of promoting a collaborative environment where teachers have opportunities to work together on curriculum initiatives. By creating spaces for peer interaction, idea exchange, and joint problem-solving, leaders can foster mutual respect and trust among teachers. This collaborative environment becomes a foundation for teacher agency, as it allows teachers to feel supported in taking ownership of their professional practice and contributes to a sense of collective responsibility for implementing curriculum changes. Morgan *et al.* (2010) advocate for leaders to facilitate regular discussions and feedback sessions, enabling teachers to reflect on their experiences, learn from each other, and collectively address challenges. Reflective practices contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and support teachers in critically evaluating their roles and approaches, which reinforces their sense of agency and adaptability.

Furthermore, organisational culture that values open communication enhances teacher agency by ensuring that information flows freely and transparently. Leaders who encourage open communication allow teachers to voice concerns, share successes, and discuss curriculum changes openly, which fosters trust and helps

teachers feel more secure in navigating changes. Morgan *et al.* (2010) highlight the importance of this transparency, noting that teachers are more likely to engage positively with curriculum reforms when they are well-informed and able to communicate their perspectives openly.

The interplay between culture, autonomy, and support is important in enabling teachers to achieve agency. Leaders who provide a balance of structure and flexibility allow teachers the autonomy to make instructional decisions while maintaining necessary guidelines for accountability. This approach empowers teachers to innovate and tailor their teaching to the unique needs of their pupils, rather than feeling constrained by rigid curricular expectations. By valuing teacher discretion, school leaders create a resilient environment where teachers feel capable of adapting and responding effectively to curriculum changes.

Communication

Effective communication structures within a school are fundamental to sustaining teacher morale and mitigating misunderstandings that could hinder curriculum change. Inadequate communication often results in ambiguities and misinterpretations that can lead to frustration and decreased motivation among teachers, ultimately impacting their engagement with new initiatives (Maguire *et al.*, 2015). Ambiguities surrounding policy changes or administrative decisions may prompt speculation, where teachers attempt to fill information gaps on their own, often leading to misunderstandings that undermine trust in leadership and diminish teacher morale (Ball *et al.,* 2011).

Transparent decision-making processes play a key role in mitigating these challenges by clarifying the rationale behind policy changes and engaging teachers in discussions about school direction. By involving teachers in decision-making, school leaders can foster a sense of ownership and increase buy-in, which helps clarify expectations and reduces speculation about leadership motives (Morgan *et al.*, 2010). Transparent decision-making also enhances teacher morale by helping educators feel valued and respected as professionals, a vital aspect of supporting the achievement of agency within the school. Such processes empower teachers to take initiative in curriculum-related decisions and foster a collaborative culture that supports collective goals.

In addition to transparent decision-making, establishing regular feedback loops is essential for maintaining open channels of communication. Feedback loops allow teachers to voice concerns and provide input on ongoing policy implementation, thereby ensuring that their perspectives are acknowledged and any ambiguities are promptly addressed. This continuous exchange of information helps align school goals with teachers' expectations, thereby enhancing teacher morale and enabling agency. Morgan *et al.* (2010) emphasise the importance of two-way communication, as it encourages teachers to actively participate in decision-making processes and supports a culture of adaptability and responsiveness in curriculum change.

Another element in effective communication is consistent updates. In an environment of ongoing reform, regular updates on policy changes, curricular adaptations, and school progress help reduce uncertainty by keeping teachers informed. Consistent messaging from school leaders ensures that teachers understand and are aligned with the school's vision, fostering a unified approach to change and preventing misunderstandings (Ball *et al.*, 2011). By clarifying expectations and goals,

consistent updates also create a positive school culture that facilitates teacher agency, as teachers feel more confident in their understanding of the school's direction and their roles within it.

Effective communication structure support teacher agency and morale in a school environment. Transparent decision-making, regular feedback loops and consistent updates collectively contribute to a supportive culture that enables proactive engagement with curriculum changes.

Conflict

Conflict resolution and a negotiated order is essential within school organisations as it creates a shared understanding among teachers and promotes a collaborative approach to educational reform (Ball *et al.,* 2011). The concept of a negotiated order emphasises dialogue, compromise, and the active participation of all stakeholders, allowing diverse perspectives to shape a shared vision for curriculum changes.

A negotiated order is particularly vital when implementing curriculum reforms, as these changes often bring to the surface competing interests within different departments or between various levels of leadership and staff. Power *et al.* (2020) highlight that establishing a negotiated order can pre-empt potential conflicts by creating a collaborative foundation for curriculum discussions. This collaborative foundation is built through structured negotiation that ensure each voice is valued and heard. These practices not only encourage alignment with the school's overarching goals but also build trust and morale among staff, fostering an environment where change can be implemented sustainably.

Facilitated discussions allow stakeholders to express their perspectives openly while being guided by a neutral mediator who ensures that conversations remain productive and inclusive (Maguire *et al.,* 2015). This approach is particularly effective in environments where power dynamics might otherwise hinder open dialogue. The neutral facilitator can help mediate conflicts, ensuring that discussions focus on shared goals and values.

Interest-based bargaining involves developing an understanding of the underlying interests and values of each party (Ball *et al.,* 2011). This method allows participants to focus on shared objectives, facilitating compromises that meet the needs of all stakeholders. Interest-based bargaining fosters a collaborative atmosphere that can bridge divides within the school.

Competing interests within a school can be particularly pronounced during times of reform, as departments and individuals may have different priorities or interpretations of the curriculum's goals. A negotiated order provides a way to reconcile these differences by fostering an environment where staff feel comfortable discussing their interests openly and honestly. According to Power *et al.* (2020), addressing competing interests involves more than simply resolving conflicts, it requires developing a school culture that values inclusivity and respects the unique contributions of each department.

This study's theoretical approach comprises of three foci – Agency drawn from Biesta and Tedder (2007); Priestely *et al.* (2015); and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) – Curriculum Development employing the concepts of Schwab (2013; 1973; 1969), Walker (1971) and Eisner (1994; 1976) – and Policy Implementation from Ball (2011), Maguire (2012) and Braun *et al.* (2011). Priestley, *et al.* (2015) describe

teacher agency as an ecological concept. They conceptualise teacher agency as influenced by factors operating at macro, meso, and micro levels. This study uses Ball's (2011) *Micro-politics of the school* and the work of Maguire (2012) and Braun *et al.* (2011) to better understand the influence the interplay between the micro-level of teacher decision-making – as described in the conceptual framework described above – and the meso-level of school organisation has on teacher agency.

This literature review has examined the key theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding teacher agency, curriculum development, and school organisation within the context of curriculum reform in Wales. Together, these interconnected domains provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how teachers as agents of change understand, develop and implement the new Curriculum for Wales. The insights drawn from this chapter lay the foundation for the methods section that follows.

Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to explore the role of teachers as agents of change within the context of the new curriculum for Wales in a Welsh secondary school. The study adopts a qualitative, constructivist approach through a small-scale qualitative study, aiming to understand the subjective experiences and perceptions of middle leaders in the educational setting. The chapter begins by discussing the philosophical underpinnings of the research, followed by a detailed explanation of the methodology. It also addresses sample selection, ethical considerations, data generation, and data analysis. By illuminating the research design and methods, this chapter provides a foundation for understanding how the study's findings were derived and ensures the credibility and reliability of the research process.

3.2 Methodology

The initial intention of this research was to explore how teachers perceive and enact their roles as agents of change within the context of the new curriculum for Wales. Although this objective appeared broad, it served as an effective starting point for empirical enquiry. By adopting a qualitative approach grounded in constructivist principles (Creswell, 2022), the study aimed to gain insight into the social world within the educational setting through the teachers' experiences and perspectives (Blaikie, 2007).

According to Creswell (2022), the constructivist worldview posits that individuals construct meanings based on their interactions with the world, which are shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts. This approach aligns with the aims of the study, allowing for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions and the factors influencing their sense of agency.

As there was no opportunity to adopt a classic ethnographic position (Pink, 2011; Creswell, 1998), the selected qualitative methods were identified as appropriate for a small-scale research project. The study embraces the expectations of a professional doctorate, where the researcher is familiar with the field of enquiry and possesses a deep understanding of the subject matter.

It was important to recognise my dual insider/outsider status in respect of being both an "object and subject" within the text (Laborie, 2002, p. 109). Delamont and Atkinson (1995) identify strategies to assist the research process when the subject of enquiry is familiar. One such strategy is the ethnomethodological manifesto, which affirms rather than negates the researcher's sense of familiarity by recognising and

using membership knowledge while also posing shared knowledge as problematic throughout the process.

Mannay (2016, p. 29) argues that the researcher's awareness and disclosure of proximity to the field of enquiry is important, as it places the researcher at the centre of the production of knowledge. Working within the educational sector, it was crucial to remain self-aware and reflexive so that assumptions could be disclosed, assessed, and evaluated throughout the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 2002; Delamont, 2001; Delamont and Atkinson, 1995).

By acknowledging "the complexities of identity and multiplicity of insider views" (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 131), the concept of maintaining moral and political self-awareness contributed to establishing relationships and gaining trust. The ability to establish rapport within the school environment facilitated access and negotiation, but as Mercer (2007) predicts, positive attributes can also present challenges. The potential of participants refraining from full disclosure due to my dual role had to be considered in terms of the study's validity.

By making these negotiations explicit, the researcher's insider credibility and positionality are clarified. The study emphasises authenticity and trustworthiness, acknowledging that traditional notions of objectivity and lack of bias may not suffice to ensure that typical events are not overlooked or taken for granted (Cohen *et al*., 2011; MacPhail, 2004). The immediate disclosure of the researcher's dual identity and sense of "situatedness" communicates real-world experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002), enhancing the depth and validity of the study.

By adopting a qualitative approach grounded in constructivist principles, through the research I was able to gain insight into the educational setting as experienced

through the teachers' perspectives. Rather than viewing prior knowledge as a detriment, it served as an effective tool to assist the enquiry. Familiarity with the context helped interpret localised meanings (Denscombe, 2010) and generated explanations about the implementation of the new curriculum and its impact on teacher agency.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide depth and flexibility, enabling participants to express their thoughts in their own words and explore topics in detail. This method aligns with the constructivist emphasis on understanding participants' meanings and perspectives (Crotty, 1998). The interviews facilitated the exploration of aspects that might not be observable through other methods, adding greater depth and validity to the study overall.

The selected methods were appropriate for responding to the research questions and investigating the complexities of teacher agency within the context of curriculum change. A quantitative approach might have been considered to create distance from potential biases and to manage time effectively. However, while positivism could test theories and identify factors causing phenomena, it does not yield an understanding of people's lived experiences (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996).

The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, capturing the richness of their perceptions and the factors influencing their sense of agency. By integrating practical relevance with academic rigor, the study embodies the concept of doctorateness in a professional doctorate context, contributing both to practice and to academic knowledge (Bourner *et al.,* 2001).

3.3 Sample Selection

The sampling strategy was deliberately designed to ensure that the participants selected would provide rich, detailed data pertinent to the research questions. Purposive sampling was employed to identify individuals who hold key positions within the school's organisational structure – specifically, heads of departments. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2008) notion that purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who can best inform the understanding of the central phenomenon under study.

Ball (2011) emphasises that curriculum delivery in secondary schools is predominantly the domain of departments, with departmental leaders holding significant influence over curriculum decisions. These leaders often have vested interests and may resist changes that disrupt established practices. By focusing on heads of departments, the study aims to explore how departmental dynamics influence teacher agency and the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales.

To capture a comprehensive view of the school's curriculum landscape, the sample included at least one head of department from each of the six new Areas of Learning Experience (AoLE) as outlined in the new curriculum:

- Expressive Arts
- Health and Wellbeing
- Humanities
- Languages, Literacy and Communication
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- Science and Technology

Including participants from each AoLE ensures that the study reflects the experiences and perspectives across the full spectrum of the secondary school's curriculum. This approach allows for the identification of common themes as well as unique challenges faced by different subject areas in adapting to curricular changes.

The sample comprised seven heads of departments, representing all of the AoLEs, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the school's organisational dynamics. The participants were Em, Pat, Nat, Gwin, Fran, Mal and Sam.

Prospective participants were approached directly, leveraging professional relationships established during my tenure at the school. Initial contact was made informally to gauge interest, followed by formal invitations that provided detailed information about the study, including its purpose, the nature of participation, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

This approach facilitated efficient access to participants and capitalised on existing rapport, which is advantageous in qualitative research where trust and openness are essential for generating rich data (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

A sample size of seven participants was deemed appropriate for this qualitative, in-depth study. This size allows for comprehensive exploration of each participants' experiences over the course of a single academic year while ensuring manageability within the scope of a doctoral research project. As Silverman (2014) notes, in small-scale qualitative studies, the depth of data gathered can provide meaningful insights beyond the specific cases studied.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and conduct of this study, particularly given the researcher's dual role as an insider within the educational setting. Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Cardiff University, ensuring compliance with institutional guidelines and ethical research practices.

All participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study through an information sheet detailing the research purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, verbal consent was obtained and recorded at the start of the interview.

To safeguard participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and any identifying information was omitted or altered in the data and subsequent reporting. Data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

Given the specific context and small sample size, extra precautions were taken to prevent deductive disclosure, where individuals could be identified through a combination of descriptors (Denscombe, 2010). This included careful consideration in the presentation of findings to avoid linking responses or characteristics to an identifiable school.

As an insider researcher, I was acutely aware of how my prior relationships and experiences within the school could influence the research process. Reflexivity was

integral throughout the study, involving continuous self-examination of my assumptions, biases, and potential impact on data collection and interpretation (Berger, 2015). Power dynamics can strongly affect qualitative research, influencing participants' openness and the authenticity of responses (Mercer, 2007). My role changed during the course of my study. Initially I was a middle leader within the school. My responsibilities meant I had no direct managerial power over participants. This facilitated genuine conversations, minimising power dynamic tensions. Mercer (2007) highlights that transparency regarding positionality is important when navigating ethical complexities, ensuring participants feel respected and valued. Half way through the study I was promoted to an assistant headship post at a different school. Moving schools mid-study offered both challenges and opportunities. According to Delamont and Atkinson (1995), shifts in research settings can alter the relational dynamics between researcher and participants, impacting data generation and interpretation. The challenge was related to maintaining communication with the participants, both for data collection but also for peer consultation of my interpretation of the data. The use of Microsoft Teams and the fact that the geographical change was minor meant that this challenge was easily mitigated. The benefits were more apparent as my positional shift mitigated any potential power imbalances allowing greater neutrality in my analysis (Cohen *et al*., 2011).

Following this I found the existing rapport and relationships, now free of any direct power dynamic influence, further enhanced the ethical integrity and authenticity of the data collected (Berger, 2015).

To mitigate potential biases, I maintained a reflexive journal by documenting reflections on each interview and the research process as a whole. This practice helped in recognising and addressing any preconceptions that could affect the study's objectivity and credibility.

Understanding that my dual role could affect participants' willingness to share openly, efforts were made to create a comfortable and non-judgmental interview environment. Emphasising the confidentiality of responses and the academic purpose of the research helped in building trust.

Additionally, I was cautious not to let insider knowledge lead to assumptions or shortcuts in questioning. Open-ended questions and active listening techniques were employed to encourage participants to express their thoughts fully, without undue influence from the researcher's perspectives.

Participants and their departments – the risk of deductive identification

In conducting this research, it was essential to include explicit links to participants' departments to effectively address the core objectives of the study. The investigation aimed to understand how departmental dynamics influence teacher agency, particularly in the context of implementing the new curriculum for Wales. Departments within secondary schools often function as semi-autonomous units with distinct cultures, hierarchies, and power structures (Ball, 2011). These factors significantly impact teachers' sense of agency, their ability to enact change, and how they navigate organisational politics.

Including participants' departmental affiliations was crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed for an understanding of power dynamics within the school. Departments can have varying degrees of influence, affecting resource allocation, decision-making processes, and the implementation of curricular changes. Identifying departments enabled an analysis of how these power differentials impact teacher agency.

Secondly, knowing the departmental context facilitated the exploration of hierarchical structures. The hierarchical relationships within and between departments influence trust, collaboration, and communication among staff. This provided insights into how these factors either facilitate or hinder teachers' ability to act as agents of change.

Thirdly, including departmental information allowed for the examination of subject-specific challenges. Different departments face unique challenges and opportunities when adapting to curriculum changes. This enabled a comparative analysis of these

experiences across various subject areas, enriching the study's findings and providing a more nuanced understanding of the overall school environment.

While recognising the potential risk of deductive identification due to the inclusion of departmental affiliations, several measures were taken to ethically justify this decision and mitigate risks. Participants were fully informed about the nature of the study, including the intention to reference their departmental roles. Consent forms explicitly stated that while their identities would remain confidential, their departmental affiliations would be discussed as part of the analysis. Participants voluntarily agreed to these terms, understanding the importance of their departmental context to the research objectives.

To further protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used, and any personal identifiers were removed or generalised. Care was taken to present data in a manner that focused on departmental insights without attributing specific statements or characteristics that could lead to individual identification. In reporting the findings, aggregate data and thematic analyses were emphasised over individual narratives. This approach reduced the likelihood of linking specific comments to identifiable individuals while still providing meaningful insights into departmental influences.

The study received ethical approval from the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Cardiff University. The committee reviewed the research design, including the inclusion of departmental affiliations, and deemed it acceptable given the precautions taken to protect participant confidentiality. This ethical oversight ensured that the research complied with institutional guidelines and respected the rights and privacy of the participants.

Furthermore, the potential benefits of including departmental information outweighed the risks. The insights gained contribute significantly to understanding how departmental structures affect teacher agency and the implementation of educational reforms. This knowledge can inform policy and practice, ultimately benefiting the wider educational community by highlighting areas where support and intervention may be necessary to facilitate effective curriculum change.

The ethical justification aligns with guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024), which acknowledge that in some cases, certain identifiers may be necessary for the integrity of the research. BERA emphasises the importance of obtaining informed consent and ensuring that participants are aware of how their information will be used. By adhering to these guidelines, the study maintained ethical integrity while fulfilling its research objectives.

In conclusion, the inclusion of participants' departmental affiliations was ethically justified due to its essential role in addressing the research questions. By implementing rigorous ethical safeguards – such as obtaining informed consent, anonymising data, and carefully presenting findings – the study balanced the need for detailed contextual information with the responsibility to protect participant confidentiality. This approach allowed for a rich, nuanced understanding of how trust, hierarchy, and personal beliefs within departments inform teacher agency in the context of curricular change.

3.5 Data Generation

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method to generate the qualitative data necessary for this study. Each participant was interviewed twice over the course of a single academic year. This approach is suitable for exploring complex phenomena such as teacher agency and perceptions of curricular change, as it allows participants to articulate their experiences in depth (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between flexibility and structure. They enable the researcher to explore participants' perspectives thoroughly while ensuring that all relevant topics are covered (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This format is particularly effective when dealing with participants who are articulate and comfortable sharing their ideas, as was the case with the heads of departments in this study.

Semi-structured interviews allow for probing deeper into responses, clarifying meanings, and exploring new avenues of enquiry that may arise during the conversation (Bell, 2005). This is essential for capturing the nuanced understandings and subjective experiences of participants regarding their roles and the implementation of the new curriculum.

An interview schedule was developed based on the research questions and key themes identified in the literature review. The guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses and encourage participants to reflect on their experiences.

The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed for the exploration of topics that emerged spontaneously during the interviews. This adaptability is crucial in qualitative research to capture the richness and diversity of participants' perspectives (Bryman, 2008).

Each participant was interviewed twice over the course of the academic year, providing an opportunity to capture changes in perceptions and experiences over time. Each single interview, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour, were scheduled at times convenient for the participants and conducted in a private setting away from the school though Microsoft Teams calls to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

Online interviews through Microsoft Teams proved highly effective in this research. Online interviewing offered flexibility by reducing logistical barriers and enabling participants to engage from familiar and comfortable environments, significantly enhancing rapport and depth of responses (Archibald *et al.,* 2019). However, the effectiveness observed in this study was notably enhanced by pre-existing professional relationships, supporting the argument that strong prior relationships are advantageous in online qualitative research (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). This approach was important in encouraging open dialogue which reflects the growing academic recognition of online interviews as robust tools for qualitative inquiry (Archibald *et al.,* 2019).

At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the purpose of the study, confirmed consent for participation and recording, and assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses. Establishing rapport was important to facilitate open and honest communication.

With participants' consent, all interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams using my university account. Utilising Microsoft Teams provided a secure and convenient platform for both the researcher and participants, especially in accommodating schedules and the flexibility needed when coordinating times that suit everyone.

Conducting interviews through Microsoft Teams had several advantages. It enhanced accessibility by allowing participants to join the interview from their own offices or homes, reducing the need for travel and making scheduling more flexible. Being in a familiar environment may have helped participants feel more at ease, potentially leading to more open and honest discussions. Additionally, using the university's licensed Microsoft Teams account ensured that data transmission was secure and compliant with institutional data protection policies.

Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a meeting invitation link. At the beginning of the session, I confirmed verbal consent for participation and recording. Microsoft Teams has a built-in recording feature, which was used to capture the audio (and optionally, video) of the interviews. Participants were informed when recording commenced, as Microsoft Teams provides an on-screen notification to all attendees when a recording starts.

The recordings were saved securely within the university's Microsoft Teams environment, which complies with data protection regulations, including GDPR. Following each interview, the recordings were downloaded and stored in encrypted, password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, again through the Cardiff University account.

Transcribing the interviews verbatim was an essential step in the data analysis process. I personally transcribed each interview to ensure accuracy and to become deeply familiar with the content – a crucial aspect of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcription involved listening to the recordings multiple times and capturing not only the spoken words but also noting pauses, emphasis, and any emotional nuances that could enrich the analysis. To maintain confidentiality, any identifying information mentioned during the interviews was anonymised during transcription. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names, and references to specific individuals, or unique projects were generalised to prevent deductive disclosure.

The use of Microsoft Teams for data collection proved effective and efficient, without compromising the quality or depth of the data obtained. It facilitated a seamless transition between data collection and analysis phases, ensuring that the integrity and security of the data were upheld throughout the research process.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data, making it well-suited for exploring the complex issues surrounding teacher agency and curriculum change.

Thematic analysis offers flexibility and is not tied to a particular theoretical framework, allowing for an inductive approach where themes emerge from the data itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This aligns with the constructivist underpinnings of the study, which emphasise the subjective meanings constructed by individuals.

In addition to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for reflexive thematic analysis, this study employed an In Vivo coding approach during the initial phases of analysis. In Vivo coding prioritises the participants' own language, capturing their authentic voices by extracting exact words or short phrases directly from interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2015). This method is particularly valuable for research that aims to foreground the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, aligning closely with the constructivist epistemology underpinning this research (Cresswell, 2022).

The data analysis proceeded through six distinct phases, each building upon the previous to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Initially, I immersed myself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts multiple times. This familiarisation process was essential for gaining a deep understanding of the content, context, and nuances within the data. During this

phase, I made notes and initial observations, capturing preliminary ideas and potential areas of interest that emerged from the participants' narratives.

I undertook the generation of initial codes. Systematic coding was conducted across the entire dataset, where I assigned codes to relevant segments of the data that related to the research questions. These codes represented basic units of meaning and helped in organising the data into manageable and meaningful categories. Coding allowed for the identification of patterns and facilitated the transition from raw data to structured analysis.

Key phrases that captured participants' meanings and experiences were identified and labelled as In Vivo codes. For instance, phrases such as "empowering," "pressure on outcomes," and "knowledge versus skills" were directly taken from participants' descriptions, providing a foundation for further rounds of analysis.

The next phase involved searching for themes by examining the coded data to identify patterns and potential themes. I looked for broader patterns of meaning that captured significant aspects of the data in relation to the research questions. This entailed grouping similar codes together and considering how they interconnected to form overarching themes that reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives. Categories developed from this refinement process included "conflicts in teachers' work," "relationships in school," "short and long-term aspirations," and "accountability."

Once potential themes were identified, I moved on to reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved a thorough examination of each theme to check for internal coherence and consistency, as well as distinctiveness between themes. I revisited the original data to verify that the

themes were grounded in the participants' accounts and that they effectively captured the essence of the data. Some themes were modified, merged with others, or discarded based on their relevance and the strength of the supporting data.

Defining and naming the themes was the subsequent step, where I established the scope and focus of each theme. Clear and descriptive names were assigned to encapsulate the essence of each theme, providing clarity and facilitating understanding. This process involved articulating what each theme represented and how it related to the research questions and the overall narrative of the study. This process of iterative analysis led to a final set of focused themes: "lack of clarity in official documentation," "assessment constraints," "open-mindedness," "generating ideas," "critical thinking," "challenging assumptions," "quality of work relationships," and "team communication."

The final phase of the analysis involved organising the themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. I selected illustrative extracts from the data to exemplify each theme, ensuring that the participants' voices were authentically represented. The analysis was situated within the context of existing literature, allowing for a critical examination of how the findings related to, supported, or challenged current understandings in the field. This comprehensive approach ensured that the findings were thoroughly grounded in the data and provided meaningful insights into the teachers' perceptions and experiences.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were meticulously employed throughout the research process. Reflexivity was a central component in maintaining rigour. I engaged in continuous reflection on my role as the researcher and the potential biases that could influence data collection,

analysis, and interpretation (Berger, 2015). By acknowledging my positionality as an insider researcher, I remained vigilant about how my experiences and perspectives might affect the study and took deliberate steps to mitigate any undue influence.

Transparency was also crucial in ensuring the integrity of the research. An audit trail was maintained, documenting all decisions made during the coding and theme development processes. Examples of the analytic memos I created during the coding process are available in the appendices of this study. This included records of how codes were assigned, how themes were identified and refined, and the rationale behind analytical choices. Such documentation enhances the transparency of the research process, allowing others to understand and, if necessary, scrutinise the pathways that led to the conclusions drawn (Nowell *et al*., 2017).

Additionally, peer debriefing played a significant role in reinforcing the trustworthiness of the analysis. Engaging in discussions with academic supervisors and peers provided opportunities to challenge and refine my interpretations. These dialogues allowed for alternative perspectives to be considered, helping to uncover any blind spots and strengthening the validity of the findings. Constructive feedback from colleagues contributed to a more robust and nuanced understanding of the data.

By integrating these strategies, the research upheld high standards of rigour. These measures collectively ensured that the analysis was conducted systematically, thoughtfully, and ethically, resulting in findings that are credible and valuable to the understanding of teacher agency and curriculum change within the educational setting.

Findings

4.1 Overview:

This chapter presents the findings of the study. The chapter aims to present and analyse the data that were collected. By communicating the key insights and themes that emerge from the analysis, this study will provide a rich, detailed understanding of teacher agency during this period of curriculum development. This chapter reveals two major findings: 1) risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency, influenced by emotional and relational factors, and 2) deliberation enhances teacher agency but is constrained by the quality of those same deliberative practices. These findings are explored through thematic subsections, beginning with i) lack of clarity in curriculum policy, ii) open-mindedness, iii) critical thinking, and iv) quality of work relationships among departments. The thematic subsections then move to i) assessment constraints, ii) generating ideas, iii) challenging assumptions, followed by iv) team communication and collaboration. The findings directly address the research questions asked at the beginning of the study. This chapter also sets the platform for the following discussion chapter and this study's contribution to knowledge.

1. Risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency in curriculum development

This finding emphasises that risk-taking is a fundamental expression of achieved agency in curriculum implementation. The experiences of teachers like Mal and Nat suggest that risk-taking allows teachers to embrace uncertainty and innovate in their teaching practices. This claim also stresses the impact emotional and relational challenges, including fear of failure and the potential for embarrassment, has on teachers' willingness to take risks. Em's experiences underscore the emotional

vulnerability associated with risk-taking and how trust in relationships are important in developing emotional safety for teachers.

2. Deliberation enhances teacher agency, but the quality of deliberation is limited

This finding positions deliberation as essential for enhancing teachers' agency and decision-making in curriculum development. Participation in deliberative activities increases teachers' confidence in defending and trying new methods. The experiences of Sam, Mal, and Nat highlight how professional development can support deliberative practice, leading to different approaches and risk-taking in the classroom. Secondly this claim argues that the quality of deliberation by teachers is limited and requires greater educational criticism and connoisseurship to improve deliberative practices, thereby enhancing the development of teacher agency, in this study's school and more widely across secondary schools in Wales.

Finding 1

4.2 Risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency in curriculum development

i. Lack of Clarity in Curriculum Policy

The introduction of the new curriculum for Wales was initially met with enthusiasm by the teachers in this study. They welcomed the opportunity to rethink educational practices and focus on holistic development through the four core purposes:

- Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives.
- Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work.
- Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.
- Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

However, as they engaged with the curriculum the lack of clear guidelines emerged as a significant challenge. This ambiguity led to confusion and uncertainty among teachers, making it difficult for them to deliberate effectively and make defensible decisions regarding curriculum implementation.

Gwin, a teacher who took the initiative to reorganise the Humanities Area of Learning Experience (AoLE), aimed to emphasise broader skills development across interdisciplinary subjects. She believed that integrating subjects would help develop the four core purposes more effectively. Gwin stated:

"The new curriculum is telling us that when pupils leave school, they need to be problem-solvers who can apply skills from a range of areas no matter the context. I don't want to get rid of any subject, but I don't think they should be taught in isolation either." – *Gwin*

However, this approach led to tensions with other teachers who felt that essential subject knowledge was being overlooked. Nat, another participant, expressed concern that the focus on interdisciplinary learning was causing pupils to miss out on important content:

"I was frustrated at times that pupils were missing out on really important knowledge. The curriculum is about developing the pupil to be ambitious, ethical, enterprising, and I felt that needed exciting, in-depth learning in a range of subjects." – *Nat*

The lack of clarity in the curriculum guidelines meant that teachers like Gwin and Nat had different interpretations of how to implement the curriculum effectively. This divergence in understanding created challenges at the middle leadership level, as decision-making became inconsistent and, at times, incompatible within the same school.

Subsidiarity, a principle intended to empower teachers by allowing decisions to be made at the most immediate level, appeared to function more as a management tool than as a means of fostering genuine autonomy. While the government's intention may be to decentralise decision-making to achieve policy goals that are tailored to local contexts, subsidiarity also provides an opportunity for government to pass responsibility for any failure to achieve those goals to those at the local level, in this case the teachers. This was felt by the participants as the teachers were left without clear direction on how much freedom they had to adapt the curriculum, leading to hesitation and a reliance on external documents for guidance.

Sam, reflecting on the school's leadership and their engagement with the new curriculum, felt that the lack of clarity was causing the curriculum to be sidelined:

"I don't think that the leadership's really, truly taken on board the new curriculum here yet, and I'm not really sure whether they'll see it's going to be important or the

relevance of it for a few years down the road… I've sort of felt that the new curriculum has definitely taken a backseat compared to everything else." – *Sam*

This sentiment underscores a disconnect between the intended policy of teacher empowerment and the reality within schools, where ambiguity leads to inaction. Gwin highlighted the broader issue of a lack of a fixed vision from the government, which further compounded the problem:

"Well, the issue is that there's no fixed vision from the government, so people struggle with that. I think there's a lot of debate between skills versus content, and I think people can't see the relationship between the two." – *Gwin*

The absence of a clear governmental directive left teachers and schools to interpret the curriculum on their own, often leading to confusion and inconsistent application. Fran found the lack of parameters particularly daunting, as it left her uncertain about how to proceed:

"[The new curriculum is] daunting because there are no limits. So, you've got the freedom, but how far do you go and what do you do? I'm finding it really quite nerve-wracking, so it's exciting but scary at the same time." – *Fran*

The ambiguity of the policy is shown to have a significant impact on teachers' deliberative practices, often leading to an over-reliance on policy documents rather than facilitating a collaborative and critical approach to curriculum planning. Gatley (2020) highlights that when curriculum policy lacks clarity, it places an undue burden on teachers to independently resolve ambiguities, which can hinder their ability to make decisions confidently and collaboratively.

Participants expressed that without a clear foundation for deliberative activities, discussions often defaulted to interpreting the policy document rather than engaging

in meaningful dialogue about the values and priorities they held as educators. Nat's experience describes this uncertainty:

"During curriculum working group meetings I felt we couldn't agree what we were aiming for other than the broad four purposes, but trying to apply that to our individual subjects certainly left me thinking how will this hang together in a way that makes sense?" – *Nat*

Nat indicates that while the four purposes offered broad goals, they did not provide sufficient guidance for teachers to determine a coherent curriculum structure within and across subjects, which affected the overall consistency of their planning.

Similarly, Gwin noted how attempts at interdisciplinary collaboration were undermined by conflicting priorities among departments. She observed:

"I had staff in my department who wanted to plan schemes of learning that had common themes with other AoLE's to give pupils that cross-curricular connection, but very quickly these became superficial connections because other departments didn't want to deviate from their critical subject knowledge." – *Gwin*

Without a shared understanding or clear direction, cross-curricular planning often became superficial, as departments were reluctant to compromise on their subject-specific content. The result was a fragmented approach that fell short of meaningful interdisciplinary integration.

Sam's perspective underscores the tension between initial vision-setting and practical implementation in curriculum meetings. She explained:

"The curriculum meetings started with wider conversations on the common goal or vision if you like, but we ended up just sharing brief feelings on it, one by one, and were no clearer afterwards than before. The curriculum documents are so vague no one is willing to change things too much from the status quo because you just know government will make a decision later down the line which undoes all that work." – *Sam*

This reflects a lack of confidence and initiative among teachers, driven by the vague nature of the policy documents and compounded by fears of future policy reversals.

The findings show that while teachers initially welcomed the new curriculum for Wales and its focus on holistic development through the four purposes, the lack of clarity in curriculum guidelines created significant challenges. This ambiguity led to divergent interpretations among teachers, inconsistent implementation within the school, and tensions between interdisciplinary collaboration and subject-specific priorities. Subsidiarity, intended to empower teachers, often functioned as a management tool, leaving teachers hesitant to take risks and overly reliant on policy documents. Participants expressed frustration over the absence of clear directives, which undermined confidence and limited meaningful deliberation. The vague nature of the policy also discouraged risk-taking, encouraging a cautious approach to curriculum development due to fears of potential policy reversals.

ii. Open-Mindedness

Open-mindedness is a critical disposition that enables teachers to consider new ideas, perspectives, and approaches. Dewey (2022) recognised open-mindedness as one of three key attributes to ensuring actions are grounded in thoughtful deliberation. It involves being receptive to alternative viewpoints, willing to question one's assumptions, and ready to adapt practices based on new information.

Taylor (2016) emphasises open-mindedness as a virtue essential for critical thinking and education. Teachers in this study valued open-mindedness as a way that empowers change in their educational settings.

Pat reflected on the importance of embracing new ideas:

"Sometimes I have to remind myself that we can't just dismiss out of hand new ideas. The more conversations we have as a department, the better we get at weighing new strategies on their own merits, even though they feel a bit different. You won't get anywhere if your first reaction is always a no." – *Pat*

Mal shared an example of applying techniques from other subjects, demonstrating open-mindedness in practice:

"I wanted to improve pupils' reading skills to help them with the numeracy-style problems. I spent time with Science, English, and Drama leads. The reading strategies used really helped, particularly the reading aloud as a class which I took from Drama. I shared it with my department, and while they were a bit unsure of using a Drama technique in Maths lessons, they were willing to try it." – *Mal*

By being open to methods from different disciplines, Mal was able to enhance her teaching and support her pupils' learning.

Teachers' attitudes towards new ideas and their adaptability vary. While some embrace change enthusiastically, others may feel hesitant due to fears of failure or accountability pressures.

Em expressed concerns about the risks associated with making changes:

"As a leader, I am accountable to the headteacher and my staff and pupils. That's a lot of pressure, and making changes is scary because if it doesn't work, it's your fault. I have to balance being open-minded with being cautious." – *Em*

Nat noted that sometimes external examples are not helpful, and adapting practices requires careful consideration:

"Sometimes seeing practice in another school doesn't help us in the way the senior team wants. Our pupils are different from theirs, and I actually think we can work out ways to deal with our own challenges more effectively. I'm happy to consider new ideas but also recognise when they might not fit our context." – *Nat*

Sam acknowledged an attachment to established practices but recognised the need to overcome it:

"I tend to fall back on the same few strategies because they have worked for me in the past. I do want to ensure I am open to new ideas, and I do evaluate where I could improve regularly. Coming up with new ideas that are effective isn't as simple as you think, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't try." – *Sam*

A supportive environment that encourages experimentation and values reflective practice promotes open-mindedness among teachers. Leadership plays a crucial role in modelling openness and providing reassurance that taking calculated risks is acceptable.

Pat emphasised the importance of departmental conversations:

"The more conversations we have as a department, the better we get at weighing new strategies on their own merits. Open dialogue helps us become more open-minded." – *Pat*

The findings show open-mindedness as a critical disposition that enables teachers to embrace new ideas, question assumptions, and adapt practices based on emerging evidence. Participants provided diverse perspectives on the role of open-

mindedness in their practices. While Pat highlighted its value in departmental discussions for evaluating new strategies, Mal demonstrated its application by integrating reading techniques from other disciplines despite initial scepticism from colleagues. However, challenges such as fear of failure, contextual differences, and attachment to established practices sometimes constrained openness. Em and Nat noted the tension between being open to new ideas and ensuring their suitability for specific contexts, while Sam acknowledged the need to balance reliance on proven methods with efforts to explore new approaches. Overall, a supportive environment and leadership that encourage experimentation and reflective practice were found to be important in cultivating open-mindedness among teachers. This discussion highlights that unexamined biases hinder effective deliberation by limiting teachers' openness to alternative strategies. Addressing these biases through structured dialogue and reflection can enhance the quality of curriculum decisions and support the achievement of agency.

iii. Critical Thinking

The findings show that critical thinking is key for teachers aiming to understand and enhance their sense of agency. It involves analysing information, evaluating evidence, and making reasoned judgments, all of which are essential when considering curriculum changes and implementing new practices.

Pat highlighted the importance of critical thinking in using research to inform decision-making:

"We use research more and more in school. Sometimes it is used as the justification for a change, which I don't like because, in my mind, we should start with the problem and use the research to help us ask the right questions. Being critical helps us evaluate whether the research is relevant and how it applies to our context." – *Pat*

Engaging with educational research allows teachers to ground their practices in evidence, enhancing the effectiveness of their interventions. Mal acknowledged the different levels of research and the need for critical evaluation:

"There are different levels of research. I use Twitter a lot, but I know that not everything on there is the best quality. When I need a starting point, I have used it to help find more relevant writing." – *Mal*

Gwin emphasised the power of using educational research to inform decision-making:

"Being able to use educational research to inform decision-making is so powerful. I have to adapt it to my context, but I have found it helps in the explaining phase to staff and is really helpful when thinking ahead to what data to collect and use in my evaluation process. My staff value that I'm not just taking information at face value but really considering its use and importance for us." – *Gwin*

Despite recognising the value of research, some teachers face challenges in understanding and applying research findings due to language barriers, accessibility issues, and a lack of confidence in interpreting evidence.

Fran expressed difficulties in engaging with research:

"There are a couple of things that put me off using research. The language is one, sometimes it feels so inaccessible. The main issue for me, though, is understanding what the evidence is saying. You can't just implement everything you come across and hope it works. I feel like there is a lot of potential for me to make improvements for my pupils, but I don't feel I understand the arguments well enough to try it." – *Fran*

This highlights the need for support in developing critical thinking skills, particularly in evaluating research literature. Teachers may benefit from training on how to interpret and assess the quality of evidence as well as apply findings to their practice.

Em noted the importance of asking critical questions during reflective practice:

"We look for areas to improve in our teaching all the time. Learning walks, lesson observations, pupil surveys, looking at pupils' books, this goes on all the time, and the important part is we are asking what is the impact? How do we know? I suppose consciously trying to ask questions that help us reflect on our practice." – *Em*

Sam added that humility and self-awareness are essential components of critical thinking:

"I think a good teacher has to have the humility and the self-awareness to reflect on their practice, and actually, the more you do it, the easier it gets." – *Sam*

To enhance critical thinking skills among teachers, professional development focused on research literacy, data analysis, and reflective practice is needed. Collaborative discussions and peer support can also foster critical engagement with ideas.

Pat suggested that starting with practical problems can make research more accessible:

"We should start with the problem and use the research to help us ask the right questions. We've got to make the research more relevant and easier to engage with." – *Pat*

Creating opportunities for teachers to discuss research findings and share experiences can build confidence and improve their ability to apply evidence to their practice.

The quality of deliberation among the participant teachers varies significantly, influenced by the degree to which they engage critically with research and evidence to inform their decisions. The findings show that not all teachers experience the same level of critical engagement or confidence when evaluating research, which in turn affects the quality of deliberative discussions and the strength of decision-making in curriculum planning.

One aspect of this variance in deliberative quality lies in teachers' attitudes toward research itself. While some teachers, like Pat, see research as a valuable resource for framing problems and generating questions relevant to their context, others like Fran perceive it as a top-down directive that may lack contextual relevance:

"Educational research is a new way of saying 'do as you're told'. In my experience the research is presented as gospel and we have to fit it in somehow to what we already do. In my department, it feels like we bolt it on to what we do already, because we know what we do works." - *Fran*

The findings show that for deliberation to be productive, teachers require a school culture that values their professional experiences and insights, not merely an adherence to external evidence. Gwin's view reflects this sentiment:

"Discussions on how useful research might be to us are sometimes useful, but I want to see more opportunities for us to do our own research to see what actually will benefit our pupils. The decisions should be more focused on what we have found, rather than on what others have found." – *Gwin*

Fran's perception of educational research as top-down highlights the tension between externally imposed evidence and professional autonomy. Gwin's desire for more localised, teacher-led research reflects the value she places on her own ability to engage critically with educational research.

The findings also show that while some teachers, like Pat, advocate for starting with a problem and then seeking research to explore possible solutions, others feel constrained by a lack of training or resources to engage fully with research literature. Fran raises concerns relating to accessibility of research and the impact she feels that has on implementation:

"The language is one, sometimes it feels so inaccessible. The main issue for me, though, is understanding what the evidence is saying. You can't just implement everything you come across and hope it works" – *Fran*

The findings show that critical thinking is an important skill for teachers seeking to understand and enhance their agency. Teachers were able to analyse information, evaluate evidence, and make reasoned judgments. Participants in the study highlight the value of engaging with research to inform their practices and support curriculum decisions. Pat highlighted the importance of framing problems first, using research to ask relevant questions, while Mal acknowledged the need to critically evaluate the quality of resources, including those sourced informally. Gwin demonstrated how research-informed decision-making can empower teachers to align practices with both current contexts and future evaluations. However, challenges such as inaccessible language, limited training, and a lack of confidence

in interpreting evidence were significant barriers, as noted by Fran, who expressed frustration with understanding and applying research findings.

The findings also show variability in how teachers approach critical thinking. Em and Sam described the importance of reflective questioning and self-awareness in evaluating practice, while Fran and Gwin highlighted tensions between external evidence and professional autonomy.

iv. Quality of Work Relationships Among Departments

The findings show that the quality of relationships among teachers and departments influences their achievement of agency and their confidence to implement meaningful changes. Strong professional relationships, marked by trust, respect, and open communication, facilitate collaboration and collective problem-solving, essential elements in achieving agency.

Mal describes the supportive and respectful nature of her relationships with other department leaders, underscoring the importance of mutual understanding and shared motivations:

"There is an understanding that we are all here for the right reasons. We want to help the pupils, and we want to work in a place where we feel supported and motivated. I feel like we have that here." – *Mal*

These supportive relationships create an environment in which teachers feel valued and confident to share ideas which contribute meaningfully to shared goals. Relationships of mutual respect, like those described by Mal, enable teachers to see their roles within a broader collective effort, enhancing their confidence in their professional decisions.

Professional relationships also provide a buffer against the structural and material constraints teachers face, as Nat shared, noting the balance between respect from peers and scrutiny from leadership:

"I definitely feel respected and valued by my team and other department heads. Sometimes from senior leaders, I feel more challenged to justify my decisions, which is fine, I get that, but I wouldn't have felt as able to make curriculum changes if it was just me and my line manager doing it." – *Nat*

Reflective practice alongside quality relationships, further enhances the teachers' ability to evaluate and adapt their approaches. Em's emphasis on continuous reflection as a necessary aspect of improvement underscores the value of accepting that no one individual has all the solutions, but by collaborating with others one can make defensible choices towards a shared purpose:

"I think that desire to improve and continually reflect on what I do in the classroom and as a leader is something I have. The last person you want is someone who has a closed mindset, thinks they know it all already, and won't reflect on what doesn't work for them." – *Em*

The need for constant reflection, noted by both Em and Gwin, reflects the practical-evaluative dimension of agency where teachers assess their actions in real-time and adjust accordingly. Biesta and Tedder (2007) state that this evaluative process is strengthened when teachers are supported in being given settings that are collaborative or reflective. Gwin echoed this, framing her perfectionism as a driver for constant improvement:

"At heart I am a bit of a perfectionist, I think most teachers are, actually. We are never totally happy with the lesson we delivered or the way we dealt with poor behaviour." – *Gwin*

These reflective practices, supported by a culture of collaboration, foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to question and improve their teaching.

The relational aspect of agency is particularly evident when collaborative practices require teachers to rely on each other, as Mal's experience working with Fran demonstrates:

"I was unsure whether we would get the buy-in for this, it was different from anything else we had talked about. [Fran] had a contact in the primary school and said she would ask for me." – *Mal*

Mal's success in implementing her idea was contingent on Fran's support, exemplifying that action requires collective engagement and cannot be achieved in isolation. By adapting the project to include other departments, Fran not only expanded Mal's initial idea but also showed how collaborative relationships facilitate change.

When competition and isolation enter the school culture however, it limits the achievement of agency and reduces risk-taking. Nat noted how uncertainty and fear of failure can prevent teachers from embracing new approaches:

"We had this great idea for integrating more technology into our lessons, but the fear of getting it wrong with such a high-cost change was a major barrier." – *Nat*

Similarly, Em described how unspoken competition among department heads reduces creativity and leads to safe tried and tested practices:

"There's this unspoken competition among department heads. No one wants to be the one whose results are down, so we end up sticking to what's safe." – *Em*

The findings also show that aligning new initiatives with the school's existing culture enhances acceptance and support for change. Em noted that when new ideas resonate with the school's values, staff are more receptive:

"When new ideas fit with what we already value as a school, everyone seems more on board." – *Em*

Similarly, Gwin described how a project-based learning initiative was embraced because it aligned with the school's values on pupil-centred learning:

"We introduced a new project-based learning activity, and because it aligned with our focus on pupil-centred learning, it was well received." – *Gwin*

When initiatives are perceived as a continuation of the school's values, they strengthen a shared sense of purpose and reinforce the achievement of agency, as described by Priestley and Biesta (2013). When changes conflict with established practices they may encounter resistance as Fran's experience introducing a more rigid scheme for language learning suggests:

"We tried to introduce a more rigid scheme of learning for grammar in lessons, but it clashed with our ideas on topic or thematic learning." – *Fran*

The positive work relationships among teachers in this study and their departments support the achievement of agency, as they enable open dialogue, mutual support, and a shared purpose. This demonstrates the importance of relational contexts in supporting the achievement of teacher agency and curriculum change.

The findings show that the quality of professional relationships among teachers and departments influences their willingness to take risks and implement curriculum changes. Strong relationships, characterised by trust, respect, and open communication, promote collaboration, reflective practice, and collective problem-solving. Teachers highlight that supportive environments enable them to share ideas

and engage confidently in decision-making, as mutual respect and shared motivations strengthen their sense of purpose.

However, competitive dynamics and fear of failure were noted as barriers, limiting risk-taking and creativity. Collaborative relationships also serve as a buffer against external pressures, with participants highlighting the value of collective engagement in navigating structural and material constraints. Aligning initiatives with existing school values was found to enhance acceptance and support, reinforcing shared goals and reducing resistance to change. Conversely, when initiatives conflicted with established practices, they encountered hesitation and resistance.

Finding 2

4.3 Deliberation enhances teacher agency, but the quality of deliberation is limited

i. Assessment Constraints

Another significant factor limiting teachers' deliberation and sense of agency was the prevailing assessment regime in Wales. The focus on standardised testing, particularly the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams at the end of Year 11 (age 16), placed considerable pressure on teachers to prioritise exam preparation over innovative teaching methods or curriculum changes.

Pat highlighted the conflict between the aspirations of the new curriculum and the realities of assessment requirements.

"We are developing the pupil, the four purposes, What Matters Statements, Progression Steps, all of it, and then we have GCSEs at the end of Year 11. It doesn't matter how you start in Year 7 we have to make sure pupils are prepared to do their best in that exam." – *Pat*

Em echoed this sentiment, noting that while there was flexibility in the earlier years, the curriculum became constrained as pupils approached exams:

"It forces you to adapt your teaching. Key Stage 3 [ages 11 to 14] is great, we can do what we want. Key Stage 4 [ages 14 to 16], you cover what's in the test." – *Em*

Teachers described how the focus on GCSEs affected their perception of assessment in the classroom, creating a tension between formative assessment aimed at learning and summative assessment focused on outcomes. Fran discussed how embracing formative assessments required a shift in mindset:

"We saw the importance of formative assessments instead of tests when we were working out how the curriculum would work. I had to change my mindset because, in

French, you have to test vocab, verbs, all sorts. I thought about what will help the pupils progress rather than solely focused on getting a C grade." – *Fran*

Despite recognising the benefits of formative assessments, the pressure to prepare pupils for standardised tests remained a significant constraint. Em pointed out that both pupils and parents expected traditional assessments:

"You have to give pupils exam experience, so they get assessed using exam questions, and grades are used to give them an idea of where they are. It is what the pupils want as well as the parents." – *Em*

This expectation reinforced the emphasis on summative assessments, limiting teachers' ability to focus on more innovative or pupil-centred approaches that the new curriculum aimed to promote. As Sam suggests:

"I think they [teachers] lack confidence down to the accountability agenda. I think most are very good decision-makers, but as soon as you make a decision which you're not sure might be supported, then you have the accountability agenda coming back at you." – *Sam*

This environment discouraged teachers from taking risks or implementing changes that might deviate from established practices, even if they believed such changes could benefit their pupils. The fear of negative evaluations or repercussions limited their sense of agency.

Mal expressed difficulty in planning ahead due to uncertainties about future assessments:

"I'd like some more guidance to know that I could keep an element of it [Key Stage 3 new curriculum planning] with Years 10 and 11 so we don't have to go more exam-focused. It's limiting because we're not setting the assessment. Because we don't know what these assessments look like ultimately, as they get closer to the formal assessments, we are going to have to adapt to that more, so it's difficult to plan ahead." – *Mal*

The lack of information about future assessment formats made it challenging for teachers to design learning experiences that aligned with both the new curriculum's goals and the requirements of standardised tests. This uncertainty further limited their ability to deliberate and implement changes confidently.

Fran highlighted the reluctance of schools to make significant changes without clarity on assessments:

"We're measured by exam success, and we can't change the whole curriculum to a completely different way of learning if we don't know what the final exams are. So headteachers are right [to be reluctant to change] because they're held accountable to the final exam grades. Schools are going to hold back a lot until we know what the final assessments are, and that will push the curriculum forward as well. If there are proper changes to GCSEs and the way they're assessed and everything else, that will develop schools' capacity to improve and go with the curriculum." – *Fran*

The high-stakes nature of standardised testing and accountability measures created a culture of caution, where teachers felt constrained in their ability to innovate or deviate from traditional methods. This environment limited their capacity to engage in meaningful deliberation about curriculum changes.

Sam described the pressure from senior management regarding pupil outcomes:

"There is a complete focus on off-target pupils by senior management. There's a worry that Estyn [the school inspectorate] is coming." – *Sam*

"You can't have any conversation about possible changes or things you'd like to do without being able to show that exam results won't suffer first." – *Sam*

This pressure led to a narrowing of teachers' aspirations for experiences in the future. The anticipation of inspections and the emphasis on measurable outcomes further limited teachers' ability to deliberate and implement changes that might not directly contribute to exam success.

Teachers felt that without changes to the assessment system, meaningful curriculum reform was unattainable. Fran articulated this concern:

"If there are proper changes to GCSEs and the way they're assessed and everything else, that will develop schools' capacity to improve and go with the curriculum." – *Fran*

Until such changes occur, teachers are likely to continue feeling constrained, with their sense of agency limited by external pressures.

The findings highlight that the prevailing assessment regime in Wales, particularly the emphasis on standardised testing such as GCSEs, significantly limits teachers' ability to deliberate and exercise agency in curriculum development. Teachers expressed that the pressure to prioritise exam preparation often conflicted with the aspirations of the new curriculum, which aims to promote holistic and pupil-centred learning. While some teachers embraced formative assessments as a means to support learning, the expectation from pupils, parents, and senior management for traditional, summative assessment approaches reinforced a cautious adherence to established practices. This culture of accountability and high-stakes testing discouraged risk-taking, leaving teachers constrained in their capacity to align learning experiences with the curriculum's broader goals. Additionally, uncertainty surrounding future assessment formats further compounded these challenges, as teachers hesitated to implement changes without clarity on how they would align with eventual testing requirements. This environment perpetuated a sense of cautious conservatism, limiting meaningful deliberation and impeding the potential for risk-taking in curriculum development.

ii. Generating Ideas

The findings show that generating innovative ideas is fundamental to effective teaching and curriculum implementation. Teachers who can think creatively and develop novel approaches are better equipped to design engaging and meaningful learning experiences for their pupils. The findings indicate that professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' ability to generate ideas.

Mal emphasised the importance of new ideas in education and how professional development can support this process:

"New ideas in education are crucial because it keeps teaching and learning fresh and engaging. Professional development opportunities allow us to explore these ideas, learn from others, and bring fresh perspectives into our classrooms." – *Mal*

Professional development provides teachers with exposure to new concepts, teaching strategies, and innovations from within and outside the field of education. By engaging in workshops, training sessions, and collaborative networks, teachers can broaden their horizons and draw inspiration for their practice.

Nat described how participating in professional development activities helped her department generate creative ideas:

"We started by throwing out every idea that came to mind, no matter how mad it seemed. From using virtual reality to explore ancient civilizations to creating a role-play game where pupils could live through historical events. One idea that really stood out was creating a mock archaeological dig right on the school grounds. This conversation led to refinements in the wider scheme of learning to incorporate not only history but the science and skills of archaeology." – *Nat*

This example suggests how professional development and collaborative brainstorming sessions can stimulate idea generation. By providing a safe space for

teachers to share and develop ideas without immediate judgment, schools can foster a culture of innovation.

An essential aspect of idea generation is the willingness to take risks and embrace ambiguity. The new curriculum's flexibility requires teachers to step out of their comfort zones and experiment with new approaches. Gwin highlighted the importance of thinking creatively and being open to new possibilities:

"Thinking outside the box empowers us [teachers] to continually refine our teaching and make lessons more engaging. It means being willing to try something new, even if it feels uncertain at first." – *Gwin*

However, not all teachers feel equally comfortable with risk-taking. Some express hesitation due to fears of failure or uncertainty about the outcomes. Sam acknowledged her tendency to rely on familiar strategies:

"I tend to fall back on the same few strategies because they have worked for me in the past. I think I am open to new ideas, and I do evaluate where I could improve regularly but coming up with new ideas that are effective isn't as simple as you think, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't try." – *Sam*

The willingness to embrace ambiguity is influenced by various factors, including individual dispositions and support from leadership. Teachers who feel supported and encouraged by their peers and leaders are more likely to take risks and explore ideas.

Despite recognising the importance of generating new ideas, some teachers face challenges in this area. Fran expressed frustration and pressure to constantly "reinvent the wheel":

"I feel frustrated and under pressure to constantly reinvent the wheel. There's an expectation to always come up with something new, but it's not easy, especially when you're juggling so many responsibilities." – *Fran*

This pressure can stem from external expectations, time constraints, and a lack of resources. Fran expresses a feeling of being overwhelmed by the demands of her role, leaving little room for creative thinking. Em expressed concern about needing assistance to make effective changes:

"There is nothing wrong with my ideas and having the freedom to adapt schemes of learning and other things is great, but I'm going to need a bit of help if these changes are going to be any good. I can't do it all on my own." – *Em*

Teachers who lack confidence in their creative abilities or feel unsupported may struggle to generate innovative ideas. To enhance idea generation, schools can provide targeted support through professional development that prioritises collaborative planning time, and greater access to resources. Sam noted the importance of professional development in thinking "bigger" about curriculum possibilities:

"Professional development is key for me. I want to think bigger about what we could do with the curriculum, and we need to take risks, but we can't ignore that we have a responsibility to the pupils in front of us. The main thing that helps me feel more confident in trying new things is talking ideas through with colleagues, basically more collaboration." – *Sam*

Mal added that exposure to ideas from outside the field of education can stimulate creativity:

"I'm comfortable when it comes to making changes, we set clear objectives, talk about desired outcomes, and no one is better at measuring and evaluating than a teacher! Surely though, the difference is going to be having a broader range of ideas to draw from? Engaging with ideas from other fields can really inspire us." – *Mal*

Nat provided an example of how expertise outside traditional education improved idea generation:

"A doctor friend spoke to me about motivational interviewing. It sounded amazing, particularly for dealing with confrontation in the classroom. I read the book and went on a course, brought back the main principles, and applied it. I'm not perfect with it, but it works so well. I can now design lessons which give far more independence to the pupil because the behavioural problems they would usually bring are massively reduced." – *Nat*

By seeking inspiration from diverse sources and engaging in interdisciplinary learning, teachers can enrich their idea generation processes.

By starting department meetings with data-driven insights, Mal creates a foundation for decisions that can be empirically justified:

"We use department meetings to talk about areas to improve and think of strategies that might help us. I always start with some data to make sure the decisions we make can be backed up. A good example is when [one teacher in the department] changed the way they gave feedback after asking the pupils what worked. I wanted us all to adopt a similar strategy and used the improved tracking data of [the initial teacher] to convince the staff who were reluctant that it would work." – *Mal*

Pat shared an experience of a productive training day, where focused discussions and a skilled facilitator helped teachers stay aligned with the day's main goals:

"The best inset day [training day] I've been on was one where we had workshops on specific teaching ideas. We discussed what worked in different contexts, listened to each other, and the group leader was really effective at keeping the main goal in mind so we didn't go down too many rabbit holes. I left with strategies I wanted to use and confident other staff would be doing the same." – *Pat*

The findings show that generating innovative ideas is vital for effective teaching and curriculum implementation, with professional development playing a key role in supporting creativity. Teachers who engage in collaborative workshops, training sessions, and interdisciplinary exchanges expand their ability to develop novel strategies for engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Mal suggested the importance of professional development in exploring new ideas and maintaining

fresh teaching practices, while Nat described how collaborative brainstorming led her team to create cross-disciplinary projects like a mock archaeological dig. However, the willingness to embrace new ideas is influenced by teachers' comfort with risk-taking, support from leadership, and access to resources. While some, like Gwin, highlighted the empowering potential of creative thinking, others, such as Fran, expressed frustration over the pressure to constantly innovate. Teachers also acknowledged that external expertise, as demonstrated by Nat's integration of motivational interviewing techniques from healthcare, can lead to completely new approaches. Despite these successes, challenges such as time constraints, external expectations, and lack of confidence can hinder risk-taking as an expression of agency in curriculum development.

iii. Challenging Assumptions

Challenging assumptions enables teachers to reflect on existing practices, identify areas for improvement, and implement meaningful changes. By questioning traditional methods, teachers can ensure that their approaches remain relevant and effective in meeting pupils' needs.

Mal observed how discussions about the new curriculum prompted teachers to challenge their assumptions:

"Before we started work on what the new curriculum would mean for us, we rarely had conversations on what we should be teaching our pupils. Now it's how all conversations start. We're questioning why we do things a certain way and whether it's still the best approach." – *Mal*

Sam found that challenging her team's assumptions led to evidence-based improvements:

"Challenging my team to think about whether constant tests were the best way to make progress forced me to look at what the research was saying. Evidence on feedback cycles and memory building in schools gave me a way to convince my team to try something different." – *Sam*

By engaging with research and reflecting on their practices, teachers can identify more effective strategies.

Challenging assumptions enhances teachers' adaptability and resilience by encouraging continuous learning and responsiveness to change. Nat noted an increase in the use of research to explain changes during head of department meetings:

"Before any change at department level now, we tend to share what the wider research has to say on the topic. Usually, we get a spread of for and against presented to us. We always try to trial things in the department before implementing

anything permanently, but by looking at the research first, you feel like you're going to have a greater impact on the pupils." – *Nat*

This approach promotes a culture of enquiry and evidence-based practice, enabling teachers to adapt more effectively to new challenges. However, the main focus was on challenging teacher practices inside the classroom, with broader assumptions about the purpose of education discussed less frequently.

Not all teachers feel comfortable challenging assumptions, particularly if it involves questioning long-standing traditions or confronting established norms. Fear of conflict, resistance from colleagues, or a lack of confidence can stifle the desire to challenge assumptions.

Em highlighted potential resistance:

"Introducing new ideas can sometimes be met with scepticism. If people are set in their ways, challenging assumptions can feel like an uphill battle. It requires persistence." – *Em*

Sam recognised the need to approach such conversations thoughtfully:

"It's important to create a safe space where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. It isn't about criticising others but about collectively finding better ways to support our pupils." – *Sam*

Supporting teachers in challenging assumptions requires fostering open dialogue and encouraging reflective practice. Leadership can model this behaviour by inviting feedback, being receptive to new ideas, and demonstrating a willingness to question their own practices.

Mal emphasised the importance of starting conversations about core teaching questions:

"Now it’s how all conversations start. We're asking, 'What *should* we be teaching our pupils?' This shift in focus encourages everyone to think critically about our goals and methods." – *Mal*

By normalising the practice of questioning and reflecting, the participants are empowered to challenge assumptions and drive meaningful change.

As Mal stated:

“Before we started work on what the new curriculum would mean for us, we rarely had conversations on what we should be teaching our pupils.” – *Mal*

The findings show that challenging assumptions is a critical practice that empowers teachers to reflect on their methods, adapt to new challenges, and implement meaningful changes. Teachers like Mal highlighted how the introduction of the new curriculum shifted conversations toward core questions about teaching goals, prompting critical reflection on traditional practices. Sam noted that questioning assumptions led her team to adopt evidence-based improvements, such as rethinking the role of frequent testing in pupil progress. Engaging with research and fostering a culture of enquiry has enabled teachers to trial and refine practices with a greater focus on pupil impact. However, broader assumptions about the purpose of education were less frequently challenged, with discussions often limited to classroom practices. As Em observed resistance to change, fear of conflict, and a lack of confidence can inhibit teachers from questioning entrenched norms. To support this process, leadership plays a vital role in fostering open dialogue and modelling reflective practices which create a safe environment for teachers to collectively explore better approaches to teaching. Normalising critical enquiry and reflective conversations empowers teachers to question their assumptions and drive meaningful change.

iv. Team Communication and Collaboration

Effective team communication and collaboration are essential for teachers to navigate curriculum changes and implement new practices successfully. By working together, teachers can share ideas, provide feedback, and support one another in overcoming challenges. Collaborative deliberation allows teachers to pool their expertise, consider diverse perspectives, and develop cohesive strategies that align with the school's goals and the needs of their pupils.

Mal emphasised the collaborative nature of the new curriculum and the opportunities it presents for cross-departmental work:

"When I read through the [curriculum] guidance, it is very collaborative, and this is something that in my current school I don't feel like we collaborate across the curriculum as much as we could. The opportunity to work with other departments, so other heads of faculty, learning from them on joint projects, that sort of thing. It's something that's really appealing to me." – *Mal*

By engaging in collaborative projects, teachers can break down silos between departments, fostering a more integrated and holistic approach to education. This collaboration enhances their ability to design interdisciplinary learning experiences that align with the new curriculum's emphasis on the four core purposes.

Em expressed enthusiasm about sharing her personal views and beliefs as part of the implementation process:

"I believe my role has a massive impact on the pupils' lives, and I want to do my best to make sure we are teaching these pupils in a way that gives them the best chance in life. I do this in my classroom now, so I am excited by the chance to talk about doing this at a whole-school level." – *Em*

By participating in collaborative discussions at the whole-school level, Em feels empowered to contribute her insights and help shape the educational experience for all pupils. This involvement enhances her sense of agency and commitment to the school's mission.

Fran highlighted the importance of being given time to engage in collaborative conversations about the curriculum:

"It's important to be given time to talk about what we think the curriculum should look like. My vision will probably adapt as more conversations I have. Collaborating with colleagues helps me refine my ideas and consider different perspectives." – *Fran*

These collaborative dialogues allow teachers to align their visions, address concerns, and develop a shared understanding of the curriculum's goals and implementation strategies.

Pat emphasised the need for inclusive collaboration where all voices are heard and valued:

"It’s all well and good having meetings together, but everybody needs to be listened to. There are a lot of different opinions flying around about the new curriculum, it would be a shame if the loudest voices didn’t give everyone a chance to be heard." – *Pat*

Inclusive collaboration ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, enriching the deliberation process. By actively listening to one another, teachers can build mutual respect and trust, which are essential for effective teamwork and collective decision-making.

Gwin explained how team communication leads to meaningful changes:

"The biggest reason why I think collaborating is the best way to make changes is that we don’t just agree with everything anyone says, we challenge each other. This

constructive dialogue helps us come up with the best solutions for our pupils." – *Gwin*

By engaging in critical discussions and challenging one another's assumptions, teachers can enhance the quality of their decisions and develop more effective strategies.

Mal added:

"Sometimes I don't know how strongly I feel about something until I get a chance to justify why when I'm asked by a colleague. I also sometimes can only come to a decision I feel happy with once I've heard others in a meeting argue their points of view. The changes we're going to make to our curriculum have to stand up to our own scrutiny as a team if we've got any chance of making the case to pupils, parents, governors, etc." – *Mal*

Collaborative deliberation enables teachers to articulate and refine their positions, increasing their confidence in the decisions made. This collective scrutiny strengthens the rationale behind changes and prepares teachers to communicate and justify these changes to stakeholders.

Em described how collaboration fosters a collective sense of security and support:

"There's respect for what they [her colleagues] do, and that means any new ideas get the space they need to be discussed and tried. We have each other's backs in that sense." – *Em*

This supportive environment encourages teachers to take risks and innovate, knowing that their colleagues are there to support and assist them.

Sam emphasised the importance of being on the same page as a department and whole school:

"The changes we have to make with the new curriculum make being on the same page as a department and whole school vital, really. I feel lucky that I have

colleagues who are incredibly supportive, they’re generous with any resources they have or new ideas they are trying out." – *Sam*

Effective team communication and collaboration were found to be important for navigating curriculum changes and implementing new practices. Teachers who collaborate can share ideas, provide constructive feedback, and support one another in addressing challenges. Mal highlighted the value of cross-departmental collaboration, highlighting its potential to create interdisciplinary learning experiences aligned with the curriculum's goals. Fran and Pat underscored the importance of inclusive discussions, where time is allocated for teachers to refine their visions and all voices are respected and valued. Collaborative deliberation also enhances the quality of decisions, as noted by Gwin, who stressed the importance of constructive dialogue and challenging assumptions to arrive at the best solutions for pupils. This process builds confidence and allows teachers, as Mal stated, to justify decisions and communicate them effectively to stakeholders. Furthermore, collaboration fosters a supportive environment, as Em observed, where mutual respect enables innovation and risk-taking. Sam reiterated the necessity of alignment within departments and across the school, crediting supportive colleagues for their generosity in sharing resources and ideas. Together, these practices strengthen teachers’ sense of agency and their ability to implement meaningful curriculum development.

Discussion

5.1 Risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency in curriculum development

i. Lack of Clarity in Curriculum Policy

The findings suggest that the absence of a clear, collaborative starting point for deliberation led teachers to rely heavily on policy documents, rather than engaging in an open exploration of what they valued in their teaching. This reliance, as Walker (1971) argues, detracts from the deliberative process's potential to foster critical, context-responsive decision-making. Instead of encouraging teachers to exercise their professional judgment and shape the curriculum based on their unique contexts, the ambiguity of the policy perpetuated a sense of uncertainty resulting in a cautious often conservative approach to curriculum development. Consequently, the intended flexibility of the curriculum reform – designed to empower teachers – was hindered by a lack of clear direction and support. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) note, agency involves the capacity to critically shape one's responsiveness to problematic situations. In this case, the lack of clear guidance inhibited teachers' ability to respond effectively to the challenges of curriculum implementation. For example, Sam was constrained by uncertainty and felt unable to exercise her professional judgment confidently. Subsidiarity as a principle for teacher empowerment, while theoretically aligned with Walker's (1971) model of context-responsive decision-making, has in practice created a void in guidance. This has shifted the focus from collaborative deliberation to an over-reliance on policy documents, undermining teachers' ability to make defensible, contextually justified decisions. Building on Schwab's (2013; 1973; 1969) theoretical foundation, Decker Walker's (1971) naturalistic model of curriculum development offers a practical, context-driven approach that highlights adaptability and evidence-based decision-

making. Deliberation is the key process by which agency can be understood to be achieved. Previous practices of curriculum development can be sustained but also change when the activated accumulated patterns of thought and actions from the past (iterational), that are orientated towards visions of future possibilities (projective), are incorporated into defensible judgements in the present while engaging with and through the cultural, structural and material environment (practical-evaluative). Gwin's attempt to integrate broader skills development across interdisciplinary subjects demonstrates the projective dimension of agency, as she reimagines traditional subject boundaries in light of the four core purposes. However, the tension with colleagues over subject knowledge highlights the need for a platform where shared values can be articulated to align different perspectives. Nat's concern about the loss of essential subject knowledge shows how the iterational dimension of agency, rooted in accumulated patterns of thought and practice, can conflict with the broader aspirations of the projective dimension. The divergent interpretations of curriculum guidelines among teachers like Gwin and Nat reflect Walker's (1971) recognition of the importance of a clear, collaborative platform to ground deliberation. For example, Nat's reflection on the challenges of integrating broader curricular goals, where she noted, "we couldn't agree on what we were aiming for", highlights the need for clearer collaborative platforms in deliberation. Without this foundation, teachers are left to navigate ambiguities independently, leading to inconsistent and fragmented curriculum planning, as shown by the superficial cross-curricular connections noted by Gwin. Deliberation can be understood as an iterative and flexible process where educators critically evaluate multiple alternatives to make informed, contextually justified decisions (Walker 1971). Walker's model aligns with Schwab's (1969) emphasis on

deliberation, advocating for critical discussions, multiple perspectives, and responsiveness to real-world classroom conditions. Deliberation seeks to capture the essence of how curriculum development is practiced in reality, rather than adhering strictly to theoretical or prescriptive frameworks (Walker, 1971). This dynamic, reflective approach ensures that curriculum evolves to meet the needs of learners and teachers while negotiating the wider social contexts – the milieu.

ii. Open-mindedness

By fostering a culture of collaboration and trust, teachers feel more comfortable exploring new ideas and adapting their practices. However, while many teachers in this study expressed openness to new ideas, the deliberative process was often hindered by unexamined biases, which impacted the quality and depth of discussions around curriculum development. Walker (1971) stresses the importance of open-mindedness in curriculum deliberation, suggesting that it reduces personal biases and fosters collaboration by encouraging acceptance of diverse perspectives. Yet, when teachers hold unacknowledged preferences or biases, these can inadvertently shape their decision-making and diminish the effectiveness of deliberation.

Walker's naturalistic model of curriculum development (1971) offers a context-driven alternative to classical curriculum models. The model is built on three elements: the platform, deliberation, and design. The platform represents the foundational beliefs, values, and assumptions that curriculum developers bring to the process, integrating an understanding of current educational realities with aspirations for future possibilities. Nat's critique of external best practices mirrors Walker's (1971) need

for adaptability in deliberation. Her selective openness to external ideas underscores the tension between the platform's integration of foundational beliefs and the need to incorporate diverse perspectives into decision-making. Deliberation is described as an iterative and flexible process, where educators critically engage with multiple perspectives, generating and evaluating alternatives to make informed, contextually justified decisions. This dynamic process aligns with Schwab's (1969) emphasis on adaptability and defensibility, focusing on real-world conditions rather than prescriptive adherence to theoretical objectives. Pat's stress on open dialogue within her department underscores the importance of a supportive environment, as Walker (1971) identifies collaboration and trust as critical to reducing biases and enhancing deliberation. Deliberation begins by identifying decision points, generating alternatives, and evaluating each option by weighing arguments for and against it. Teachers are required to justify their choices using accepted principles and assumptions, ensuring decisions are defensible. When information is insufficient, additional data is sought to support evidence-based decision-making (Walker, 1971).

The influence of unexamined biases is evident in teachers' reliance on established practices. Sam, for example, acknowledged the importance of new ideas but revealed an implicit bias toward familiar strategies:

"I tend to fall back on the same few strategies because they have worked for me in the past." – *Sam*

While Sam's approach reflects some openness to new ideas, her attachment to familiar methods limits her ability to fully consider alternative strategies. Walker (1971) suggests that open-mindedness involves not only considering new options

but also actively questioning one's assumptions and habits. Without interrogating the potential limitations of established practices, opportunities for innovation may be missed.

Deliberation operates within the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, which is concerned with teachers' choices and actions when immersed in a collectively organised social context (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This dimension involves interpreting and navigating temporary situations by applying knowledge, principles, and values from the iterational and projective dimensions (Priestley *et al.,* 2015). However, accountability pressures can undermine this process. Em's experience reflects these constraints:

"Making changes is scary because if it doesn't work, it's your fault." – *Em*

Em's cautious stance, rooted in concerns about responsibility and risk, reveals an environment where the emotional burden of risk-taking rests entirely on individual teachers. According to Walker (1971), open-mindedness requires flexibility and a willingness to explore new options, but Em's aversion to risk constrains her ability to consider a broader range of alternatives during deliberations. Em's cautious approach to making changes highlights how accountability pressures can constrain the practical-evaluative dimension of agency described by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Walker (1971) suggests that for deliberation to be truly flexible, the emotional burden of risk must be shared, a condition absent in Em's context.

Biases also surfaced in Nat's reflections on external best practices:

"Sometimes seeing practice in another school doesn't help us in the way the senior team wants." – *Nat*

While Nat frames this as an open-minded critique, her preference for locally tailored practices may overshadow the potential benefits of external ideas. Walker's (1971) analysis underscores that effective deliberation requires the flexibility to adapt diverse inputs. However, Nat's selective openness suggests a bias that could prevent her from fully embracing valuable perspectives from outside her immediate context.

For open-mindedness to genuinely enhance deliberation, teachers must actively work to recognise and reduce biases, approaching decisions with greater flexibility and acceptance of alternative viewpoints. While the participants in this study demonstrated a willingness to consider new ideas, their deliberative practices were often constrained by an unacknowledged tendency to favour familiar approaches. This bias is further compounded by an educational culture that places the burden of risk-taking solely on individual teachers. Walker's model highlights the need for collaborative and contextual approaches to deliberation, where risk is shared rather than borne individually.

Shifting the emphasis from individual to shared risk requires teachers to navigate the cultural and structural contexts of their schools effectively. By fostering environments that encourage collaboration, share accountability, and support reflective practice, teachers can engage more deeply with innovative strategies. Recognising and addressing these cultural barriers can enhance the quality of curriculum deliberation, ultimately enabling teachers to achieve agency in curriculum development.

iii. Critical thinking

Pat's approach advocating for starting with a problem and then seeking research to explore possible solutions, aligns with Walker's (1971) principle of beginning from defensible assumptions. This principle is critical for productive deliberation as it ensures decisions are grounded in issues that are both relevant and comprehensible to teachers. When teachers like Pat access research directly addressing their unique challenges, deliberation becomes more targeted, meaningful, and context-sensitive.

The platform in curriculum development, as outlined by Walker (1971), represents the foundational beliefs, values, and assumptions that curriculum developers bring to the process. This reflects the iterational dimension of teacher agency in Priestley *et al.* (2015) model, where individuals draw on accumulated patterns of thought and professional experiences to inform present actions. Gwin's emphasis on adapting research to her specific context mirrors Walker's (1971) importance on integrating current educational realities with aspirations for future possibilities. By using research to inform her decisions, Gwin illustrates how the platform bridges existing practices with aspirational goals, enabling contextually relevant and defensible judgments. Anchoring curriculum decisions in this historical and personal knowledge shapes teachers' perspectives and informs the deliberative process, providing a stable yet flexible foundation for decision-making.

Fran's concerns about the accessibility of research illustrate an ongoing barrier to deliberative quality. Walker (1971) notes that when individuals cannot clearly define issues or understand the parameters of available solutions, deliberation risks becoming fragmented or superficial. For teachers like Fran, the lack of clarity and

accessibility in research diminishes their ability to engage fully in discussions, weakening the overall quality of deliberation. This variation in deliberative quality reflects differing levels of critical engagement with research and evidence. While some teachers, like Pat, perceive research as an adaptable resource, others, like Fran, experience it as a prescriptive directive. Walker's (1971) model highlights the importance of a defensible foundation in deliberation, where teachers evaluate alternatives relevant to their specific contexts. Enhancing critical thinking and research literacy among teachers through professional development focused on research interpretation and contextual application could support a more robust and contextually informed deliberative process, broadening the professional experiences that inform present actions.

Fran's perception of educational research as top-down highlights a tension between externally imposed evidence and professional autonomy. Rather than empowering teachers, such research can act as a constraint, leading to what Walker (1971) might describe as a misaligned foundation for decision-making. Without a shared belief that research is adaptable to their specific contexts, teachers are less likely to engage effectively in critical deliberation.

Integrating an understanding of current educational realities with aspirations for future possibilities within the platform of curriculum development addresses the projective dimension of agency. This dimension involves envisioning and planning future goals by reimagining established practices in light of broader aspirations (Priestley *et al.,* 2015). The platform bridges existing realities with aspirational goals, ensuring decisions align with long-term educational visions and empower teachers to navigate uncertainties while remaining oriented toward future possibilities.

Gwin's call for more localised, teacher-led research aligns with Walker's (1971) emphasis on formulating and defending alternatives within deliberation. Valuing teachers' own findings allows deliberative processes to become more responsive to the actual needs of pupils and the specific conditions of each department. This approach fosters deeper critical engagement and strengthens teachers' sense of agency, bridging gaps between professional autonomy, evidence-based practices, and meaningful curriculum development. The variability in teachers' engagement with critical thinking and research reflects differing levels of deliberative quality, as Walker (1971) notes. While teachers like Pat and Mal actively interrogate evidence to inform practice, Fran's and Gwin's experiences highlight barriers that can constrain this process, such as accessibility and perceptions of prescriptiveness. The collective insights from the participants highlight the importance of professional development to build research literacy and reflective capacity. Walker's (1971) model underscores that equipping teachers with the tools to evaluate and adapt evidence supports a robust and contextually informed deliberative process, enhancing their achievement of agency in curriculum development.

iv. Quality of Work Relationships Among Departments

According to Biesta *et al.* (2015), these relationships shape teachers' beliefs about their roles and purposes in education, leading to a shared purpose to implementing change when these beliefs align. Competitive or weak relationships can limit teachers' achievement of agency by creating an environment of caution.

Mal describes the supportive and respectful nature of her relationships with other department leaders, underscoring the importance of mutual understanding and

shared motivations. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) suggest, agency is deeply contextual and relational, dependent on the quality of the social interactions within one's work environment.

Nat's experience reflects Priestley and Biesta's (2013) findings that supportive and facilitative relationships, especially with senior staff, enhance teacher confidence. Positive relationships create a safe space for teachers to take risks. Nat's mention of needing more than her direct line manager highlights how essential supportive networks are to developing and maintaining a collaborative and open-minded school culture.

The need for constant reflection, noted by both Em and Gwin, supported by a culture of collaboration, foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to question and improve their teaching. This aligns with the temporal-relational dimensions of agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argued that agency is not static but develops over time through changing relationships and self-evaluation.

When Mal adapts her project to include other departments, Fran not only expanded Mal's initial idea but also showed how collaborative relationships facilitate change, aligning with Priestley and Biesta's (2013) findings that relational aspects of agency are crucial for achieving successful outcomes in schools.

Nat's fear of failure reflects Biesta *et al.* (2015) argument that weak or competitive relationships foster environments where teachers feel less secure in implementing changes.

Teachers in this study require a collaborative and supportive environment to achieve agency. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) suggest, agency thrives in environments

where teachers feel encouraged to take risks without fear of retribution or judgment, allowing them to explore new approaches and adapt to their pupils' needs. Resistance to change, as described by Fran, highlights how conflicting beliefs within a school can lead to challenges in achieving agency, supporting Biesta *et al.* (2015), who note that teachers' beliefs are often shaped by competing discourses that can create confusion and impact agency. The buffering role of professional relationships against structural and material constraints, as noted by Nat and Mal, aligns with Schwab's (1969) focus on the milieu. These relationships enable teachers to navigate external pressures collectively, fostering resilience and reinforcing their agency

Schwab's commonplaces (1973); teacher, learner, milieu and subject matter, provide clear guidance for the platform of curriculum development's understanding and offer insights into the discourses that dominate or are absent during deliberative activities. The commonplaces ensure that all relevant perspectives are considered (Reid, 2010), providing a balanced foundation for curriculum development. By analysing the presence or absence of commonplaces in deliberation, teachers can identify gaps in discourses and address limitations in their decision-making processes. Em's insight into unspoken competition among department heads reflects Schwab's (1973) concept of the milieu, demonstrating how cultural and structural contexts influence teachers' willingness to innovate. Such dynamics can promote caution and reliance on tried-and-tested practices. The role of trust and open communication, as described by Mal and Nat, aligns with Schwab's (1973) commonplaces of equal rank, ensuring all perspectives are considered in deliberation. These relational dynamics provide a balanced foundation for curriculum development, supporting teachers' ability to navigate complex decisions.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe the practical-evaluative dimension as occurring within a collectively organised social context, shaped by cultural, structural, and latterly added by Priestley *et al.* (2015), material conditions. Schwab's (1969) milieu provides an important analytical tool to understand the degree to which teachers act as a means of their environment. The milieu reflects the broader social and cultural realities within which curriculum decisions are made, revealing how teachers engage with and through their environment. By analysing the milieu, one can better understand how teachers achieve agency through their interaction with these contextual factors, and how these interactions shape their curriculum development.

5.2 Deliberation enhances teacher agency, but the quality of deliberation is limited

i. Assessment Constraints

The accountability agenda at the school level, referred to as formal answerability by Ranson (2003), further constrained teachers' ability to deliberate openly. Sam acknowledged that teachers were cautious about making decisions that might not be supported by school leaders, given the emphasis on accountability measures.

Eisner's (1994) conception of the art of teaching provides a valuable lens through which to position his concept of educational connoisseurship (1976) within Priestley *et al.* (2015) framework for teacher agency. Eisner describes teaching as 'an art in that teachers … make judgements based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action' (Eisner, 1994, p.155), reflecting the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. In Dewey's theory of reflective thinking (Dewey, 2005), which underlines the above-described ecological model of achieving agency, action and thinking are intertwined and take place at the same time. Eisner stresses that teaching is not dominated by rigid prescriptions or routines; it demands an artistic expression and performance quality to navigate the tension between automaticity and inventiveness (1994). This conception relates to the practical-evaluative dimension as the decision point of judgment during action. Em's experience of adapting teaching practices to standardised assessments supports Eisner's (1994) argument that teaching requires a balance between automaticity and inventiveness. However, the focus on exam preparation subordinates the teachers' capacity for artistic judgment and limits opportunities for emergent, context-responsive decision-making within the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. Fran's shift toward formative assessments highlights Dewey's (2005) theory of reflective thinking, where action and thinking are

intertwined. Reflective practice through her deliberate consideration of the relationship between her teaching methods and their impact on pupil progress, demonstrates a consecutive ordering of thought where each reflection on assessment practice informs and supports subsequent decisions, aligning with Dewey's (2005) idea that reflection involves a structured, purposeful sequence of ideas. Her willingness to reconsider traditional methods underscores the potential for critical deliberation to support innovative teaching practices, despite constraints imposed by the assessment system. The tension between formative and summative assessment, as discussed by Fran and Em, supports Dewey's (2005) theory of reflective thinking. While formative assessment encourages adaptive practices, the dominance of summative approaches limits the teachers' ability to respond dynamically to pupil needs within the practical-evaluative dimension of agency.

As Braun *et al.* (2010) observed, one-off visits from organisations like Estyn are high-stakes and develop into systems within the school itself. The continuous process shapes and reshapes teachers' practice in the classroom, diminishing the scope for agency. Teachers become both "victims of the system and its instruments," (Havel 2018, p.365). The prioritisation of measurable outcomes by senior management, as described by Sam, aligns with Braun *et al.* (2010) assertion that high stakes inspections shape school practices. These pressures discourage open deliberation, leaving little room for risk-taking or experimentation in curriculum development. The judgment of the expert as Eisner (1994) would argue is subordinated by the accountability and performativity focus in the study's school. The desired outcomes of schooling negate potential for agency in denying the teacher the option respond to emergent actions of the classroom, instead the emphasis is on returning the emergent action to a predefined step on an assessment progression. Sam's account

of the accountability agenda stifling decision-making supports Eisner's (1994) assertion that performativity focused schools suppress the teachers' expert judgment. The importance on predetermined outcomes limits the teachers' ability to respond to emergent classroom needs, forcing a return to rigid, predefined steps.

The constraints imposed by assessment practices had significant consequences for teacher agency. The focus on standardised testing and accountability measures undermined the goals of the new curriculum by limiting teachers' ability to implement its principles fully. The emphasis on exam preparation led to a reliance on traditional teaching methods and discouraged innovation.

ii. Generating Ideas

The findings suggest that deliberation within school settings can effectively support teacher agency, though its quality can vary significantly depending on several factors, including the structure of meetings, access to data, and the role of shared principles. Teachers frequently use collaborative settings such as department meetings, to generate ideas, assess strategies, and make decisions that can positively impact their practice. However, the deliberative process's quality and the extent to which it supports the achievement of agency depend on how well teachers justify their choices, balance rational considerations with emotional preferences, and operate within a shared framework of goals and values.

For example, Mal describes the role of data in grounding decisions and enhancing the quality of deliberation. This example aligns with Walker's (1971) emphasis on justifiable choices in deliberation. By basing her proposal on concrete outcomes Mal

navigates potential constraints such as scepticism or reluctance and effectively supports the commitment to making defensible choices within her department.

The structure and focus of deliberative activities can greatly influence their effectiveness in supporting agency. Pat shared an experience of a productive training day, where focused discussions and a skilled facilitator helped teachers stay aligned with the day's main goals.

This scenario demonstrates the importance of structured deliberation and highlights that the presence of a clear guiding principle can help teachers engage meaningfully with the curriculum, leaving the session with actionable strategies. Walker (1971) identifies that formulation and focused definition of issues are crucial for quality deliberation. When the facilitator effectively steered the group, it prevented potential distractions, thereby improving the quality of discussion and its practical outcomes.

The findings indicate that generating ideas is a fundamental way teachers engage in deliberation, yet the success of this practice depends on shared views and collaboration, as well as on access to sufficient information and data. When teachers can justify their strategies with evidence and operate within a setting that encourages balanced, goal-oriented discussions, the deliberative process not only enhances participants achievement of agency but also facilitates meaningful curriculum development. However, when these elements are absent the quality of deliberation suffers underscoring the need for structured support and shared guiding principles to ensure effective collaborative decision-making in schools.

Eisner's (1994) notion of teachers developing and relying on repertoires of skills and knowledge speaks to the iterational dimension of agency, which draws upon past experiences to inform present decisions (Priestley *et al.,* 2015). Furthermore,

Eisner's concept of educational connoisseurship (1976) enriches our understanding of the projective dimension by highlighting the importance of teachers' long-term vision and critical evaluation of the normative purposes underlying their curriculum decisions. Eisner's conception of the teacher as an artist who seamlessly navigates automaticity and inventiveness (1994) accentuates the emergent nature of teaching, where outcomes are often discovered through interaction (Eisner, 1994).

This perspective underscores the depth of consideration required in curriculum deliberation, particularly regarding the broader purpose and meaning of education. Eisner's connoisseurship (1976) allows one to interpret the projective dimension as the capacity to envision and articulate future possibilities, which is essential for supporting deliberation in the present contexts-for-action that teachers encounter. By integrating Eisner's appreciation of teaching as an art (1994; 1976), the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley *et al.,* 2015) gains a nuanced understanding of how teachers balance immediate decisions with a forward-looking vision to achieve agency in curriculum development.

iii. Challenging Assumptions

In exploring the role of challenging assumptions within deliberation, Walker's (1971) analysis highlights the importance of engaging critically with the foundational principles or platform principles of curriculum decision-making. These principles are the core assumptions that teachers bring as they deliberate on curriculum choices. When teachers encounter alternatives that align with or contradict these platform principles, it encourages them to examine these assumptions, creating an opportunity for reflection and potential revision.

Schwab (1973) created five commonplaces, four described above, and the fifth termed curriculum making. The commonplaces remind teachers undertaking curriculum development of the elements that are important to consider and include (Reid, 2010). Teacher agency in curriculum development is achieved in part through the activation of the iterational dimension, which involves accumulated patterns of thought informed by professional knowledge, beliefs, values, and personal histories (Priestley, *et al*., 2015). Schwab's commonplaces (1973) cited in Reid (2010): teacher, learner, milieu and subject matter, provide a framework to understand how these elements interact in the deliberative process. The iterational dimension requires teachers to apply discourses related to their professional knowledge, beliefs and values, and personal histories to make informed decisions about curriculum development (Priestley, *et al*., 2015). For example, subject matter encompasses foundational knowledge within a discipline, which teachers draw upon when making curriculum decisions, while milieu reflects the cultural and social contexts influencing those decisions. Sam's evidence based approach to challenging her team's reliance on frequent testing demonstrates Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, particularly subject matter and learner, as she draws on accumulated professional knowledge to align teaching methods with research on feedback cycles and memory. This process activates the iterational dimension of agency, allowing her team to revise outdated practices and implement improvements that reflect the evolving needs of pupils.

Such critical engagement supports informed, flexible decision-making that is responsive to the evolving demands of curriculum development.

Circumstantial constraints within the school context often limit the range of choices available to teachers, yet these same constraints can encourage the challenging of assumptions. For instance, when teachers find that certain structural or practical

limitations prevent them from implementing a new approach, they may be prompted to question the underlying principles guiding their current practices. Em's experience of resistance when introducing new ideas demonstrates the challenges of working within a milieu that discourages risk-taking. Rather than accepting these constraints as fixed, effective deliberation within Walker's model suggests that teachers should see them as an impetus to search for alternative guiding principles, broadening the decision-making framework and opening the door to innovative solutions.

Walker (1971) also emphasises the use of precedent as a tool for challenging assumptions, whereby curriculum developers compare new situations with past experiences. This comparison not only allows teachers to assess the relevance of their established practices but also highlights potential inconsistencies or outdated beliefs that may need revision. This was not something all the participants found straightforward however, Em highlighted that resistance from colleagues who are "set in their ways" can make challenging assumptions "feel like an uphill battle."

The commonplaces also serve as an analytical tool for understanding the balance between, or absence of, these discourses in curriculum deliberation. Effective deliberation relies on the availability of discursive resources, as justification of choices requires appealing to accepted principles or assumptions. Without access to robust professional discourses, as Priestley *et al.* (2015) found, teachers may struggle to critically engage with policy, limiting their ability to consider alternatives or challenge prevailing norms. Teachers with greater experience often have broader discursive repertoires due to their exposure to diverse policies and practices, allowing them to act more critically and autonomously, while less experienced teachers tend to depend on narrow policy discourses (Priestley *et al*., 2015).

The commonplace of milieu is particularly relevant to understanding teacher agency because it highlights the extent to which teachers consider the long-term normative meanings of education beyond immediate classroom contexts. Milieu connects teachers' professional and personal histories to their visions for education, which Priestley *et al.* (2015) found to be crucial for developing strong educational visions. Mal's normalisation of reflective questioning within team discussions reflects Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, particularly the interplay of milieu and subject matter. By promoting a culture of enquiry, Mal enables teachers to connect their professional histories and contextual realities with evolving curriculum demands, strengthening the iterational and practical-evaluative dimensions of agency. This connection provides a lens through which one can better understand teachers in exploring the alignment of their professional and personal knowledge, beliefs, and values, enabling them to engage in deliberation that is informed, critical, and contextually responsive.

Engagement in the reflective process of comparing the old with the new strengthens the quality of deliberation by ensuring that decisions are grounded in reasoned judgment rather than habit or convenience. The participants show that even when this is met with resistance they continue with it as they see the value from challenging assumptions in supporting curriculum implementation.

iv. Team Communication and Collaboration

A shared vision and collaborative effort enhance the team's ability to implement changes effectively and consistently across the school. Reflective consciousness as outlined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), allows teachers to critically evaluate their

past experiences and consider multiple viewpoints when approaching new curriculum challenges. This reflective process broadens the field of choice, enabling teachers like Em and Fran to explore different possibilities. As Em described, engaging in collaborative discussions allows her to "talk about doing this at a whole-school level," enhancing her confidence to contribute to wider educational strategies and build a shared understanding of goals. Reflecting on her practice in this context enables her to see her work's broader impact and adjust her approaches accordingly.

The practical-evaluative dimension of agency (Priestley, *et al.*, 2015) further supports teachers in making nuanced, situationally based judgments about their teaching and curriculum implementation. Teachers like Sam and Gwin describe how collaborative dialogue with colleagues improves their ability to evaluate various approaches. Sam noted that being "on the same page as a department and whole school" is vital for effective implementation, while Gwin emphasised that collaboration creates an environment where "we don't just agree with everything anyone says, we challenge each other." This constructive dialogue encourages teachers to integrate multiple perspectives enabling them to develop more contextually relevant strategies.

Team collaboration embodies the communicative transactional nature of agency, where the ongoing exchange of ideas fosters adaptability and resilience. Collaborative settings allow teachers to engage in a dialogical process, one that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe as akin to an ongoing conversation. Teachers like Mal highlighted the collaborative nature of the new curriculum, noting the opportunity to "work with other departments … learning from them on joint projects." This openness to cross-departmental collaboration enables teachers to

bridge gaps in their knowledge and adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, aligning with the new curriculum.

Pat's highlighting of inclusive collaboration aligns with Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, particularly the teacher and milieu, by advocating for all voices to be heard in deliberative practices. This approach encourages equity and ensures that decision-making processes have multiple inputs, making them more contextually responsive and comprehensive. Similarly, Fran highlights the role of collaboration in refining her vision connecting to Schwab's (1973) commonplace of milieu, where both personal and professional contexts influence curriculum decisions. Engaging with colleagues allows her to adapt and align her vision with evolving goals, ensuring it remains relevant and flexible. Sam's recognition of supportive colleagues reflects a milieu within her school that values trust and mutual respect. This environment demonstrating how collaboration across the commonplaces can enhance teachers' capacity to navigate curriculum changes effectively.

Em's observation of mutual respect among colleagues illustrates the transactional nature of agency, where collaborative support fosters innovation and encourages risk-taking. This aligns with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) concept of agency as a dynamic and ongoing exchange shaped by social interactions.

The following section deepens the discussion thus far and sets out this study's key contributions to the body of knowledge relating to teacher agency, curriculum development and school organisation in a way that aims to support teachers in this study school and schools across Wales as they continue to develop and implement the new curriculum for Wales in their setting.

5.3 Contribution to knowledge

This study makes two significant contributions to knowledge: first, it establishes risk-taking as a crucial expression of teacher agency in curriculum development; second, it demonstrates the vital role of deliberation in developing lasting teacher agency.

i. Risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency in curriculum development

This section argues that risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency because it reflects teachers' capacity to navigate uncertainties and innovate within structural constraints. Throughout this study teachers express their achievement of agency in curriculum development through risk-taking. Gwin accepts that changes she makes feel "uncertain at first". Fran describes the freedom of the new curriculum as "scary" and "nerve-wracking". Nat states the fear of getting changes to the curriculum wrong would incur a high cost. Understanding risk-taking in education, particularly in the context of curriculum development, is essential for examining how teachers navigate change. Le Fevre (2014) outlines three key elements shaping risk perception; loss, the significance of that loss, and the uncertainty of outcomes. Loss is at the foundation of risk taking, for a situation to be considered a risk, the individual taking that action must believe there is a potential for loss (Yates, 1992). Teachers in this study implicitly understood their loss in terms of the performativity culture. Em described an "unspoken competition" where no one wants to suffer poor results in their subject. This competition reflects the significance teachers in this study place on results. Strikingly Em made clear the vulnerability teachers in this study feel when attempting to achieve agency, she stated that "if it doesn't work it's your fault". The practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency is

where teachers navigate the tensions they experience in the social contexts of the present. Teachers are making judgements that interpret their cultural, structural and material conditions. These conditions are perceived as enablers, resources or constraints on the potential to act (Leijen *et al.,* 2020). Using the lens of risk-taking, one can better understand the perception and action of teachers in this study. By applying the lens to the structural and cultural conditions of practical-evaluative dimension of agency, one can see the importance of sharing risk when teachers undertake curriculum change.

Bringing together Ball (2011) and Maguire's (2012) understanding of school organisation with Priestely *et al.* (2015) concept of levels of curriculum enactment through the lens of risk-taking the section below will argue that trust in relationships are fundamental to reducing the emotional risk associated with risk-taking and that the engagement of teachers in educational research help teachers develop an alternative discourse that can provide teachers with the necessary conditions to share risk collectively.

The Role of Emotional and Relational Risks in Risk-Taking

Structural Relational Experiences

Priestley *et al.* (2015) conceptualise three levels of teacher agency in practice: the macro-level of policy formation, the meso-level of policy interpretation and the micro-level of policy enactment. At the micro-level Preistley *et al.* (*ibid*) found teachers were unwilling to move away from years of established prescriptive practice when faced with performative prescriptive demands. Harris (2021) underlines that weak relational trust, for example between teachers and senior leaders, exacerbates the

emotional risks associated with uncertainty and vulnerability during curriculum development. Emotional risk refers to the potential for experiencing negative emotions, such as fear of failure and frustration, which can inhibit risk-taking behaviour (Ponticell, 2003). Emotional risk is closely tied to the perceived significance of potential losses. Positive emotions can encourage risk-taking, while negative emotions often lead to caution (Ponticell, 2003). In this study, emotional risk affects teachers' willingness to take risks, as the fear of reduced self-esteem or professional failure led to more conservative behaviours. Em spoke of selecting new ideas that resonated with already accepted practices of the school – a low risk strategy – which reduced the perceived potential loss derived from failure. Priestley *et al.* (2015) also observed teachers who were given the freedom to develop curriculum as they wanted were not willing to venture beyond already accepted practices. When Nat describes a fear of getting curriculum changes wrong, the fear is of failure to meet the expectations of senior leaders and also the fear of losing standing among other middle leaders. As Em states, there is "unspoken competition" for results. Ball (2011) highlights the micro-political dynamics of schools, where trust between teachers and leaders is vital for supporting collaboration and aligning competing interests. Trust reduces the fear of loss and builds a foundation for open dialogue, which is essential for deliberative practices that address emotional and relational challenges. Nat feels respected by her peers and scrutinised by senior leaders. The respect from peers builds self-esteem which makes justifying herself to senior leaders possible.

Lasky (2005) describes vulnerability in teachers as a fluctuating state shaped by their relationships with others and their professional environment. In this study trust within the relationships of teachers and leaders, as well as trust between their peers,

helps mitigate feelings of vulnerability, enabling teachers to embrace the uncertainty inherent in curriculum development and increase their willingness to take risks. Sam suggests a “safe space where teachers feel comfortable sharing thoughts”. Gwin values “constructive dialogue” with colleagues and Pat wants everyone to be “listened to”. Walker’s (1971) model for curriculum development underscores deliberation as a mechanism for reducing emotional risks by fostering collaborative relationships. Through trust-based dialogue, teachers critically evaluate alternatives in a supportive environment, strengthening their confidence in shared decisions. Morgan *et al.* (2010) argue for regular discussions and feedback sessions between teachers to create opportunities to build trust. These practices help reduce risk of negative emotional load by ensuring teachers feel heard and valued, ultimately increasing their willingness to take risks. Trust encourages teachers to engage in collaborative problem-solving, reducing the fear of failure by distributing risks across the team rather than placing the burden solely on individuals (Ball, 2011). Priestley *et al.* (2015) argue that teacher agency is achieved within relational contexts shaped by cultural and structural factors. Trust strengthens these relational contexts, enabling teachers to exercise agency by drawing on the practical-evaluative dimension to navigate and take risks in a supportive environment.

Cultural Relational Experiences

Priestley *et al.* (2015, p.158) meso-level of policy interpretation has the primary purpose of facilitating “teacher sense-making of the core principles and purposes of the curriculum”. This level positions teachers as interpreters of curriculum at school level. Teachers in this study, as middle leaders collaborating with their teams, are

meso-level actors who have to navigate educational perspectives from other meso-level actors such as the school inspectorate for Wales, Estyn, or the consortium who interpret and disseminate national educational policies, providing guidance and support to schools for effective implementation. The emotional risks described above, which can be mitigated through trust building from a micro-level perspective, are not sufficiently addressed when considering the responsibility of the teacher at a meso-level perspective. As Gwin says there is “no fixed vision from the government” – the macro-level of policy formation – and teachers “struggle with that”.

Teachers in this study, when faced with the new vulnerability associated with policy interpretation, used engagement with educational research as a means to redistribute the risk by framing the discourse as collective enquiry rather than performative competition. Gwin describes using educational research as “powerful” and “informing decision-making”. This is radically different to the language used by Em when she described herself as “accountable” and if change does not work it was her “fault”. Ball (2011) highlights how schools’ micro-political dynamics can redistribute risk by framing curriculum reform as a collective endeavour, developing trust and support. Bandura’s (2000) concept of collective efficacy suggests that shared belief in group capability enhances risk-taking. By engaging in educational research teachers in this study develop the language necessary to critically engage in curriculum development. The language of evaluation and powerful decision-making replaces assessment and attainment. Sam used evidence on feedback cycles to convince her team to move away from constant testing, showcasing the power of research-informed practice to challenge norms. Mal and Nat described using research to justify curriculum decisions, reinforcing a shift from compliance to critical engagement. Ball’s (2011) analysis of micro-politics shows that when schools

position curriculum change as a collective project, vulnerability is shared and negative emotional risk is reduced.

Teachers in this study have shown that when emotional risk is mitigated at a micro-level through trust in relationships they are more willing to take risks in curriculum development. As meso-level actors, teachers in this study collaborate to share risk as they engage with educational research. Teachers act through their cultural environment and in doing so change the ethos and norms of the school in which they work by employing the discourse of enquiry. Priestley *et al.* (2015, p.161) found meso-level activities played a "major role in shaping the cultures of schools". Teachers in this study would benefit then from greater support in the critical engagement of their interpretation of curriculum development. School leaders should also take note of the importance of building trust in order to encourage risk-taking as teachers' expression of agency.

5.3 Contribution to knowledge

ii. Deliberation enhances teacher agency, but the quality of deliberation is limited

Subject Matter and Learner Commonplace

The insights from the above Findings chapter suggest that the participants in this study expressed concerns that ambiguous guidelines and external constraints hindered their capacity to implement changes confidently. Using Schwab's (1973) commonplaces the participants' concerns were mainly focused on deliberation of subject matter. Gwin spoke of "cross-curricular connections becoming superficial" as departments wanted to focus on what they saw as "critical subject knowledge". She also worried that subjects could be replaced to focus on skills such as problem solving. Nat's response to wider purposes of the curriculum was to position her thinking from her subject area, which led her to worry how it would "make sense". Biesta *et al.* (2015) argues that teacher beliefs are closely tied to their sense of agency. When teachers lack broad and robust enough discourses to allow them to evaluate and reflect on existing beliefs, those beliefs cannot be experienced as choices and "appear as inevitable" (*ibid,* p.638), as Sam stated "no one is willing to change things too much from the status quo". The prevalence of the subject matter commonplace illuminates the narrow discourse on curriculum development the teachers in this study can access. Fran's experiences suggest that critical thinking can also be a source of frustration when the language and concepts of educational research feel inaccessible. This further underscores that agency is achieved when teachers feel able to navigate complex information and apply it effectively. As a result of the lack of wider discourses teachers like Gwin and Nat orientate beliefs of

past experiences towards the present as ‘routinized patterns of habitual behaviour’ (Priestley *et al.,* 2015, p.141), where ‘agency is not present’ (*ibid*. p.141).

The prevailing discourse that all teachers in this study used to evaluate and reflect on existing beliefs was that of assessment. The *what* of the subject matter commonplace was orientated towards the short-term goal of preparing for exams. Decisions made in the present were focused on maximising time teaching their respective subjects, testing cycles and maintaining a culture of performance in external examinations.

By applying Schwab’s commonplaces (1973) within this study’s theoretical framework however, it was apparent that teachers in this study did engage in critical thinking of the leaner commonplace. Pat stresses she wants to make sure pupils are “prepared to do their best”. Nat frames changes from a pupil’s perspective when she argues she worries they are missing out on “important knowledge”. The teachers in this study considered curriculum development by integrating the commonplaces of learner and subject matter, shaped by a nuanced understanding of pupils’ cultural and social contexts – pupils understand school to be a success or failure based on the results they leave with. The teachers in this study rely on the assessment discourse, but taken from the learner commonplace one can see that teachers are weighing decisions to ensure the pupil benefits more so than trying to defend their subject’s place of importance in its own right.

These interactions suggest the complexity of teachers’ beliefs and practices, as they navigate the cultural, structural, and material contexts that shape their professional responsibilities. Ultimately, the deliberative process reflects a sophisticated negotiation of the commonplaces, offering insights into how teachers reconcile their

responsibilities with the pressures they encounter in shaping meaningful educational experiences.

Milieu Commonplace

The milieu commonplace (Schwab, 1973) demonstrates how teachers' relational experiences with their cultural, structural, and material environments enable them to engage in deliberation that moves beyond a narrow focus on subject matter. Schwab's milieu commonplace, which examines cultural and social influences on curriculum, complements Priestley and Biesta's ecological agency framework by providing a lens to understand how structural and cultural factors shape teachers' practical-evaluative actions. Teachers who consider the broader social and community context in their planning, such as interactions with parents or fostering pupils' connections to the world beyond the classroom, embody the critical engagement that the milieu demands (Schwab, 1973). In Reid's study (2010) the milieu was evident in curriculum deliberations when teachers concentrated on teaching pupils how to interact in socially accepted ways. Teachers in this study experienced a sense of empowerment when they generated and applied new ideas that went beyond the subject matter in their classrooms. For instance, Nat's experience, where she experimented with integrating motivational interviewing techniques into her teaching as a way to reduce conflict led to greater pupil independence. Nat also highlights the importance of alternative discourses in curriculum development. Behaviour management, a staple discourse for many teachers, was balanced with a new discourse of conflict resolution. Teachers' engagement with the milieu suggests the notion that teachers achieve a sense of

empowerment when they actively integrate cultural and social considerations in their curriculum planning. Mal described how meetings on curriculum changes evolved to focus on “what should we be teaching our pupils?”, recognising that she had to consider the goals of the learning experiences being delivered. Em sees a higher purpose to her teaching when she describes impacting on pupils’ lives and giving them the “best chance in life”. The milieu commonplace, while not as dominant as subject matter, highlighted achievement of agency for teachers in this study. As Leijen *et al.* (2020, p.303) stated, a teacher achieves agency when they can consider alternatives and are able to judge the most appropriate “in light of her/his greater professional purpose”. The milieu commonplace illuminate instances where teachers in this study are able to distance themselves from the way something is always done – either relating to their own habits, or the societal structures and norms – and can imagine a different outcome (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). The relational experiences with cultural, structural and material contexts by teachers in this study were also influenced by the milieu commonplace, for example where Mal accepts that changes to curriculum will need to be accepted not only by staff, but by pupils and parents. Sam also showed that teachers in this study, by considering the milieu felt able to question the assessment discourse when she challenged her team to ask whether “constant tests were the best way to make progress”. The milieu commonplace is where teachers in this study achieved agency in curriculum development, specifically where they were able to imagine longer-term normative purposes to education and their place within it (projective). The milieu was also the place where teachers in this study broke away from the prevailing discourses, or at least considered alternative discourses, such as their position as professionals,

which again provided the means to critically evaluate the relational experiences of their social contexts (practical-evaluative).

As noted by Biesta *et al.* (2015), many teachers lack access to systematic professional language and discourses, which are crucial for critical engagement with curriculum policies. The implementation of the new curriculum in Wales has disrupted the professional discourses teachers are comfortable with. This disruption has limited teachers' ability to deliberate effectively, reducing their achievement of agency and confidence in making curriculum decisions. Without these discourses, teachers struggle to critically assess policies or generate alternatives, thus curbing their agency and reducing their capacity to fully engage with the milieu. This tension underscores the importance of fostering professional development that equips teachers with the discursive tools necessary to navigate and adapt to their evolving contexts. The discourses that would be most valuable to teachers in this study would be those that address the normative purpose of education.

Deliberation is limited

Deliberation by teachers in this study is limited. It is limited for the arguments made above – 1) a lack of discourse relating to milieu and educational purpose and 2) the individualised emotional risk associated with change outside of the school's norms and values. While teachers in this study have shown they can achieve agency by navigating these structural and cultural social contexts by developing discourses that share the emotional risk of curriculum change, the act of deliberation by teachers in this study reinforces a scientific approach to curriculum change and the associated evaluative methods. As I will go on to argue this is incongruent with Schwab and Walker's conceptualisation of deliberation (1973; 1971). The final section of this chapter will then address the third element in this study's theoretical framework – connoisseurship and criticism – and how this element can be incorporated into the deliberation processes by teachers to enhance the achievement of agency in curriculum development.

> [The] initial stage of the deliberation serves two purposes. First … it begins by emphasis on other commonplaces, especially the student and his [*sic*] milieus. Second, it is the prime means by which each planner begins to discover himself [*sic*] – his [*sic*] values and their projections into educational intentions.
>
> (Schwab, 1973, p.519)

Schwab's suggestion that deliberation is where a teacher undertaking curriculum development can discover their values and their vision for the future of education shows how deliberation as a process can support the achievement of teacher agency. As Leijen *et al.* (2020) posits, the projective dimension of teacher agency contains long term future aspirations that allow the shaping of one's actions in the

present. Eisner (1994, p.155) describes the ends of teaching as emerging through "the course of interaction" with pupils rather than being "preconceived".

Mal gives an insight into this process when she describes a shift from rarely speaking about what *should* be taught to starting all conversations from this perspective. Fran shows that her future aspirations change as she deliberates further through the course of her curriculum conversations. The teachers in this study are able to achieve agency in curriculum development through the deliberative process where "beliefs about what exists and about what is possible are necessary" (Walker, 1971, p.56).

The findings show however, that the initial stages of deliberation as shown in the above quote by Schwab (1973, p.519), are under explored by teachers in this study. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the milieu commonplace is not prioritised by teachers – reducing orientations by teachers towards future possibilities thereby reducing the achievement of agency – and while teachers like Mal and Fran describe a journey of discovery regarding values and aspirations, they are not prioritised. Instead, conversations move to choices relating to policy objectives and methods of evaluation. As Nat states, "we couldn't agree what we were aiming for other than the broad four purposes [of the policy document]". Em suggests she improves her teaching by asking "what is the impact? How do we know?". The impact however refers to the efficacy of teaching practices in meeting objectives directly linked to attainment and evaluative methods that measure that progress. While I have argued that the level of emotional risk can be a barrier to teachers' expression of agency, and the development of discourses that allow for collective sharing of emotional risk is positive for the achievement of agency, the process of deliberation by which that agency is achieved also requires discussion.

Walker states that “the heart of the deliberative process is the justification of choices” (1971, p.55). Pat discusses “what worked” during deliberation and leaves with “strategies [she] wanted to use”. Mal asks whether her choice is still the “best approach” and Gwin describes the best thing in the deliberations is that they “challenge each other”. For Walker (1971) deliberation drives at defensibility, so for deliberation to support teacher agency – for Pat, Mal and Gwin to arrive at justifiable positions based on the questions they are asking – the way they evaluate their actions and make judgements on alternative possibilities is crucial to improving that defensibility. Mal describes setting “clear objectives” and feels confident in “measuring and evaluating”, Pat feels satisfied that deliberations didn’t lead down “too many rabbit holes”. Both these comments underly a quantitative view of how to judge what has worked and also show that teachers in this study do not feel as though they need to explore alternative possible ways to approach the way they teach or develop curriculum. As Eisner argues (1994) teaching is a form of enquiry where one explores problems one cannot always adequately predict. The teachers in this study are limited in the quality of the deliberation they can undertake until less objective driven approaches are found when driving towards defensibility.

Eisner's concept of educational criticism (1994; 1976) is drawn from the artistry of teaching. Teaching can be understood as an art in four distinct senses. First, teaching involves an aesthetic element, where the act of teaching is understood as a performance. The aesthetic quality of teaching lies in its ability to resonate emotionally with pupils and provide ‘intrinsic forms of satisfaction’ (Eisner, 1994, p.155). Second, teaching relies on judgments being made by teachers on the qualities that unfold during the course of action. These judgments are based on qualitative forms of evidence, which require teachers to assess the emergent

aspects of classroom interactions and make informed decisions in real-time. Third, teaching is shaped by the tension between inventiveness and automaticity. While effective teaching demands a repertoire of well-practiced routines that provide stability and structure, it also requires teachers to be able to navigate the unpredictability of classroom dynamics. This balance between routine and creativity enables teachers to respond fluidly to unexpected challenges and opportunities. Finally, the outcomes of teaching are often created in the process of teaching itself, highlighting its emergent nature. Unlike rigidly goal-oriented activities, teaching as an art recognises that the ends it achieves are often discovered through action rather than predetermined. This aligns with Dewey's (1997) concept of flexible purposing where goals evolve in response to ongoing interactions and reflections. The artistry of teaching lies in its capacity to blend aesthetics, evaluative judgment, adaptability, and emergent outcomes. This conception frames teaching, and the decision-making that teachers undertake to arrive at defensibility in a way that the participant teachers in this study have not addressed. The third component of this study's theoretical framework, Eisner's (1994;1976) educational criticism and connoisseurship helps deepen this study's claim that deliberation supports teachers' achievement of agency, and importantly points to aspects of teachers' deliberation that need to be developed in order to enhance the achievement of teacher agency in curriculum development.

Eisner's (1994; 1976) connoisseurship and criticism helps one understand teacher agency by addressing both the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions as discussed by Priestley *et al.* (2015). Educational criticism improves deliberation by making evaluation – that is 'making known what is strong and what is weak, what needs support and what does not' – an 'artistic problem' (Eisner, 1994, p.192). This

approach shifts deliberation from being objective driven to a more nuanced practice that considers the qualitative and affective dimensions of educational experiences that reflect teaching as an art. This aligns with Dewey's (1997) experiential continuum, suggesting that genuinely educative experiences build the capacity for future growth by fostering reflective habits of thought and action. Fran reflects this when she states that "my vision will probably adapt as more conversations I have" and her ideas are refined through deliberative activities. Em shows that teachers want to reflect on their practice to improve learning experiences for their pupils. The immediate examples of these reflections are drawn from "learning walks, lesson observations, pupil surveys". These forms of evidence are qualitative rather than quantitative. They require description and interpretation to understand what is working and what can be improved. The way teachers interact with these forms of evidence can be viewed through the practical-evaluative dimension by recognising the interplay of structural constraints and cultural norms. Teachers can adapt their understanding of what they observe in ways that are both contextually responsive and aligned with their professional values. The means by which teachers already collect evidence on learning experiences in a variety of ways are suitable but the nuance of the interpretations is not suitably artistic. By focussing on the projective dimension of agency one can see how deliberation of teaching experiences can become an artistic problem.

Eisner states "education is a normative enterprise. What counts educationally depends on one's educational values" (1994, p.192). In the projective dimension, educational criticism supports the formation and development of long-term educational aspirations. Eisner's (1994; 1976) notion of teaching as an art highlights the importance of envisioning possibilities and developing normative views of

curriculum that allow teachers to give a lower priority to short-term performative goals. By engaging in deliberation that is enhanced by educational criticism teachers can use the broader purposes of education to drive at defensible decisions, challenging established norms towards curriculum development. Walker's (1971) model provides a deliberative structure within which these aspirations can be iteratively evaluated and refined enhancing teacher agency. Educational criticism (Eisner, 1976) by teachers can illuminate problems for others by making visible the qualities of teaching and learning that might otherwise go unnoticed. By doing so it provides a clearer picture of the educational environment helping teachers understand what is happening in classrooms and why it matters. By making these aspects visible, educational criticism improves any deliberation process as it allows teachers to make themselves understood to others through vivid descriptions of what they observe, clear interpretation of the implications of those observations and defensible judgements of the educational experience as they see it.

Conclusion

6.1 Overview

This chapter sets out this study's revised model of the conceptual framework of the formation of teacher agency in curriculum development as part of this study's unique contribution to knowledge. Following this the chapter addresses the research questions of this study before setting out the limitations of this study followed by implications for professional development and recommendations. The recommendations develop the final element in this study's theoretical framework, educational connoisseurship. The section suggests how a focus on improving teachers' connoisseurship will support criticism and therefore teacher deliberation in curriculum development but also provide teachers with the means to develop discourses relating to the milieu commonplace and normative educational purposes. Taken together with recommendations relating to employing the discourse of enquiry to support meso-level curriculum interpretation and mitigating emotional risk at the micro-level of curriculum enactment, this study sets out clear recommendations for the study's school and more widely schools across Wales that can support teachers' achievement of agency in curriculum implementation and development.

6.2 Revised model of the conceptual framework of the formation of teacher agency in curriculum development

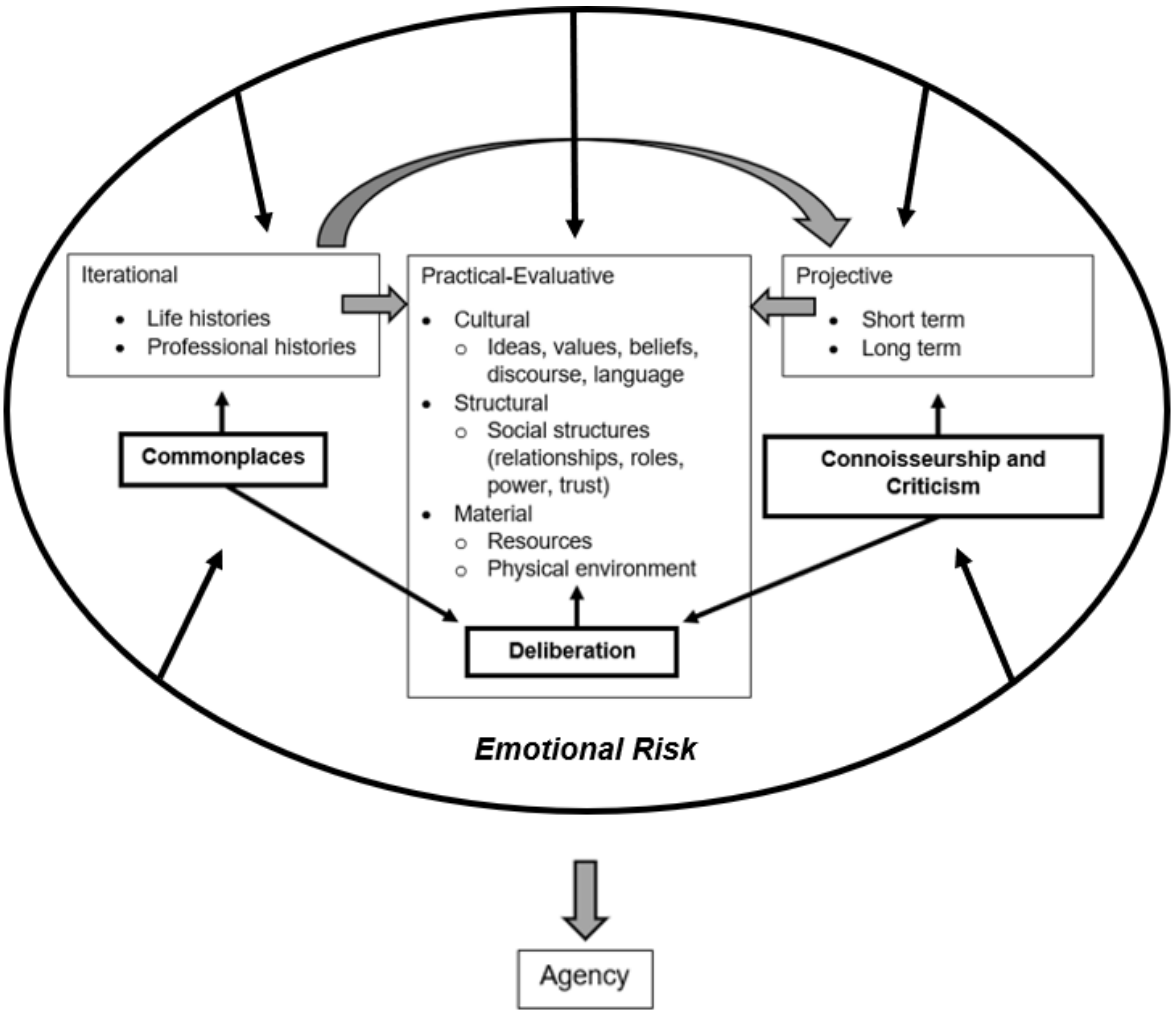

Figure 2. Revised model of the conceptual framework of the formation of teacher agency in curriculum development (adapted from Biesta *et al.,* 2015; Priestley, *et al.*, 2015 *ecological model of teacher agency*; Schwab's (1973) *Commonplaces* of curriculum development; Walker's (1971) *Naturalistic Model for Curriculum Development* and Eisner's (1976) *Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism*)

Integrating emotional risk into the conceptual framework of teacher agency has come about as a result of this study's findings on how emotions underpin teachers' achievement of agency in curriculum development. This framework explicitly positions emotional risk as central to the ecological model of agency (Biesta *et al.,* 2015; Priestley, *et al.*, 2015). Emotional risk influences iterational capacities as

teachers' previous experiences and emotional histories inform their perceptions and responses to curriculum changes. Within the practical evaluative dimension emotional risk shapes teachers' immediate judgments, decisions and actions by moderating their responses to perceived threats and opportunities in their contexts. The projective dimension of agency is impacted by emotional risk as it influences teachers' long term aspirations and their willingness to take risk towards those future possibilities. By placing emotional risk at the centre of the ecological model of teacher agency (Biesta *et al.,* 2015; Priestley, *et al.*, 2015) this revised conceptual framework enables a deeper understanding of the interplay between teachers' emotions and their agency offering opportunities to address emotional barriers proactively to achieve agency in curriculum change.

Emotional risk, as described by Le Fevre (2014) and Harris (2021), significantly influences how teachers perceive and respond to their educational contexts. By situating emotional risk explicitly within Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, this study highlights how emotions affect interactions within and across these dimensions, shaping both practical evaluative and projective capacities in curriculum deliberations.

The milieu commonplace (Schwab, 1973) incorporates social, cultural and environmental contexts, but extending this definition to include emotional climates within schools deepens our understanding of teacher interactions with colleagues, learners and school leadership. Emotional climates characterised by relational trust, openness to new ideas, and supportive leadership can alleviate perceived emotional risks, enabling greater teacher agency and openness to change. Equally, climates dominated by performative pressures and accountability measures heighten

emotional risk, creating conditions where fear of failure and professional isolation can significantly hinder curriculum innovation and deliberative openness.

By embedding emotional dimensions in the teacher commonplace (Schwab, 1973) prioritises the critical role emotions play in shaping teachers' identity, self-efficacy, and professional judgments. Lasky's (2005) conceptualisation of teacher vulnerability is particularly valuable here, demonstrating how emotional states shaped by beliefs, values and prior experiences, directly influence teachers' practical evaluative decision making. Teachers who perceive a higher emotional risk due to potential losses, such as diminished professional reputation or failure to achieve desired pupil outcomes are more conservative in their choices (Ponticell, 2003; Yates, 1992). Addressing emotional risk as part of the teacher commonplace involves recognising the context sensitivity of teachers' emotional experiences and the influence these experiences have on their curriculum deliberations and decisions.

By explicitly incorporating emotional sensitivity and awareness, emotional risk supports the enhancement of this conceptual framework's integration of Eisner's (1976) concept of educational connoisseurship. Educational connoisseurship, when expanded to include emotional insight, positions teachers as nuanced observers and interpreters of emotional dynamics within the classroom and school environment. This emotional sensitivity enriches their evaluative capacity, enabling more holistic judgments that consider affective dimensions alongside pedagogical and curricular content. Emotional awareness equips teachers to navigate emotional risks constructively, encouraging classrooms that support both pupil and teacher emotional well-being thereby enhancing the quality and responsiveness of educational experiences.

Incorporating emotional risk into the iterational, practical evaluative and projective dimensions of teacher agency provides a deeper understanding of how emotional factors shape teachers' deliberations and their capacity for meaningful curriculum innovation. Recognising emotional risk allows school leaders and educators to anticipate and address emotional barriers proactively, ensuring conditions are conducive to teacher agency in curriculum development.

In this study, the research questions served as a guiding framework to explore the nuanced and context specific phenomenon of teacher agency in curriculum development. Addressing these questions in the conclusion demonstrates their relevance to the study's original aims. This process not only ensures coherence between this study's objectives and outcomes but also aims to strengthen transparency and credibility.

Research questions:

1. How do heads of department understand their achievement of change in their educational setting?

This study argues that risk-taking is a crucial expression of teacher agency because it reflects teachers' capacity to navigate uncertainties and innovate within structural constraints. Teachers understand their achievement of change as a multifaceted process deeply connected to risk-taking and their ability to navigate the social and professional contexts of their schools. This study reveals that teachers achieve agency through an ongoing negotiation of and with their cultural, structural, and material environments. Emotional risks are vital in this process, with trust emerging as a critical enabler of agency at the micro-level of curriculum enactment by the teacher. At the meso-level of curriculum interpretation, teachers through

engagement in educational research, understood their achievement of change through a discourse of empowerment and enquiry which fostered a shared sense of purpose, allowing teachers to align their practices with long-term educational goals. However, teachers often default to established routines and assessment-driven practices, limiting opportunities to challenge assumptions and take risks. Further research on the relationship between emotional risk and the achievement of agency in curriculum development could support school leaders in Wales as they place ever greater emphasis on teachers to design and implement curriculum policy.

2. What factors influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

Teachers' sense of agency is shaped by a combination of relational trust, emotional safety, professional development opportunities, and the broader cultural and structural dynamics of their schools. Trust among colleagues and between teachers and leaders mitigates the emotional risks associated with curriculum change, fostering an environment where risk-taking becomes a collective endeavour rather than an individual burden. Teachers' engagement with professional discourses, particularly that of enquiry, enhances their capacity to deliberate critically and make defensible decisions. However, accountability pressures and the dominance of assessment discourses often constrain teachers' sense of agency by prioritising measurable outcomes over emergent practices. The promotion of educational enquiry discourses and activities in schools, by changing school norms and cultures, can weaken the influence of accountability pressures as teachers are able to collectively share the emotional risk associated with the fear of failure. This study

would encourage school leaders to adopt enquiry discourse and practice at all levels of the school.

3. What factors of the new curriculum for Wales policy influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

The new curriculum for Wales introduces both challenges and opportunities for teachers' sense of agency. Ambiguity in policy guidelines creates a sense of uncertainty, leading teachers to rely on familiar practices and narrow discourses, particularly those related to assessment. While the policy's emphasis on flexibility and teacher autonomy is intended to empower teachers, its lack of clarity often undermines deliberative processes and inhibits risk-taking. The application of this study's conceptual framework provides a clear area for further research in schools. That being the use of Schwab's (1973) commonplaces, particularly that of the milieu commonplace, to support deliberation of curriculum development. The over reliance on policy documentation by teachers showed that there is worth in future researchers exploring how curriculum development theories, when applied, can be transformative for the teachers that experience them. Deliberative activities were not structured in a way that supported the teachers in this study to access their potential as highly skilled, self-aware and sensitive curriculum developers. Teachers in Wales represent an untapped wealth of talent and knowledge that the expertise of future researchers in the areas of seminal curricular thinkers could harness.

4. To what extent does the school organisation influence heads of departments' sense of agency in the educational setting?

Positive relationships within and across departments develop a culture of trust and collaboration, enabling teachers to take risks and engage critically with curriculum development. Conversely, competitive or fragmented relationships undermine agency, creating environments where teachers feel less secure in pursuing change. The study highlights the importance of school leaders in supporting deliberative spaces where teachers can explore, challenge, and refine their practices. As an educational researcher situated inside the school context I can appreciate the value in leaders creating space for questions and deliberation as a necessary foundation for the achievement of teacher agency. By prioritising trust building and supporting professional development, school organisations can create the conditions for teachers to achieve agency. Horizontal deliberative structures between departments and management structures that seek to develop trust first before accountability support risk-taking and promote resources to be shared across disciplines.

By addressing the research questions demonstrates this study's contribution to existing knowledge, situating the findings within broader academic discussions while offering practical implications for teachers in Wales. Finally, by reflecting on the research questions, this section identifies areas for further research, underscoring the importance of a greater depth of understanding by teachers and school leaders during the ongoing implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales.

6.2 Limitations of research

The limitations of this study reflect the inherent challenges and constraints of conducting small-scale qualitative research in a single secondary school, particularly within the scope of a professional doctorate program. While the study provides

valuable insights into the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales, certain limitations related to generalisability, sample size, time constraints, and researcher positionality must be acknowledged.

As a qualitative study focused on one Welsh secondary school, the findings are context-specific and may not be broadly generalisable across other schools or regions in Wales. The intention of this study was to explore the nuanced experiences of middle leaders within a particular institutional setting. The study took place during the academic year 2021-22 which preceded the statutory implementation of the new curriculum in secondary schools in September 2023. Future studies could seek to add to this study's contribution to middle leaders' nuanced experiences of curriculum development as schools in Wales are still in the formative years of interpreting and implementing the curriculum. In the academic year 2026-27 the new curriculum will be delivered by all teachers to all pupils from the ages 3-16 for the first time. This provides an opportunity for future studies to select a diverse range of localities, age ranges – primary (3-11), secondary (11-16) or through school (3-16) – for comparative methods and identifying broader trends and potential points of divergence in curriculum implementation. This study contributes to the wider discourse on curriculum implementation aligning with Denscombe's (2010) perspective that in the context of limited resources and time constraints small-scale studies provide valuable contextually rich insights that can be informative for other institutions facing similar challenges.

The sample size consisting of seven heads of department across the Areas of Learning Experience (AoLEs) limits the scope for wider variability in perspectives. While this approach provided rich qualitative data aligned with the study's objectives, a larger sample could offer a more diverse range of experiences potentially revealing

additional insights into departmental dynamics and teacher agency in curriculum reform. Although practical and ethical considerations restricted expanding the participant pool, future research with an expanded cohort would deepen understanding of teacher agency within a broader context. As Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest, smaller samples allow for in-depth exploration of complex issues which can be diluted in larger studies. This focus at the departmental level also provides insights into how policies are enacted and reinterpreted at the classroom level supporting Bowe *et al.* (1992) assertion that education reform is often re-created through local interpretations.

Time constraints posed another limitation as the study spanned only one academic year. While this allowed for a detailed snapshot of teachers' responses to curriculum changes, it did not capture the longer-term effects as the curriculum becomes embedded in practice. Curriculum reform is a dynamic process, and a longer timeframe could provide insights into how teacher agency and organisational structures evolve over time.

Researcher positionality also presents potential limitations. My role as a senior leader with direct involvement in curriculum development introduced the possibility of bias in interpreting findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to mitigate this, yet the inherent tension between objective analysis and subjective interpretation in insider research remains. Close professional proximity may have influenced the responses shared by participants, given the hierarchical structures present within the school. Nonetheless, consistent adherence to ethical guidelines helped to minimise these biases.

The study also contributes to the broader debate on curriculum implementation by capturing the perspectives of middle leaders, whose role often places them at the intersection of policy and practice. These findings reflect Braun *et al.* (2011; 2010) assertion that national education policies are re-created rather than directly implemented, with teachers' experiences shaped by their professional and local contexts. This study underscores the importance of understanding how teachers negotiate agency amidst curriculum reform, validating Spillane's (1999) concept of teachers as final policy brokers. Such insights are especially relevant as Wales embarks on a curriculum journey requiring adaptation and innovation, not mere compliance.

Finally, the study's reliance on semi-structured interviews, while providing in-depth insights, posed limitations in terms of breadth and triangulation. Although interviews allowed exploration of teachers' perspectives, additional methods such as observations or focus groups might have enriched the findings, providing a fuller picture of how teacher agency operates in practice.

In summary, while limitations of sample size, generalisability, time, and positionality restrict the scope of this study, they also highlight the complex, context-dependent nature of curriculum reform. Future research could employ a comparative, longitudinal design across multiple sites to offer comprehensive insights into teacher agency and the Curriculum for Wales's effective implementation. Engaging with the complex realities of reform, this study suggests how theory, policy, and practice intersect in curriculum implementation. As Goodall (2015) advocates, a broader approach could enhance understanding of effective curriculum strategies across Welsh secondary schools, and this study's school provides valuable insights to

inform professional development, policy frameworks, and institutional support necessary for empowering teachers as agents of change.

6.4 Implications for Professional Development

Eisner describes connoisseurship as a “private act” (1994, p.215) and develops this to argue much of what teachers aim for is “held in the “minds eye” as an image rather than a proposition” (1994, p.163). Schwab reflects this in his own writing of curriculum development, recognising that the “felt experience of it, an undergoing of it in imagination and empathy” is necessary before one can be confident in its defensibility (1973, p.507). One can quickly see the dilemma for curriculum developers in schools. The appreciation of educational experiences by teachers interpreting and enacting curriculum development cannot hinge on public judgements that try to standardise experiences and improve predictability of preconceived outcomes. In order to achieve the mantle of agents of change, teachers must consider the future potential of what those learning experiences could be; this requires then a consideration of the now, so that teachers can analyse and evaluate the present circumstances in light of their past insights. Deliberation drives at defensibility of the choices and actions available with their associated future consequences, but vital in all of this is the teachers’ *sense* of these happenings. Their *sense* of choices available to them, their *sense* of consequences of their actions, their *sense* of what the felt experience is telling them and their *sense* of how their educational values that underpin their intentions “grow out of action” (Eisner, 1994, p.165). It is this study’s argument that teachers and schools should seek to develop their *educational connoisseurship* (Eisner, 1994; 1976) as a means of improving the quality of deliberation and therefore enhance the achievement of agency in curriculum development.

The purpose of a professional doctorate is to bridge the gap in theory and practice in the practitioner’s setting, in my case secondary schools. The bridging of

connoisseurship to teachers' practice is best achieved through teacher enquiry. This approach requires teachers to develop a sensitivity towards, and be conscious of, the complexities of educational practices by becoming students of "human behaviour" (Eisner, 1994, p.216). These processes can be encouraged by classroom level teacher enquiry. Teacher enquiry, as exemplified by initiatives like Wales's National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP), enables educators to critically engage with their practices (Evans, *et al.*, 2022). Evans *et al.* (2022) argue that teacher enquiry encourages teachers to adopt a critical stance towards their own practice, focusing on issues pertinent to their settings and learners. This approach allows teachers to be more attentive and sensitive to the nuances of their educational environment. School based professional development that is designed around teacher enquiry models similar to Evans *et al.* (2022), would also connect the "private act" (Eisner, 1994, p.215) of appreciating educational happenings with the deliberation process, as Schwab stated, "the meanings which matter … lie in nuances of expression in the course of the deliberation" (Schwab, 1973, p.506).

The following recommendations suggest tangible actions that teachers who undertake enquiry in schools can harness, while also providing school leaders with important guidance on how best to support staff in their schools to achieve agency in curriculum development.

6.5 Recommendations

1. Professional development in secondary schools should prioritise teacher-led enquiry as a foundational approach to curriculum development. By encouraging a culture of collective educational research at the meso-level, schools can encourage a discourse of enquiry that supports teachers in interpreting curriculum meaningfully. This collaborative focus on research-based enquiry not only enhances professional dialogue but also reduces emotional risk at the micro-level of curriculum implementation, as teachers feel more confident and supported in making informed changes.

Recommendation 1: Schools should promote school wide educational research to encourage an enquiry discourse of curriculum development

2. Deliberative activities should prioritise the *milieu* commonplace, guiding teachers to critically examine the broader social, cultural, and normative purposes of education. Through teacher enquiry, teachers can align their professional beliefs, values, and knowledge with longer-term educational goals, moving beyond short-term performative outcomes. This supports teachers to accept "intentions need not precede action; they can grow out of action" (Eisner, 1994, p.165).

Recommendation 2: Teachers should privilege the milieu commonplace in curriculum deliberations to help orientate professional beliefs, values and knowledge towards future normative educational purposes.

3. To deepen these processes, professional development programs should integrate the principles of educational connoisseurship. This involves equipping teachers with the ability to conduct qualitative evaluations of curriculum development, enabling them to discern and articulate the nuanced aspects of educational practice. Teacher led enquiry informed by connoisseurship supports engagement in richer deliberative practices. This promotes consideration of future potential so that teachers can analyse and evaluate the present circumstances in light of their past insights and broader educational aspirations.

<u>Recommendation 3</u>: Professional development in schools should develop educational connoisseurship as a means of improving teacher understandings of qualitative evaluations of curriculum development.

6.6 Closing remarks

This study has investigated the role of teacher agency in implementing the new Curriculum for Wales within a Welsh secondary school, focusing on middle leaders across all Areas of Learning Experience (AoLEs). Teachers can act as agents of change in curriculum development when they engage in deliberation that addresses the longer-term normative purposes of education. Teacher agency, however, is expressed through risk-taking, and such expressions depend on reducing or sharing the emotional risks that teachers face. At the micro-level, trust within relationships alleviates the fear of failure by creating emotionally supportive environments. At the meso-level, engagement with educational research has introduced new discourses that shift school norms and values, enabling emotional risk to be collectively shared.

The inclusion of the milieu commonplace in deliberative activities reorients teachers to consider broader curricular purposes and address normative questions relating to educational experiences. However, the deliberation observed in this study was limited. Conversations remained dominated by policy objectives and rational-scientific methods of evaluation, inhibiting the exploration of alternative evaluative approaches or the consideration of values and lived experiences. Deliberation that accepts an unpredictability of learning experiences – rather than constrained by prescriptive goals – is essential for enhancing teacher agency. Such an approach allows teachers to develop new evaluative frameworks, grounding their decisions in the artistry of teaching – in its capacity to blend aesthetics, evaluative judgment, adaptability, and emergent outcomes – enhancing meaningful action.

This study highlights that deliberation did not adequately support future-oriented goals. Teachers' discussions about curriculum aspirations were neither supported

by novel evaluative methods nor underpinned by sufficient reflection on values and emotions. To address this gap, integrating Eisner's (1994; 1976) concept of educational connoisseurship as a means to improve the quality of deliberative practices by positioning curriculum development as an artistic problem rather than a scientific one. Connoisseurship enables teachers to recognise and interpret the qualitative aspects of their interactions with pupils and curriculum supporting critical engagement with their educational aspirations. Development of educational connoisseurship is necessary if teachers in this study and more widely in schools across Wales are to be agents of change in curriculum development. Teachers in this study are representative of teachers more widely in Wales in that they are worthy professionals, embodying self-awareness and possessing a great sensitivity to the needs of their learners. They represent a wealth of potential achievement in implementing the new curriculum for Wales in the coming years and this study is one of many small steps necessary to realising it.

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Appendix 1 – *Interview Schedule*

Example Interview Schedule

Context

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
   - How long have you been teaching?
   - At this school?
   - What subject area do you teach?
2. Tell me about your understanding of the new curriculum for Wales and how you have experienced the new curriculum in your practice to date.

Interview Questions

1. What three words would you use to describe this curriculum and why?

2. In relation to preparing for the new curriculum, what would you say are the areas where there is most disagreement? What about consensus?

3. When you think about changes to the curriculum how do you think you can develop the next generation of *insert subject?*

4. Can you give me an example of when you felt empowered to make a change to your teaching? Tell me about a time when you were disempowered.

5. Do you feel you and your department are constrained to doing things in particular ways with the new curriculum?

6. In relation to curriculum would you say teachers in your school deliberate well before making decisions? What makes you say that?

7. How important is communication, both formal and informal, to you when it comes to your decision-making about curriculum implementation? Can you tell me about a time where communication had an impact on a decision related to your work?

8. How trusted do you feel, from peers and managers, when it comes to your decision-making about curriculum implementation?

9. For you, what makes a working relationship truly collaborative? What if anything do think would need to change to make teacher relationships at all levels in school more collaborative?

10. For you what could the unintended consequences of the new curriculum be? How do we avoid this?

11. Can you tell me about what sort of training you would want to see to help you and your department develop their capacity to make changes ready for the new curriculum?

12. If teachers are the ‘agents of change’ for the new curriculum what barriers, if any, need to be removed before we can make changes?

13. If you were head teacher how would you want your staff to prepare for the new curriculum?

Possible Prompt Questions:

1. Are you able to describe what happened?
2. Say what you mean by [term or phrase]
3. When you say, [term or phrase], what are you actually doing?
4. It sounds like you are saying, ". . . .". Is that a fair summary?
5. So you are saying . . . .? (Check understanding)
6. Tell me more about that.
7. Can you give me an example?
8. What would that look like?
9. How do you do that?
10. Can you tell me more about that?
11. Why was that important to you?
12. Why does that matter?

End Statements:

1. We are coming towards the end now

2. Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

Appendix 2 – *Participant consent form*

Cardiff University

School of Social Sciences

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reference Number: *SREC/4060*

Participant name or Study ID Number:

Title of Project: *Can teachers be agents of change? Preparing for the New Curriculum for Wales in a Welsh secondary school.*

Name of Researcher: *James Wall*

Information about this study:

- This research is self-funded and is led by James Wall, professional doctorate student Cardiff University.
- Information about the aims and methods of this research can be found by following this link:
- Consent forms and all data collected during the study will be stored securely on the researcher's Cardiff University OneDrive account, not accessible within the school. All data will be destroyed after the University's required time period.
- The researcher will not disclose the names or identifying details of the participants or the school in any publications arising from the research.
- This study has received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, which can be contacted at socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk.
- I have received permission from the Headteacher to carry out this research and send out this consent form.
- Please contact James Wall at *email* if you have any questions.

Protections in place for staff who opt to take part:

- Full anonymisation – use of pseudonyms, identifying all participants with the same pronoun, and removing from transcripts any identifying turn-of phrase, or comment which could identify them. To mitigate against identification of participants even after taking the aforementioned steps.
- Staff member participation within this research is completely voluntary and confidential, and they are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason.
- During the interviews participants are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason. They just need to tell me that they wish to withdraw either before the interview starts, during the

interview or after the interview has finished if this is what they want to do. They are not obliged to answer any questions that are asked if they do not wish to. Further they can state that they do not wish to answer a particular question and we will move on to the next question. They are able to terminate the interview at any point.

- Findings from the research will be shared with all participants before final submission and publication.
- All data will be secured in files that are password protected, and stored on Cardiff University servers, accessible only to the researcher.
- All data will be destroyed after the required time period required by the university.

Protections in place for the school:

- I will ensure the description of the school, its name, its setting, geographical location and all identifying features, for example a participant's description of a school venue, or community resource, is changed and fictionalised to reduce the likelihood of the school's identity being exposed.
- No sensitive data will be used in the study, all data will arise from minutes during Curriculum Working Group meetings and conversations with teachers who take part in the working group. All data will be secured in files that are password protected, and stored on Cardiff University servers.
- Findings of this research will be shared with you and the senior team before final submission and publication.

There is a risk that even after these protections have been put in place, the school may be identified through association with myself who will be named as the research's author, and as a consequence you may be identified as a participant of this research. It is important that you consider the balance of these protections against this risk before giving your consent.

Cardiff University

School of Social Sciences

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reference Number: *SREC/4060*

Participant name or Study ID Number:

Title of Project: *Can teachers be agents of change? Preparing for the New Curriculum for Wales in a Welsh secondary school.*

Name of Researcher: *James Wall*

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

4. I understand that all information given will be confidential and that no individual will be identified in any subsequent report or publication; and that the information given will be stored securely by the researcher and destroyed once it is no longer necessary for the purposes of research. ☐

e-Signature of Participant:

Date:

Name of person taking consent: **James Wall**

e-Signature of person taking consent: ***JAMES WALL***

Appendix 3 – *Headteacher consent form*

Can teachers be agents of change? Preparing for the New Curriculum for Wales in a Welsh secondary school.

Dear Headteacher,

Information about this study:

- This research is self-funded and is led by James Wall, professional doctorate student Cardiff University.
- Information about the aims and methods of this research can be found by following this link:
- Consent forms and all data collected during the study will be stored securely on the researcher's Cardiff University OneDrive account, not accessible within the school. All data will be destroyed after the University's required time period.
- The researcher will not disclose the names or identifying details of the participants or the school in any publications arising from the research.
- This study has received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, which can be contacted at socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk.

I request permission to interview the teachers who will take part in the Curriculum Working Group from Spring term 2021 to Sumer term 2022. I request permission to use minutes from, and presentations given during the Curriculum Working Group meetings over the same period.

The research involves analysis of group interactions during the Curriculum Working Group meetings and interviews with participants of the Curriculum Working Group over the stated period. The analysis of the minutes are used as a springboard for the interviews, to provide a focus for a discussion about the teacher's practice and decision-making in relation to the New Curriculum for Wales and how it evolves during their time as part of the Curriculum Working Group.

Protections in place for the school:

- I will ensure the description of the school, its name, its setting, geographical location and all identifying features, for example a participant's description of a school venue, or community resource, is changed and fictionalised to reduce the likelihood of the school's identity being exposed.
- No sensitive data will be used in the study, all data will arise from minutes during Curriculum Working Group meetings and conversations with teachers who take part in the working group. All data will be secured in files that are password protected, and stored on Cardiff University servers.
- Once fortnightly meetings with the Curriculum Working Group lead to include updates on this research and its developments.
- Findings of this research will be shared with you and the senior team before final submission and publication.

Protections in place for staff who opt to take part:

- Full anonymisation – use of pseudonyms, identifying all participants with the same pronoun, and removing from transcripts any identifying turn-of phrase, or comment which could identify them. To mitigate against identification of participants even after taking the aforementioned steps.
- Staff member participation within this research is completely voluntary and confidential, and they are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason.
- During the interviews participants are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason. They just need to tell me that they wish to withdraw either before the interview starts, during the interview or after the interview has finished if this is what they want to do. They are not obliged to answer any questions that are asked if they do not wish to. Further they can state that they do not wish to answer a particular question and we will move on to the next question. They are able to terminate the interview at any point.
- Findings from the research will be shared with all participants before final submission and publication.
- All data will be secured in files that are password protected, and stored on Cardiff University servers, accessible only to the researcher.
- All data will be destroyed after the required time period required by the university.

There is a risk that even after these protections have been put in place, the school may be identified through association with myself who will be named as the research's author. It is important that you consider the balance of these protections against this risk before giving your consent.

Please indicate below that you give your informed consent for members of staff at your school to take part in interviews and for Curriculum Working Group minutes to be used as part of the research. Do not hesitate to contact myself by email for any further details.

Thank you,

Mr James Wall

I give my voluntary informed consent for members of staff at my school to take part in interviews and for Curriculum Working Group minutes to be used as part of the research. I have been informed that the participants can withdraw from this research at any time.

Head Teacher Signature _____

Head Teacher Name _____

Date _____

Email:

Appendix 4 – *Ethical Approval*

School of Social Sciences
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol
Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol
Dr Tom Hall

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www.caerdydd.ac.uk/social-sciences

19 January 2021

Our ref: SREC/4060

James Wall
Professional Doctorate Programme
SOCSI

Dear James,

Your project entitled *'CAN TEACHERS BE AGENTS OF CHANGE? PREPARING FOR THE NEW CURRICULUM FOR WALES IN A SOUTH WALES SECONDARY SCHOOL.'* has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

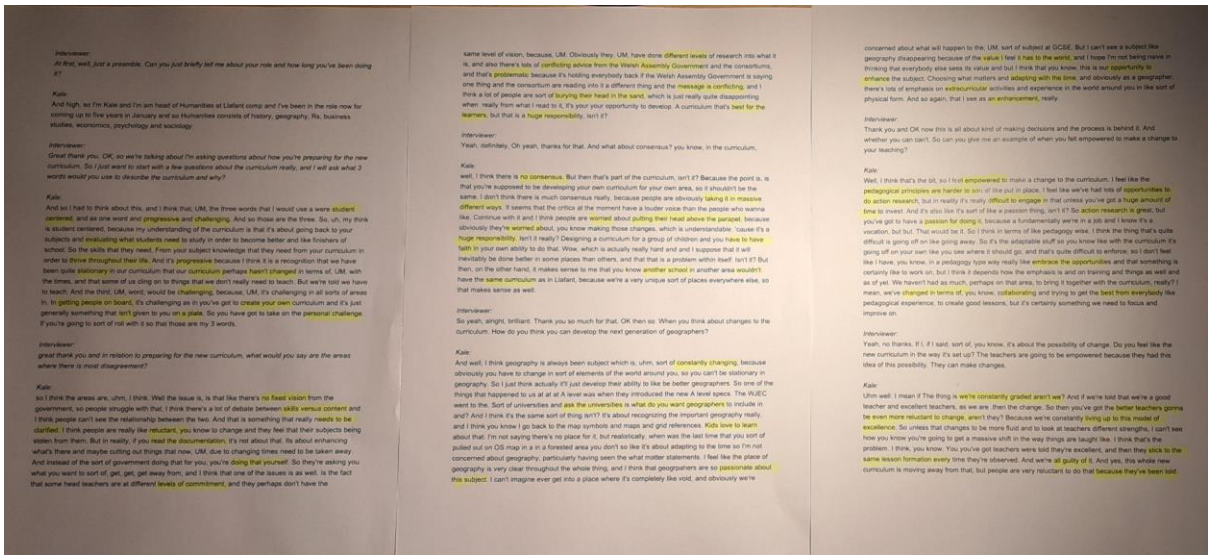
All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Professor Emma Renold
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 5 – *Example of inductive coding process*



In Vivo Codes (121)

"inclusive"
"unrestricted"
"forward thinking"
"empowering"
"exam factory"
"preparing students for the real world"
"seemingly equal"
"relevant"
"massive boost"
"massive takeaway"
"discrete subjects"
"lack of specialist skills"
"one size fits all"
"true collaboration"
"fantastic outcome"
"came from us"
"our ideas"
"faculty by name"
"subjects are very different"
"autonomy"
"pressure on outcomes"
"exciting but daunting"
"no parameters"
"nerve wracking"
"left to own devices"
"scary and lonely"
"constant collaborative planning"
"sharing of good practice"
"no department" (collaboration across curriculum)
"teaching styles very different"
"element of choice"
"freedom taken away"
"prescriptive"
"teaching to an assessment"
"student-centred"
"progressive"
"challenging"
"skills versus content"
"subjects being stolen"
"conflicting advice"
"burying their head in the sand"
"huge responsibility"
"no consensus"
"developing your own curriculum"
"reluctant to change"
"designing a curriculum"
"personal challenge"
"empowered to change curriculum"
"pedagogical principles"
"action research"
"constantly graded"
"brave person"
"experiment"
"constant change in leadership"
"empowering"
"inspire resilience"
"application of skills"
"empowered by prompts (DRICE)"
"change the culture"
"growth mindset"
"restricted by outcomes"

"cohesive"
"relevant"
"disconnect between education and experiences"
"opportunity to join it all up"
"knowledge versus skills"
"misconception it's thematic"
"already doing it brigade"
"focus on outcomes"
"disappointment"
"wish I could teach physics rather than teach to pass an exam"
"confidence to try something new"
"disempowering"
"pressure on outcomes"
"positive experiences"
"install moral values"
"opportunities to thrive"
"autonomy within department"
"balancing act"
"curriculum guidelines"
"element of consistency"
"staff autonomy"
"feeling pressure"
"ticking boxes"
"meeting certain objectives"
"trust in own pedagogy"
"department differences"
"experienced vs. new staff"
"open for discussion"
"financial barriers"
"managing differences of opinion"
"holding people to account"
"relationships fluctuate"
"revolutionary"
"current"
"thought provoking"
"pupil-focused"
"skills-focused"
"depth rather than breadth"
"lack of assessment guidance"
"application-based"
"fun and enjoyable"
"pressure to become exam-focused"
"uncertainty in planning"
"concern for GCSE preparation"
"empowered to create"
"team collaboration"
"autonomy"
"restrictions from numeracy tests"
"disempowered"
"opportunity"
"clean slate"
"freedom given"
"collaborative"
"people-centric"
"debate over skills and knowledge"
"long-term goals"
"room for disagreement"
"huge consensus"
"change needed"
"disempowered by time pressure"

Cluster Groups (79)

Cluster 1: Perception of Change
- "preparing students for the real world"
- "fantastic outcome"
- "came from us"
- "our ideas"
- "empowered to change curriculum"
- "confidence to try something new"
- "empowered to create"
- "true collaboration"
- "sharing of good practice"
- "constant collaborative planning"
- "positive experiences"
- "trust in own pedagogy"
- "depth rather than breadth"
- "application-based"
- "fun and enjoyable"
- "growth mindset"
- "inspire resilience"
- "change the culture"

Cluster 2: Autonomy and Control
- "autonomy"
- "autonomy within department"
- "staff autonomy"
- "freedom given"
- "clean slate"
- "people-centric"
- "opportunity"
- "empowering"
- "element of choice"
- "empowered by prompts (DRICE)"
- "open for discussion"
- "balancing act"
- "trust in own pedagogy"

Cluster 3: Factors that Restrict
- "pressure on outcomes"
- "focus on outcomes"
- "ticking boxes"
- "meeting certain objectives"
- "lack of specialist skills"
- "lack of assessment guidance"
- "prescriptive"
- "freedom taken away"
- "restricted by outcomes"
- "restrictions from numeracy tests"
- "one size fits all"
- "nerve wracking"
- "exam factory"
- "pressure to become exam-focused"

Cluster 4: Factors Related to the New Curriculum for Wales
- "inclusive"
- "forward thinking"
- "student-centred"
- "progressive"
- "challenging"
- "skills versus content"
- "misconception it's thematic"
- "massive boost"
- "massive takeaway"
- "seemingly equal"
- "subjects being stolen"
- "opportunity to join it all up"
- "no consensus"
- "developing your own curriculum"
- "current"
- "revolutionary"
- "thought provoking"
- "relevant"
- "debate over skills and knowledge"

Cluster 5: Influence of School
- "department differences"
- "experienced vs. new staff"
- "faculty by name"
- "subjects are very different"
- "constant change in leadership"
- "relationships fluctuate"
- "holding people to account"
- "managing differences of opinion"
- "scary and lonely"
- "left to own devices"
- "burying their head in the sand"
- "long-term goals"
- "room for disagreement"
- "conflicting advice"
- "financial barriers"

Broader grouping with first attempt at theme creation (34)

1. Conflicts in Teachers' Work
   - Pressure on outcomes
   - Ticking boxes and prescriptive curricula
   - Knowledge vs. skills debates
   - Managing differences of opinion
   - Subjects being "stolen"
   - Lack of specialist skills
2. Relationships in School
   - Quality and fluctuation of professional relationships
   - Collaborative working patterns
   - Faculty identity (faculty by name)
   - Experienced versus newer staff dynamics
   - Stability or instability of leadership
3. Short and Long-term Aspirations
   - Preparing students for the real world (long-term aspiration)
   - Shifting from an exam-focused model (short-term pressure vs. long-term goal)
   - Curriculum as forward-thinking and revolutionary
   - Long-term skills development ("growth mindset," "resilience")
   - Challenging traditional curriculum structures
4. Teachers' Professional History / Beliefs
   - Autonomy and trust in pedagogy
   - Empowerment based on professional experience
   - Personal views on depth over breadth
   - Importance of "application-based" and "enjoyable" teaching
   - Experiences shaping openness or reluctance to change
5. Space for Dialogue
   - Open discussion within departments
   - Collaboration and sharing good practice
   - Importance of teacher autonomy and empowerment
   - Opportunity for professional voice ("came from us," "our ideas")
6. Accountability
   - Holding staff accountable for performance
   - "Pressure on outcomes"
   - Examination-driven cultures
   - Requirements to meet specific objectives or standards
   - Constraints linked to numerical targets or levels
7. Flow of Information and Management
   - Conflicting advice (Welsh Assembly vs. consortium)
   - Ambiguities and confusion over curriculum design
   - Lack of consistent leadership direction
   - Teachers "left to own devices," experiencing isolation or uncertainty

Refined groups organised by RQs (25)

RQ1
Category: Teachers' Experiences of Successful Change
- Preparing students for real-world application
- Genuine collaboration and shared practice
- Empowered innovation and autonomy
- Positive outcomes and experiences
- Culture of growth mindset and resilience

RQ2
Category: Factors Promoting Teacher Agency
- Freedom and autonomy in teaching practices
- Empowerment through choice and trust
- Open and collaborative professional dialogue
- Opportunity to shape curriculum and pedagogy

Category: Factors Restricting Teacher Agency
- Pressure and accountability for measurable outcomes
- Prescriptive and restricted curriculum practices
- Focus on assessment and examination results
- Limited autonomy and perceived loss of professional control

RQ3
Category: Influence of Curriculum Policy Principles
- Inclusive, forward-thinking and student-centred design
- Opportunities for curriculum innovation ("clean slate")
- Progressive and relevant curriculum model
- Perceived ambiguities (skills versus content debates)
- Challenges and misconceptions of thematic teaching
- Issues of equality across subject areas and disciplines

RQ4
Category: Organisational Influence on Teacher Agency
- Impact of departmental structures and faculty identity
- School leadership stability and consistency
- Professional relationships and school culture
- Decision-making processes and managing conflict
- Variations in teacher experience levels
- Structural barriers including financial resources and communication clarity

Refined themes

1. Ambiguity from documentation
   - Conflicting guidance from governmental bodies and educational consortia
   - Ambiguity in curriculum objectives and expectations ("skills vs. content")
   - Teachers uncertain about assessment expectations and curricular boundaries
2. Assessment Constraints
   - Pressure for measurable outcomes
   - Exam-driven educational practice ("exam factory")
   - Restricted autonomy due to prescribed assessment tasks ("numeracy tests," "ticking boxes")
   - Perceived limitations on depth and innovation due to assessments
3. Open-mindedness
   - Teachers open to curriculum change ("forward-thinking," "revolutionary," "current")
   - Willingness to embrace autonomy and professional freedom ("clean slate," "opportunity")
   - Professional histories influencing openness to experimentation and innovation
4. Generating Ideas
   - Space provided by curriculum for innovative teaching ("application-based," "came from us")
   - Collaborative idea generation within and across departments ("sharing good practice," "collaborative planning")
   - Autonomy enabling creation of new and engaging learning experiences
5. Critical Thinking
   - Teachers questioning existing curriculum frameworks ("depth rather than breadth")
   - Critical reflection on teaching practice and assessment models
   - Pedagogical principles underlying teachers' curriculum decisions
6. Challenging Assumptions
   - Questioning long-standing assumptions ("already doing it brigade")
   - Resisting one-size-fits-all curriculum approaches
   - Reconsideration of previously accepted knowledge vs. skills debate
   - Moving away from traditional outcomes-oriented teaching practices
7. Quality of Work Relationships
   - Importance of supportive professional relationships ("relationships fluctuate")
   - Dynamics between experienced and newer teachers
   - The impact of collaborative relationships ("true collaboration," "constant collaborative planning")
   - Importance of departmental culture and stability in facilitating innovation
8. Team Communication
   - Clear departmental dialogue ("open for discussion")
   - Influence of communication style on sense of agency ("left to own devices," "scary and lonely")
   - Importance of regular, clear, and purposeful exchanges of information within and between teams

Themes (8)

1. Lack of Clarity in Official Documentation
2. Assessment Constraints
3. Open-mindedness
4. Generating Ideas
5. Critical Thinking
6. Challenging Assumptions
7. Quality of Work Relationships
8. Team Communication

Excerpts from Analytic Memos from coding process:

Analytic Memo CODES 1

First cycle coding method chosen is In Vivo coding. It is applicable to all qualitative research and one that is accessible to a first-time researcher.

Prioritises the voice of the participant, as the code refers to a short phrase or word used by the participants themselves.

In Vivo coding is applicable to action practitioner research (Coghlan 2019) as it is more likely to capture the meanings inherent in participants professional lives.

Analytic Memo CODES 2

Following Saldaña I am wary of code proliferation, so I will attempt to code based on what "stands out" (Saldaña 2016, p.108) and then apply a code "cluster".

Analytic Memo CODES 3

I've expanded the previous round into slightly broader groupings to help me find connections across the literature without losing the structure of my research questions and give me a first attempt at theme creation.

The result was four "lumper" categories addressing the participants understanding of agency and three further "lumper" categories which addressed the curriculum working group.

This feels far more manageable a data capture to use as part of an analysis.

The categories I selected are driven by my current understanding of the literature on agency, particularly the importance of social-relational interactions may have on agency. As well as the importance of individual agency being achieved as part of a collective process.

I cannot see an issue with this, as it is driven by the ecological approach to agency, although, my research questions are currently framed from the perspective of the individual.

Analytic Memo CODES 4

Following Saldaña I grouped the codes into clusters that suggested categories. I then used my research questions to help form an order to the categories.

I feel like these are more refined and have the potential to highlight a wider scope of meaning.