

**The Practice of Policy? A study of the  
role of the support services in the  
implementation of curriculum and  
assessment policy in the  
Republic of Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

The study investigates the work of the curriculum support services in the curriculum and assessment policy process in the Republic of Ireland. The curriculum support services are made up of seconded teachers who work with their peers in schools, supporting the implementation of changes in curriculum and assessment in primary and post-primary schools.

Drawing on the policy cycle and the contexts of the policy process, particularly as presented by Stephen Ball, the work of the support services is considered from a policy studies perspective. The implications this perspective, as opposed to one of school change, or of teacher professional development, are considered throughout. The usefulness of the policy cycle as a heuristic for curriculum and assessment policy is also examined.

As the researcher was working in the policy process during the conduct of the research, particular attention is given to insider issues. Data was collected by means of a postal questionnaire, and focus group discussions. One of the questionnaire items included a graphic representation of the policy cycle and respondents had the opportunity to interpret and interrogate their own experiences in representing them in the data collection process.

The application of the policy cycle as heuristic shows that the path from development to implementation in the Republic of Ireland is neither direct nor smooth. The study reveals multiple pathways, with apparent differences between the work at primary and post-primary levels, and between the implementation of curriculum and assessment policies.

Bringing a policy studies perspective to contemporary curriculum and assessment discourse is shown to offer new theoretical resources for the relatively dystopian field of curriculum, and a source of critique for assessment, for the assessment literature, and particularly for the emerging utopian discourse of ‘assessment for learning’.

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## Chapter One

### Rationale for the study

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#### Introduction

Once upon a time it was believed that policies turned out as intended. In recent times, however, students of policy have come to the conclusion that intentions are an inconsistent guide to results. This insight, now more than twenty years old, and concerned with work on school governance policies in the U.S. (Cohen,1982), shares two of the features of the fairy-tale maxim that it challenges. Its wisdom is both universal and ever-relevant.

For any researcher working in the field of education, the path from intention to results offers a useful area of investigation; for a researcher such as this one, who combines the role of researcher and policy-maker, this transition from policy development to policy implementation is also an intractable problem. The problem can be simply stated. Good policies and sensible innovations ‘seem to die in contact with the institutional reality of the school’ (Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p.60). Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) are equally blunt, if a little more positive, in their assertion:

Policymakers initiate, administrators and practitioners implement. In the process of reform, the mode of transition from one structure to another is nearly everything.

(p.59)

Given the attractions of this space - theoretical and practical - between policy and practice it is not surprising that it has generated a considerable number of attempts at circumscription and construction. Some of these are documented in chapter two; of note here is that it is the complexity of the space, this ‘mode of transition’ that has given rise to multiple analyses.

This complexity arises from a range of factors. Some of these are associated with the nature of the policy-making process, some with the role of a variety of agents and actors in the implementation of policy, and some with the contexts in which policies are implemented. In education, further complexities arise from the fact that policy effects can never be predicted because teaching requires the use of professional judgement to make what Elmore and McLaughlin call a 'situationally effective response' (1988, p.39). Unlike other professions, in teaching, variability is a key ingredient of effective performance.

Such variability is important in the consideration of the path from intentions to results for curriculum and assessment policy. Calling for new forms of curriculum theorising, Goodson (1994) suggests that what is needed are not simply new forms of theorising, but new sites for that process:

Curriculum research and theory must begin by investigating how the curriculum is currently constructed and then produced by teachers in the differing circumstances in which they are placed.

(p.37)

The 'differing circumstances' offer new sites for theorising and new challenges for that process. Any new form of curriculum theorising must take account of the variability that is at the heart of the 'situational response'.

The attractions for the researcher/policy-maker of this path from intentions to results in education have been indicated. For this researcher/policy maker, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in the Republic of Ireland, these attractions are strongly felt. The NCCA has the statutory responsibility for advising the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary school. The Council and its executive staff are positioned towards the 'intentions' end of the policy path, yet are generally judged from the perspective of the 'results' phase of the journey. The particular complexities – the twists and turns – of that path in the Republic of Ireland offer a number of possibilities for investigation and navigation.

Previous work undertaken as part of the Institution Focused Study initiated one such investigation, and resulted in some initial mapping of the terrain.

### **Earlier research – the Institution Focused Study**

The work undertaken for my Institution Focused Study (IFS) followed from a line of investigation and exploration that had as its starting point the ‘drift to the technical’ in the field of curriculum studies (Looney, 2000; 2001) and an absence of new modes of theory that could inform what ‘might be’ in curriculum instead of ‘what is’ (Goodson, 1994). The research undertaken for the IFS explored the relationship between curriculum and assessment in policy advice of the NCCA. Through the use of documentary analysis together with interviews with those who had contributed to the drafting of the documents, an attempt was made to map the relationship between curriculum and assessment. The implications of the absence of theory for the relationship between curriculum and assessment were also considered. Over the course of my doctoral studies, culminating in the IFS, the possibility of using emerging theories of education policy as a source for a new theoretical framework for curriculum and assessment was explored. The IFS afforded the opportunity to progress the investigation of this under-theorised relationship between curriculum and assessment to an institutional landscape – a landscape shaped by the policy process within which it was constructed.

The research drew heavily on the policy cycle as presented by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) and subsequently further developed by Ball (1994a) as a possible theoretical framework against which the issues emerging in the study might be considered and understood. The IFS ‘tested’ the policy cycle as a useful heuristic for curriculum and assessment policy, and found that it had some potential in this regard. Chapter two includes a more extensive discussion of the policy cycle and its application in the IFS.

The report on the IFS concluded that the ‘context of practice’ presented by Ball merited further investigation. Such investigation would need to be informed by a key finding of the research undertaken as part of the IFS – that sectoral affiliation (whether teachers worked in primary or in post-primary schools) was a significant factor in how curriculum and assessment policy was understood. At the end of the report on the IFS a series of questions was posed:

What are the implications of the somewhat fractured nature of the policy on curriculum and assessment? What happens when the policy is implemented – in primary and post-primary classrooms? Is the relationship between curriculum and assessment in primary classrooms mediated by learning and in post-primary classrooms mediated by examinations, as suggested by the documentary analysis? If so, what are the implications for students and for the transition from primary to post-primary education?  
(Looney, 2001, p.78)

### **The curriculum support services in the Republic of Ireland**

If the path from intention to results for curriculum and assessment policy is to be interrogated and investigated in the Republic of Ireland, then the ‘curriculum support services’ will be central to that task. These services are made up of teams of teachers seconded from classrooms for a number of years to work with their professional peers over a period of change in curriculum and assessment policy. Their work is described as ‘in-career support’ or in-service training for teachers. For example, at upper secondary level, a new syllabus for English was introduced in 1997 and a team of 10 teachers, led by a co-ordinator provided, and continues to provide, although in a scaled down format, in-career support for teachers of English.

This centralised model of support for the implementation of a change in curriculum policy is a factor of system size and the lack of regional educational authorities or boards. Its development in the mid-nineties was initiated by the Department of Education and Science partly in response to the harsh criticism of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of the

'grossly inadequate' nature of in-service education and training for teachers (OECD, 1991, p.129). The OECD report recommended a 'structured and farsighted framework of provision at the national level' (p.131). Further impetus was provided by the availability of EU Structural Funds to support this work under the Human Resources Operational Programme (HROP) (OECD, 1998).

The scale of the 'curriculum support teams' can vary; while there were ten teachers working on the English team in introducing the new syllabus for Leaving Certificate, the team supporting the revised primary curriculum introduced in 1999, the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) is composed of 80 people, a co-ordinator, deputy co-ordinator and four assistant co-ordinators.<sup>1</sup> All told, between the various teams working in the year in which data was collected (2002-2003) there were about 140 teachers involved in the support services related to curriculum or syllabus change. There are other support teams – notably for school development planning at primary and post-primary level and for particular vocational and pre-vocational programmes at upper secondary level. There are other providers of in-career support to teachers including the teacher unions, subject associations, education and teacher centres and universities and colleges of education, but the 'curriculum support team' model is the form of provision associated with the implementation of changes in curriculum and assessment policy. The brief of all the teams is similar: to support the implementation of changes in curriculum and assessment policy introduced by the Minister for Education and Science, on the advice of the NCCA. The Primary Curriculum Support Programme was established following the revision of the revised primary school curriculum. At post-primary level, since 1996, curriculum support services have been established as subject syllabuses have been revised. More details on the processes of curriculum and assessment change in the Republic of Ireland are provided in chapter two.

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<sup>1</sup> By September 2003 there were plans in place to reduce this to 60.

The brief for the support services is set out in the *Draft Inservice Framework Working Document*<sup>2</sup> prepared by the In-career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in February 1996 following the allocation of funds from the Human Resources Operational Programme of the EU. In line with the strategies set out in the HROP a ‘training of trainers’ model was adopted that would allow for a ‘corps of teachers-trainers who would then be capable of delivering training as resources permitted’ (Department of Education, 1996, p.4). The draft framework suggests that teachers’ needs for in-career development fall into two main categories – needs arising out of decisions of policy, and needs associated with professional development. The document notes that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Given the absence of detailed aims and purposes for in-career development generally, the specific lack of theoretical basis for the curriculum support services and the absence of evaluation criteria it is not surprising that there are notable differences in how each curriculum support service describes its work, and in the case of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP), some contradictions in that description.

Some, but not all, of the curriculum support services working with post-primary teachers and schools are co-ordinated under the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). SLSS however is a loose alliance, as opposed to the PCSP, which is a single support programme dealing with a number of curriculum areas.<sup>3</sup> The SLSS is ‘aimed at co-ordinating services’ and there is a strong emphasis in its rationale on promoting coherence across the different support services ([www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)).

In addition to subject-based support, in English, Biology, Home Economics, Civic, Social and Political Education and Mathematics, the main

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<sup>2</sup> By 2003 this document had not been updated from its ‘draft’ status.

<sup>3</sup> In 2001, the PCSP was divided into trainers (oiluinoiri) and advisers (cuiditheoirí), the latter being a small number of regionally based subject specialists available at school request. All advisers must have been trainers for at least one year.



focus of the work of SLSS is co-ordinating the work of the support services associated with the different programmes available in senior cycle education. The SLSS locates its work in a broad context:

It is intended that the Second Level Support Service will also develop a capacity to help address the broader needs of schools and assist in meeting the challenge of future change in education ([www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)).

Each curriculum support team associated with the different subjects in the SLSS operates to its own rationale. The Religious Education Support Service ‘offers in-service in the form of school-based and cluster-based meeting for teachers opting to introduce the new syllabus’. (DES, 2003, p.32). The Mathematics Support Service lists nine ‘key areas’ of work including ‘inducting new teachers of mathematics to the revised mathematics syllabus at junior cycle’ and ‘providing information and advice on resources to teachers of mathematics’ (ibid. p. 35). Despite the strength of the relationship between curriculum and assessment in the curriculum documents, only the Home Economics supports service refers to work with teachers on assessment.<sup>4</sup> The list of activities includes ‘practical coursework, active teaching and learning methodologies, programme planning, the electives and assessment’ (ibid. p.29).

The purpose of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) ‘is to mediate the Primary School Curriculum for teachers and to help them to implement it in their schools’ ([www.pcsp.ie](http://www.pcsp.ie)). No details are offered as what ‘mediation’ might mean. However, among the underpinning principles set out for the work of the PCSP are the following:

- promotion of ownership of the curriculum so that each child’s education can be enriching, meaningful and relevant to his or her life;
- adoption of a partnership approach to planning the support programme at national, regional and local level;

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<sup>4</sup> The IFS showed that in post-primary curriculum and syllabus documents there was a strong emphasis on assessment in the certificate examinations and on preparation for examinations shaping the curriculum in schools.

- facilitation of quality in-career development events whereby teachers become familiar with the principles, teaching methodologies and assessment approaches of the curriculum ([www.pcsp.ie](http://www.pcsp.ie)).<sup>5</sup>

The apparent tension between ‘promotion of ownership’ and ‘mediation’ is left unresolved. A further aim of the support programme ‘is to support the changes in practice which are required for the successful implementation of the curriculum’ and ‘to develop new knowledge, skills and attitudes in each subject, on a sequential basis’.

Each curriculum support service whether working at primary or post-primary level has a similar management structure. A steering committee comprising nominees of the In Career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science, the NCCA, the Inspectorate and the education centre in which the service is based is responsible for the management of the overall direction of the work of the team. In general, the NCCA plays a key role in the establishment of the team, including in the induction of team members and in the training of trainers programme. However, this interface between the NCCA and the support services can be uneven. An unpublished memo on the role of the NCCA in the in-career development of teachers prepared by the NCCA executive noted:

While the key interface for the teachers is with the support service, arguably, the most significant interface is the one between the NCCA and the support service. If the key change messages are not ‘transferred’ at that point, they may be lost completely ‘further down the line’..... There is a long distance between the curriculum and assessment message and the classroom and the students.

(NCCA, 2003, p.6)

If the linear approach to policy implementation, which Ball refers to as the traditional and prevailing model, is accepted, if the path from intention to is straightforward, support services ‘deliver’ the change into the system.

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<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of assessment is noteworthy here, reflecting the finding of the IFS that in the documents and for the drafters assessment was ‘integral’ to curriculum, although a shared understanding of ‘integral’ was not in evidence.

The role of the teams in such an approach is clear and relatively unproblematic. However, if the policy process is seen as a series of sites where policy is contested, where policy texts are ‘written, re-written and over-written’ (Scott, 1996, p. 113), then the role of the curriculum support teams is made more complex. Clearly, they are placed within the context of practice – but if, as Ball suggests, policies are transformed as they are re-contextualised, then the role of the teams is more than ‘delivery’, and of greater significance in the curriculum and assessment policy process.

### **Interrogating the process of policy implementation**

How do the curriculum support services, those involved in the process of ‘implementation’ of curriculum and assessment policy, describe their work? How does their participation in the curriculum and assessment policy process as key players in the critical interface between the policy makers and practitioners shape their view of the policy process? Do the sectoral divisions between primary and post-primary found in the context of text-production in the IFS continue into the context of practice?

This line of investigation builds on the work undertaken as part of the IFS and continues to draw on education policy theories as a source for theorising about curriculum and assessment. The study will test the usefulness of these theories as they are brought to bear on curriculum change where the absence of theory is acutely felt (Beyer and Apple, 1998) and where *accounts* of change are plentiful, but *analysis* is rare (Looney, 2001a; 2000).

In particular, the investigation will draw on the policy cycle as an analytical tool, but it will also interrogate the policy cycle and test whether it merits Taylor’s label of ‘too blunt’ for the complexities of policy implementation (Taylor, 1997, p. 24). The view of the policy process proposed by Taylor, and by others will also be considered in this interrogation.

This dual interrogation – of the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland, and of the policy cycle as a useful heuristic for that process – has a number of implications for the research design. While a more extensive discussion of this is included in chapter three, it is worth noting at the outset that it is unlikely that a study informed by a positivist approach could account for the complexities of the processes under consideration. Secondly, it seems likely that multiple perspectives on the policy process will be needed given the multi-layered and iterative construction of the policy cycle in the work of Ball. Thirdly, the study claims a place in the tradition of policy research as well as in curriculum and assessment research. The implications of locating the current study at this intersection are further explored in chapter three.

### **The structure of the thesis**

Chapter two will present an overview of the relevant literature under a number of headings. A more expanded discussion of the policy cycle is included, and a number of alternative perspectives are presented with a particular focus on those drawing on discourse and neo-Marxist theories. Given the emphasis on the context of practice in the study, some consideration is given to the models constructed by school change researchers to account for and provide an analysis of the implementation of reform policies in schools.

Because the work of the support services is associated with the professional development of teachers as well as the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy, some of the extensive literature on teacher professional development is considered in chapter two. However, given the breadth and range of this literature, the exploration is confined to those studies which relate to the intersection between professional development and the implementation of policy.

Literature relating to curriculum and assessment is also interrogated, particularly that which deals with the implementation of policy. Consideration is given to the relationship between curriculum and assessment, a relationship

that has proven in earlier work to be problematic for policy-makers and 'policy-implementers' and under-theorised by researchers and the academy (Looney, 2001).

Chapter Three describes the methodology adopted for the study, and the theoretical basis underpinning the research design. The claim for a place in the policy research tradition is made and a rationale is provided. Particular reference is made to the ethical issues and dilemmas that arise when a researcher/policy-maker conducts research within their own 'policy context'.

Chapters Four and Five present the analysis of the data collected over the course of the study and the discussion of that analysis.

Chapter Six considers the study in a number of contexts. Firstly, it is considered as a contribution to the field, and some reflective evaluation is undertaken. Secondly, it is considered in the context of previous research and work undertaken in the course of my doctoral studies. Thirdly, the professional significance of the work is considered, both for the researcher and for the arena in which the professional role of the researcher is enacted.

Finally, the possibilities for further and future work are considered.

## Chapter Two

### Review of relevant literature

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#### Introduction

Four collections of literature, connected but distinct, are relevant to this study. The first of these is the literature associated with education policy research generally and the policy cycle in particular. The second, to some extent a particular subset of the first, is the literature associated with the implementation of education initiatives or reforms and generally comes under the heading of ‘school change’. The third collection, arising from the brief of the support services in the Republic of Ireland, is the literature concerned with the professional development of teachers. The fourth collection important in the context of this study is the curriculum and assessment literature. Each of these is an extensive collection, each is associated with a somewhat contested field. However, it is the first of these – the literature related to education policy research, and to the policy cycle – that will enable navigation of the other three. This study claims a place in the tradition of policy research; it is this literature that should form the basis for any productive review.

#### Education policy – a contested arena

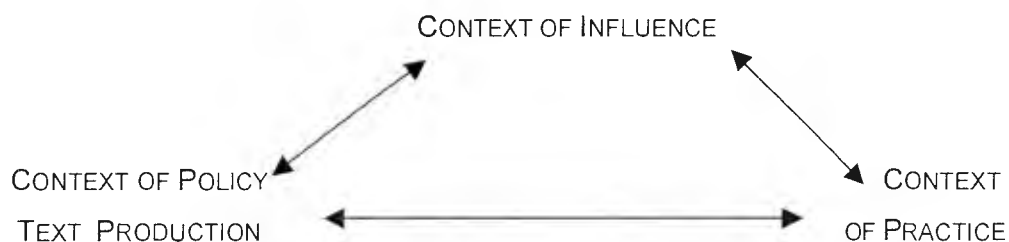
This literature has grown significantly since the early nineties when Ozga criticised the tendency to *describe* policies in education rather than analyse them. At that time, she called for greater attention to the interrogation of policy claiming that ‘otherwise, we shall continue to dismantle and describe all the parts of the machine without being able to explain either how it works or what it is for’ (1990, p. 361). Since then such explanations – informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives – have begun to emerge, although some working within the field continue to voice impatience at the pace of development:

The changing processes of policymaking in education over the past ten years have, to a great extent, outrun the development of relevant analysis and conceptualisation.

(Taylor, 1997, p.7.)

Despite such reservations, there is now a considerable literature associated with education policy studies, a recent spurt of development having been provided through the work of those studying policy as ‘discourse’ – although not all sharing an agreed view of the meaning of that term (Ranson, 1995; Gale 1997, Taylor *et al*, 1997; Baachi, 2000).

Scott (1996) usefully identifies three perspectives on policy. The first perspective, he suggests, is rooted in the view that the policy process is ‘fractured, dislocated, only occasionally exhibiting a linear form’ (p.133). Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992), positioned by Scott within this first perspective, describe policy as an ‘overlay’ or ‘bricolage’. At each stage of the policy process, they suggest, the policy is overwritten by different social actors operating within each context or site. Drawing on the work of Barthes, Bowe *et al* (1992) distinguish between ‘writerly’ and ‘readerly’ texts, and classify policy texts as ‘writerly’ in that they must be contextualised by those who read, interpret and implement them. They identify three contexts of policy production – the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice. Together, these contexts constitute what they call the policy cycle – a heuristic model for understanding the policy process.



**Fig.1 The Policy Cycle** (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992, p.20)

Each of the contexts or sites in the cycle – the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice – has its own set of political circumstances to which actors must respond. While this triarchic model may seem neatly constructed, the authors point out that the relationship, the mode of transition, between the different contexts is often an uneasy one. Conflicts can occur *within* contexts – between the public and private arena within the context of influence for example. In 1994, Ball proposed two further 'contexts' - the context of outcomes and the context of political strategy. He placed these outside the triarchic model, in the horizon of the policy process, further impacting on the 'compromises and trade-offs' that, according to Taylor *et al* (1997, p. 26) characterise the policy process. These two contexts are alluded to in this study, particularly in the discussion of the findings, although they are not included in the model of the policy cycle used for data collection and analysis.

Proposing this cycle as a useful heuristic tool, Ball accuses the traditional, and Ball would claim, prevailing, model of education policy research of an ahistoricism which prevents it taking account of how policies change and decay over time. In addition, Ball asserts, this traditional approach dislocates the classrooms and schools from their physical and cultural environments. Ball (1997) is particularly harsh in his criticism of this tendency within the traditional model to abstract knowledge from its contexts:

...education policy researchers close down the possibilities for interpretation and rip the actors who feature in the dramas of education out of their social totality and their multiple struggles.

( p.269)

For Ball, policies are not 'done' to people who then implement them. They are problems for people that they solve in contexts and settings. Ball subsequently criticises perspectives on policy that draw on an image of the 'social' as neat and orderly. This, he suggests, results in policy being both 'de-politicised and thoroughly technicised' (1995, p.259) and imbues policy with an instrumental rationalism. He cites two examples. The first, management theory, he accuses of presenting human beings as subjects to be managed. The second, of interest



to this study, is school effectiveness discourse that presents the school as the focus of causation in explanations of student performance. Effectiveness, suggests Ball, is a 'technology of normalisation' (ibid, p.261) in which teachers are entrapped into taking responsibility for their own discipline under the false label of professional development. Ball calls for the restoration of theory to the heart of policy research and the construction of educational theorist as 'cultural critic' (p.268) in order to 'move beyond the accidents and contingencies that enfold us' (p.267). He later suggests that theory offers the possibility of a different language, 'a language which is not caught up with the assumptions and inscriptions of policy-makers or the immediacy of practice' (Ball, 1997, p. 269).

Drawing on Elmore (1996) Ball identifies three 'distinctive conceits' or fallacies of education policy research (1997, p. 264). First, new policies always take precedence over old previous ones. Second, reform policies emanate from a single level of the education system and have a single message for what schools should do in implementing the policy. Third, reform policies operate in the same way wherever they are implemented. Such conceits, Ball would argue, fail to take account of contexts and settings. Policy texts, he suggests, *enter* rather than *change* existing circumstances:

Policies don't normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or options are set.

(1994, p. 19)

The texts carry meanings representative of the struggles involved in their production. These meanings are then captured in policy documents, but both that process of capture, and the process of insertion described above are complex and contested:

....the translation of the crude, abstract simplicities of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involves productive thought, invention and adaptation.

(ibid)

An apparently similar view is proposed by Taylor (1997) who suggests that 'policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing

modifications to the text and the processes of implementation into practice' (p.25). Eschewing what she refers to as the 'tight categorisation of theoretical positions' (1997, p.25), she describes theories of discourse as a set of 'interrelated developments in social theory (p. 25). She suggests that these theories are useful for policy analysis and research because they are placed at the intersection of power and knowledge. In acknowledging policy documents as *texts* (her italics), she sees them as the outcomes of political struggles over meaning.

The second perspective on policy in Scott's (1996) taxonomy is the perspective that suggests that in the policy process, the central authority always operates to further the interests of capital. Hatcher and Troyna (1994) for example, criticise the policy cycle presented by Ball and colleagues for what they see as its political naïveté and failure to take account of the relative power of those involved, particularly the power of the state in all policy processes. They accuse Ball, in constructing the policy cycle, of accepting a straightforward choice between a normative cause and effect state and a multi-causality, pluralist sites for state. From their perspective the 'circumstances' and 'options' proposed by Ball for each of the contexts within the policy cycle are far more restricted than Ball presents them. Cornbleth and Waugh (1993) have similar concerns.

...approaches to policy analysis too often downplay the politics of education policy making and the questions of who benefits and at whose expense. Instead, we engage in technical examinations of policies already made, their implementation and their effectiveness (p. 31).

For Hatcher and Troyna, Ball downplays the key role of the state in the policy process. Ball's analysis, from their perspective, is too optimistic.

Ball's response to the criticism of Hatcher and Troyna provides further insights into his own perspectives. He accuses them of taking a position that is 'authoritative, closed and certain' devoid of any sense of a 'problematic' (1994b p. 171). He denies that he represents the power of the state as

subordinate to institutional or individual responses, and regrets if his views can be represented as such. However he suggests that the ‘analytical crudities’ of his critics ‘does injustice to those who struggle with and within policies’ (ibid, p. 180). Notably, he reminds them of the realities of classroom and school life:

Polices are not totalising, they do not address every eventuality, they do not specify every act, they do not speak meaningfully to all settings. Sometimes, it is the chaos/freedom of the ordinary that is primary – in the disorderly classroom or the bilingual classroom or the classroom that is otherwise engaged .

(ibid, p.177)

Scott (1996) offers his own criticism of Hatcher and Troyna’s view of the policy process. For him, their perspective seems to require that those in authority have a coherent overview of the policy process at any given time. This, suggests Scott, is to ignore the multi-authored nature of all policy texts and the consequent impossibility of such an omnipotent overview.

Scott (1996) calls the third perspective on the policy process the ‘pluralist model’, a process ‘driven by diversity, and influenced at every level by a variety of interests’ (ibid, p.134). From within this perspective, the policy text will represent the views of a wide range of interests, although, clearly, not all interest groups have an equal chance of influencing the construction of these texts. Ranson (1995) offers a more extended treatment of this pluralistic approach to policy-making, suggesting that the policy landscape in post-war U.K. is generally subject to this pluralist analysis. According to Ranson, the ‘partnership’ between teachers, the Local Education Authorities and the Ministry in the tasks of planning, curriculum and winning resources in the U.K. saw a distributed system of decision-making. In the pluralist model, power is diffused between the partners. Taylor *et al*, (1997) take a less optimistic view of the pluralist model. They identify an elitist model masquerading as partnership where the policy – process and product – is designed to serve powerful interest groups.

## **Education policy in the Republic of Ireland – the partnership paradigm**

While this study will be drawing heavily on the model of the policy cycle proposed by Ball and his colleagues (in Scott's taxonomy, from the first perspective), it is worth noting that there is a strong partnership rhetoric associated with social and economic policy development in the Republic of Ireland. This is particularly so in education where the phrase 'partners in education' is widely used to mean the teacher unions, school managers and parent representative groups. Two years prior to the publication of a White paper on Education in 1995, a National Education Convention was established as part of a consultative process to inform the drafting of the legislation. The then Minister for Education described it in a perfect example of the education partnership rhetoric:

The objective of this dialogue was to promote the articulation of the various viewpoints of the partners, to improve mutual understanding between sectoral interests and to identify areas of actual or potential agreement between the different groups.

(Bhreathnach, 1996, p.17 )

This partnership rhetoric appears to be expressed in the curriculum policy structures, not least in the NCCA which is made up of the 'partners in education' with only a single ministerial nominee and which was established on a statutory basis in July 2001 with the remit to advise the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools.

Granville (1995) and Gleeson (2000) disagree on the extent to which the partnership rhetoric in the Republic of Ireland is matched in the reality of curriculum and assessment policy making. The former takes a relatively optimistic view and sees the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (the precursor of the NCCA) and the NCCA itself as attempts to give ownership of the process of curriculum change to teachers and school management. Gleeson however takes a less optimistic view and suggests that 'some partners are inevitably more powerful than others' (p. 7) and points to the relative

powerlessness of parents, for example, when compared to the power of the teaching unions. This supports the view of Taylor that partnership can hide the role of policy elites. Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) are similarly sceptical about the partnership rhetoric. They are critical of a nostalgic view of partnership, a pluralist idyll they are keen to shatter in declaring that ‘an essential element of pluralism is that power is distributed, and that politics is a process of bargaining between interest groups and between groups and government’ (1990, p.38). In the research they conducted among a number of policy makers, or the ‘policy elite’ they found what they termed a ‘closed policy community’ (ibid, p.47) despite a strong partnership rhetoric.

One consequence of the partnership approach to the development of curriculum and assessment policies in the Republic of Ireland is that the goals of both tend to be vague in nature and generic in form (OECD, 1991; Looney, 2001; Hall and Kavanagh, 2002). Thus, for example, in the revised Primary Curriculum (1999), there are no outcomes associated with learning areas. Instead the learning intentions are articulated. In the Mathematics curriculum in teaching the children about weight, ‘*the child should be enabled to estimate, compare, measure and record weight using non-standard units*’ (Government of Ireland, 1999 p. 54). The italics are used in the original, and the italicised phrase is repeated throughout the curriculum texts. Similarly, in the post-primary curriculum, content topics are listed with some advice on ‘depth of treatment’. The objectives for Leaving Certificate Chemistry include that ‘students should have a knowledge of basic chemical terminology, facts, principles and methods’ and ‘students should be able to follow instructions given in a suitable form’ (Ireland, 2000, p. 6). The syllabus document states that ‘the syllabus will be assessed in relation to its objectives’. More recently the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has begun developing a new template that would contain greater specification, and a greater emphasis on outcomes (NCCA, 2002b). Despite the vague language and the lack of specification, the curriculum does serve a regulatory function; it forms an integral part of the inspection process in primary schools, and is the basis for high-stakes tests in post-primary schools.

Gundem (1993; with Sivesind, 1997) offer an analysis of the curriculum policy process in Norway, and in particular of the role of the curriculum and assessment guidelines in schools. Of note for this study is their use of the work of Ball in this analysis. They re-name the context of text production as the 'arena of formulation' (1997, p.17), and suggest that the curriculum policy documents can be 'tools of state control' (1993, p. 257). A range of functions for policy documents is identified:

The curriculum guidelines serve several functions: a political function legitimating the content of schooling; a programmatic function, producing the appropriate content, and a practical function, framing and supporting the planning of teaching and learning in the classrooms.

( Gundem and Sivesind, 1997, p.8)

The latter 'framing' function is particularly relevant for the Irish context given the low level of detail and specification in the documents. In Norway, as in Ireland, there is a strong emphasis on the role of the teacher as the curriculum developer at school and classroom level. Broadhead (2002) in her discussion of the Norwegian experience, summarises:

Policy as discourse and text moved on, beyond centralized activity and into classroom application. New discourses begin, discourses of interpretation and application against a backdrop of traditional understandings, teacher professional development and personal inclination.

(p.59)

### **The policy cycle – a contested heuristic**

Scott's (1996) useful taxonomy of education policy points to the contestation within the arena of policy studies. For the purposes of this study, the contestation associated with the policy cycle merits particular attention. Ball's own rejection of a 'sociology of parsimony, certainty and closure' (1994b, p. 180) and his rejection of the 'closed and the certain' (op cit, p. 171),

is the basis for 'testing' the policy cycle and avoiding its easy application as heuristic or hermeneutic. The critique offered from a neo-marxist perspective, in the work of Hatcher and Troyna, has been outlined above. A further critique, of interest for this study, is that offered by a number of discourse theorists, notably Carol Baachi (2000) and Trevor Gale (1999).

Baachi (2000) suggests that discourse is a useful analytical and heuristic tool for policy:

The goal is to illustrate that change is difficult, not only because reform issues are opposed, but because the ways in which issues get represented have a number of effects that limit the impact of reform gestures.

(p.46)

When policy is presented as discourse (as opposed to cycle), suggests Baachi, no actor stands outside the policy process as policy planner or adviser – the process, and the discourse, is all encompassing. Equally, policy 'problems' are not 'out there' to be solved by Government, as in traditional public administration theory. She finds a tension between theorists who emphasise the *use* of discourse and those who focus on the *effects* of discourse. She places Ball in the latter group and suggests that he is focused on constraints rather than agency.<sup>6</sup> For Baachi, concentrating on the ability of some groups to create discourse, as Ball and Broadhead (in the Norwegian analysis above) both do, rather than on the groups constituted in discourse, leaves undiscussed the meaning of power. From her perspective, the diagrammatic representation of the policy cycle, is less cyclical than hierarchical, with the context of influence at the 'top' rather than at one of the points in the triangle. As such, she suggests, policy makers get far more attention in policy research, than those on the receiving end of policy.

Of note in this regard is a comparative study on the convergence of education policies by Ball which builds on his initial work on policy cycles.

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<sup>6</sup> Ball's 1994 additions to the policy cycle – the context of outcomes and the context of political strategies – may have been an attempt to give greater emphasis to agency.

In reporting on this study, Ball restates an emphasis on the policy-makers, rather than the policy-receivers, as Baachi would put it, and accords them even greater influence than in his earlier work:

...policies are both systems of values and symbolic systems; ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions. Policies are articulated both to achieve material efforts and to manufacture support for those effects.

(Ball, 1998, p.124)

However, it is precisely this aspect of the policy cycle that Higham (2000) finds useful in research into the implementation of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). Suggesting that much implementation research is too often focused on the meso level of the school, Higham finds that the categories offered by the policy cycle afford an opportunity to engage in a systematic analysis of the response to a policy change *and* an approach to theory development. Higham's research shows the potential of the policy cycle as an analytical tool in curriculum and assessment research. It is the weakness identified by Baachi – not enough attention to the 'receivers' of policy – that is for Higham the strength of the policy cycle.

Trevor Gale (1999) has concerns about the policy cycle similar to those of Carol Baachi. The model of the policy cycle presented by Bowe, Ball and Gold, suggests Gale, does not pay enough attention to what he calls 'interdiscursive politics' (p396). The researchers who constructed such a model, he claims, fall prey to the same rigidity they find in the traditional and linear approaches to policy. More recently, with Densmore (2003), he refers to the approaches to policy as discourse and text as 'the current orthodoxy in the policy sociology literature' (p.45) and calls for a greater emphasis in this orthodoxy on those whom policy affects and a policy analysis *for* teachers rather than *of* them:

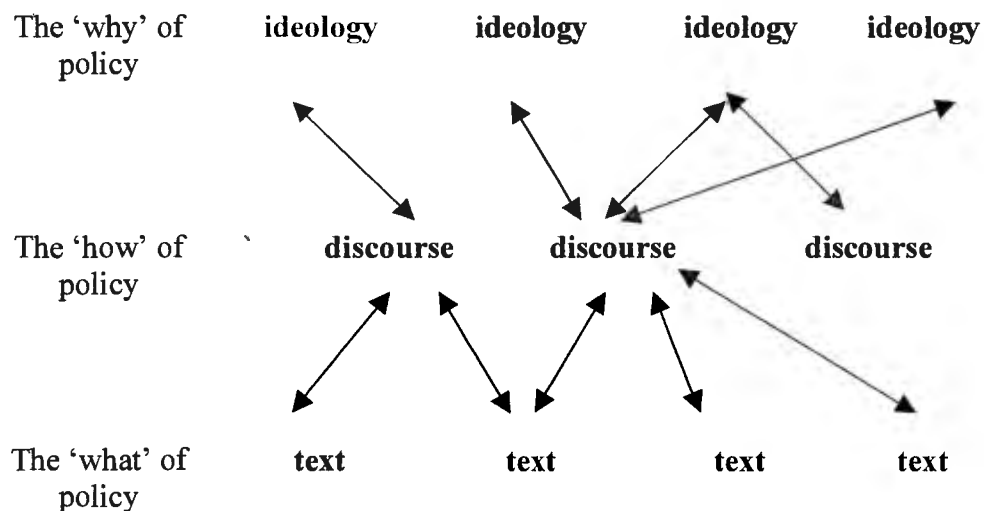
..... policy as text and discourse seems to provide little space for teachers to engage in productive activities, even though we might recognise theoretically and empirically that they are capable of them.

(Gale and Densmore, 2003, pp. 51-52)



To create this space, Gale proposes a view of policy as ‘settlement’ (p.394), not in the sense of a compromise between competing interests, but a framing in a historical or geographical moment. Such policy settlements, he proposes, have three defining features. Firstly, they are asymmetrical in that they will always be defined by the discursive strategy of the dominant actors. Secondly, they are temporary; their asymmetrical nature means that they will inevitably succumb to a destabilising crisis. Finally, they are context dependent and arise in particular policy sites.

Gale’s model of policy production draws on Kenway (1990). It stands in sharp contrast to the relative simplicity of the Ball model.



**Fig 2. The Policy Process.** (Gale, 1999, p.397)

The interdiscursive quality of the policy production process is clearly illustrated. For Gale, policy texts are more than documents, they are ideological and political artefacts. As is the case for Baachi, the site of the policy process is more than a matter of context; when and where the policy is produced is also part of the policy process – time and place are significant.

More recent work by Ball seems to give greater attention to the political aspects of policy implementation – the context of practice. He identifies three

features of what he calls the ‘current education reform package’ (2003, p. 215). He refers to these – the market, managerialism and performativity – as ‘policy technologies’:

Policy technologies involve the calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organize human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power. Various disparate elements are inter-related within these technologies; involving architectural forms, functional tests and procedures, relations of hierarchy, strategies of motivation and mechanisms of reformation or therapy

(p.216).

Interestingly, documents (policy, curriculum etc.) are not included under the heading of technology in this analysis. A defining feature of policy technologies is that they change the shape of relationships and identities, they do not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, they change who they are. In Gale’s analysis, summarised above, texts have this transformative power, they are ideological and political artefacts. In contrast, Ball does not seem to afford the policy document this status as text. Instead, in this recent analysis, ideological artefacts are the documents that are the *products* of education. It is the indicators, the test scores, the plans and schemes that are ascribed an ideological and political role. He does not make any attempt to include these outputs in the policy cycle developed ten years earlier. Whether such an enterprise is feasible in the context of the accountability culture associated with these outputs, (or fabrications, to use Ball’s own term) is debatable. If the policy cycle is an optimistic analysis (as suggested in the neo-marxist critique) then it may not be possible to accommodate such a pessimistic analysis of contemporary educational reform within its gambit.

Popkewitz (1999; 2000) is also concerned with the transformative power of policies. His overarching concern is that policy studies lack reflexivity and consideration of the impact of knowledge systems on power relations. He includes education policy and curriculum under the heading of ‘knowledge system’. Like Ball, he sees these systems as impacting on teacher identity, not

just on what a teacher does, but on who they are. 'Knowledge' Popkewitz summarises, 'is a political practice' (1999, p. 35).

His perspective on curriculum as a knowledge system is interesting. In an exploration of how school subjects are produced he refers to the 'alchemy of pedagogy' (2000, p.18).

We can think of curriculum as performing an alchemy on disciplinary knowledge. As the sorcerer of the Middle Ages sought to turn lead into gold, modern curriculum theory produces a magical change as it turns the specific intellectual traditions of historians or physicists, for example, into teaching practices (ibid, p.18).

The transition from the complexities of discipline to the 'logical systems of unambiguous content for children to learn' (ibid, p.19) is made more complex by the social expectations of schooling – thus it is an 'alchemy' rather than a simple transition.

It is the 'alchemy' of school reform – the mysterious process whereby, as Tyack and Cuban suggest, good ideas seem to die 'on contact with the institutional reality of the school' (1995, p.60) – that is the focus of the second collection of literature of interest to this study.

### **Policy development and implementation from the perspective of school reform**

If the critiques of the policy cycle from a discourse perspective share a view that Ball's analysis does not take account of the complexities of policy production, those from a school reform or change perspective accuse him of over-complexity. Tyack and Cuban (1995) take a somewhat linear view of the educational policy process. They ascribe it three clear phases, a phase of policy talk, a phase of policy action and a phase of policy implementation. They emphasise that the policy implementation phase is the most complex of the three. Tyack and Cuban make an explicit criticism of the cycle model, not for its lack of complexity, but for its apparent lack of trajectory:

The metaphor of the cycle induces a feeling of futility because the cycle returns to the same place, seemingly denying the possibility of progress.  
(1995, p. 41)

However, they agree with Ball that policies for educational reform accumulate. New policies add to existing ones, they do not replace them. In that sense, their linear view does have a cyclical aspect.

Hall (1995) stresses that an understanding of how change takes place is 'vital to those who are concerned about achieving success in policy initiatives' (p.101). He notes that 'implementation as a phenomenon has been a relatively recent discovery' (p.104) and emphasises that the implementation of a policy can be as costly as the developmental phase. Hall does not present the path from policy to practice as unproblematic. The main problems, he suggests, arise from a lack of understanding of the complex world of practice (especially teaching) from those who work in policy development and little empathy for the apparently easy life of policy makers from the perspective of hard-pressed teachers. However he presents the relationship between policy and practice as a continuum rather than a gap or divide.

Fullan (2000), like Tyack and Cuban, suggest that in any policy process, implementation is the most complex phase. He also espouses a three-phase process that has a more linear than cyclical construction. Thus the phase of implementation, as he presents it, is focused on 'putting into practice':

Implementation consists of the process of putting into practice an idea, program or set of activities and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change

(Fullan, 2000, p.69)

The concept of implementation, he claims, is elusive, and agencies and governments have underestimated the complexity of implementation. Spillane (2001) would agree:

Teachers and school administrators ultimately decide whether policymakers' aspirations are reflected in students' learning experiences. (p. 220)

Interestingly, and similar to Tyack and Cuban, Fullan includes a cyclical perspective in his predominantly linear model when he suggests that what school needs is a relationship with policy agencies that is 'processual rather than episodic' (p.86).

While Fullan's quite pragmatic approach may appear a long way from Gale's emphasis on interdiscursivity, Fullan refers to the conclusions of Datnow and Stringfield (2000) following extensive research on school reform that actors in the reform process do not act in isolation.

Rather they are the result of interrelations between and across groups in different contexts, at various points in time. In this way, forces of the state and district levels, at the design team level, and at the school and classroom levels shape the ways in which reforms fail or succeed. (Datnow and Stringfield, 2000, p.199, quoted in Fullan, 2001, p.95)

Some sense of 'settlement', in Gale's sense, is found in Fullan's work. Fullan's representation of what he terms 'authority' in the process of educational change, makes an interesting contrast with both the policy cycle as presented by Ball, and the more interdiscursive perspective of Gale. The diagram below is designed by Fullan to show the relation of the actors to the change effort.

	Authority position Yes	Authority position No
Initiator or promoter	Planner (policy maker)	Planner (developer)
Recipient or responder	Coper (principal)	Coper (teacher)

**Fig 3. Authority in the change process.** (Fullan, 2001, p. 105)

Fullan addresses the issue of power and authority with a startling simplicity. Some actors in the policy process have it, and some do not! From the perspective of Baachi, presented earlier, this may be more honest than the policy cycle that may disguise or mask issues of power and powerlessness.

Hargreaves *et al* (2001), also writing from the perspective of school reform, offer a taxonomy of change comprising four perspectives - the technical, the cultural, the political, and the post-modern. They suggest that one of the tasks of any teacher engaged in a process of implementing change is the decoding of policy texts and their consideration 'in relation to their own beliefs and practices' (p.125). Beyond this reference to a process of decoding, little attention is given to the implementation process. In other work by Hargreaves, an analysis of the impact of new technologies in education, he offers a more complex view of language, including policy language.

It does not connect us. It constitutes us. Language condemns us to a cacophonous world in which all voices are different and no voice is, on rational grounds, more valid than any other.

(1999, p.338)

The process of 'decoding' then must surely involve some sort of dialogue between the teacher and the text. However, in the work on school reform, this aspect of the change process is relatively unexplored.

In summary, it is evident from two collections of literature that the policy cycle can be a useful heuristic in policy research. That the policy cycle is contested is also beyond doubt. For those working within a neo-marxist or a pluralist tradition, the policy cycle fails to take account of issues of power and agency. For those drawing on theories of discourse, the policy cycle presents an over-simplistic and restricted view of text. From the school reform perspective, the cycle is over-complex and lacks trajectory. It is important that in using the policy cycle in research, its contestation is also

considered. Thus, as suggested in chapter one, the research can interrogate both the policy process **and** the policy cycle.

The third collection of literature is that associated with the professional development of teachers, specifically where that literature intersects with the process of policy implementation.

### **Supporting policy implementation; the role of professional development**

Desimone *et al* (2002) offer some details on the kinds of professional development associated with the successful implementation of policy and reform. However, it is worth noting that these details are presented in somewhat negative terms.

Our results suggest that change in teaching would occur if teachers experienced consistent high-quality professional development. But we find that most teachers do not experience such activities.

(p.103)

The quality indicators for Desimone and colleagues include a focus on the classroom context, opportunities for teachers to engage in active learning, and an emphasis on collective or whole-school participation. In addition, they stress that professional development experiences need to be prolonged, rather than a once-off event or series of events and that teachers should be given opportunities to lead change as well as to respond to it. Interestingly, these features of professional development are so rarely found that the researchers can only hypothesise that they would impact on teacher practice if they were experienced by teachers! Instead according to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) most policy makers view professional development as helping teachers to know what they need to do so that they will do it.

Over the last twenty years teacher learning has become one of the most important concerns of the educational establishment. It has been more or less assumed that teachers who know more teach better. This 'simple'

idea has governed multiple efforts to improve education in the arenas of policy, research and practice by focusing on what teachers need to know.  
(p. 15)

As part of a review of the policy and practice of teacher professional development in the Republic of Ireland, Sugrue *et al* (2001) conducted research among participants in a variety of courses and professional development sessions. While the results showed a high level of satisfaction among participants, they concluded:

Evidence suggests that the courses were much better at conveying information of a cognitive variety, while impact on teachers' pedagogies and classroom routines did not occur to the extent predicted in summer courses.  
(p.121)

McLaughlin (1991) highlights a number of aspects of the findings of the major study on school change in the U.S. by the Rand Corporation relating to effective teacher professional development. Data collected from teachers on their sense of personal and professional efficacy showed that their willingness to engage with change was not related to their years of experience, or their verbal ability (on which data was also collected). What made the difference was the kind of professional development they were encountering. Teachers with a high sense of efficacy were engaged in locally based professional development that provided considerable ongoing contact and support. Lower levels of efficacy were associated with a once-off event or series of events provided by external consultants. Since Rand, notes McLaughlin, research into teaching has confirmed that pedagogic practice is not a set of skills that is acquired, but a set of responses to the complex demands of the classroom setting. It is a co-constructed practice. However, Desimone's analysis seems to indicate that little account is taken of this in the design of professional development for teachers.

The OECD shares these concerns about the quality of professional development experienced by teachers.



Improved planning, more involvement of teachers, better evaluation and dissemination will all strengthen the concept of professional development which must be seen to begin with pre-service and continue through a teacher's career. Professional development is not simply an 'add-on' or a 'quick fix' to be applied when a particular problem arises.

(1998, p. 56)

The association between teachers' professional development and 'problems' to be addressed is highlighted by Hargreaves *et al* (2000) who advocate a view of change as *process* rather than *event*. They criticise a naïve view of the process by which policy texts, especially curriculum policy texts, impact on teacher practice.

Placing curriculum documents in teachers mailboxes and expecting their contents to make their way unsullied and untransformed into teachers practice and belief systems is a naïve strategy. Indeed it is scarcely a strategy at all!

(p.118)

McLaughlin (1991) considers that even if the next step is taken – the curriculum documents are read by teachers – there is no guarantee that the contents of the documents will have an impact. 'A teacher with new information about how to do better in the classroom', she notes, 'does not necessarily apply or sustain it' (p.79). This recognition, she claims, has resulted in a shift in how staff or teacher development is viewed. It is no longer a 'policy afterthought', but a 'policy requirement' (p.61).

Elmore and McLoughlin (1988) consider that the cognitive response of teachers to any policy change is key to how they respond to the change. They suggest that 'uncertainty about the effects of a new practice is a fundamental obstacle to teacher willingness to carry it out' (p.42). They outline three phases through which any teacher must pass in coming to grips with any new policy that requires a change in practice. The first phase – survival – is characterised by persuasion and reassurance on the part of the agents of the change or the policy. The second – consolidation – affords teachers rehearsal opportunities and a chance to move towards understanding the implications of

the change. The third phase – mastery – is characterised by a deep understanding by teachers of the conceptual base of the new policy and practice. Each phase is associated with a particular kind of support or professional development to support what Elmore and McLoughlin call ‘the mode of transition from one structure to another’ (p.59). The details of the different approaches are however relatively undiscussed.

Spillane (2002) examines the path from policy development to policy implementation from the perspective of situated cognition theories. Concerned with how classroom practitioners in the U.S. responded to the standards-based reform movement, the researchers developed a ‘theoretically and empirically grounded cognitive framework’ (2002, p. 388) to examine how those who had to implement the changes made sense of them. Spillane focused on how those who implemented policies understood those policies, suggesting that when implementing actors are scrutinised in research, it is generally their actions (what they do with the policy) rather than their understandings (the process of comprehension) that are the object of study. He suggests that most accounts of implementation draw on rational choice or principal-agent theories where utility maximisation is the guiding principle for human behaviour. Within this framework, policy is a stimulus to which implementers respond. Situated cognition theories offer a new perspective on the ‘policy problem’;

Viewing failure in implementation as demonstrating a lack of capacity or a deliberate attempt to ignore policy overlooks the complexity of the sense-making process. Sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy message; in general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual’s rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs and attitudes.

(Spillane, 2002, p. 391)

Spillane concluded that implementation agents will always work to make the strange familiar, ‘preserving existing frames, rather than radically transforming them’ (p.398).

The study by Hill (2001) of the response of mathematics teachers in one school district to a major reform of the mathematics curriculum shows just how this preservation instinct works in practice. In Hill's study, policy makers saw the proposed changes as fundamental and far reaching. Teachers however, spent considerable time discussing the policy, but for the most part, concluded that the change would have little impact on established curriculum practice. Spillane (2002) draws on this study and concludes that new phrases and ideas become part of the practitioner conversation about classroom practice, but not necessarily part of the practice. This effect has three sources, they suggest. Firstly, it arises from an innate desire to make the strange familiar. For teachers dealing with a new curriculum, this means that they have to unlearn a significant amount of what they know and believe about curriculum.

Secondly, because sense-making is not a solo affair (in the Hill study it was the mathematics teachers' conversations with each other that were central to how they processed the policy), social networks, professional affiliations and tradition – this 'complex web of organisational structures (p.404) – play a significant role in how policy is processed.

The third source of this conservative effect as proposed by Spillane is of particular interest. He suggests that the policies themselves, and the policy language are designed both to protect the institutional structures as well as change them. Referring to curriculum and assessment as the 'core technology of schools' he declares:

Policy is designed chiefly not to transform the core technology, but rather to protect it from scrutiny and thereby maintain the legitimacy of the institution in the eyes of key constituents. Within these institutional arrangements, the well documented limited influence of education policy on administrators and teachers is not surprising.

(Spillane 2002, p. 405)

Conley and Goldman (1995) would concur. Analysing teacher responses to mandated reforms in Oregon in the U.S., they conclude that

teachers can merely continue their practices or adapt them incrementally. Underlying assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning are not challenged or modified. School structures need change little.

(p. 513)

For Conley and Goldman, most of the policies to which teachers have to respond (and there are many such policies) can be classified under the heading 'more of the same'. Describing policy language as generally 'imprecise', Spillane (2002) notes that 'the message and design of policies influence implementing agents' sense-making efforts' (p.414).

Policy documents, as the external manifestations of policy, matter in the policy process, but for Spillane (2002), the interdiscursive function that Gale (1999) ascribes to policy texts is served by crafting a system to communicate and enforce reform. Documents do matter, but exhortations alone do not bring about change. Therefore, 'the system for providing support for sense-making is as critical as the content of the message' (Spillane, 2002, p. 418). In this analysis, in the Republic of Ireland, the curriculum support services are critical to policy implementation.

### **Curriculum and assessment – a unitary perspective?**

The final collection of literature is the literature on curriculum and assessment. This is an extended field, with a wide-ranging literature. In this review the focus is threefold. Firstly the relationship between curriculum and assessment is scrutinised. The research considers curriculum and assessment together and previous work showed this relationship to be of particular interest in the Republic of Ireland (Looney 2001b). Secondly, the current 'state' of the curriculum literature is considered for the purposes of contextualising the study. Thirdly, the 'state' of assessment is considered for similar purposes.

Spillane (2002) describes curriculum and assessment as the 'core technology' of schools. Spillane makes this designation in support of his

perspectives on how teachers implement policy. However, presenting curriculum and assessment in this manner is also significant from the perspective of curriculum and assessment – they are presented as the core *technology*, not as core *technologies*. They are presented as a unity. This is a considerable development beyond the traditional ‘tail wagging the dog’ relationship that characterises much of the literature on the relationship between curriculum and assessment. This image is characterised by a cause-and-effect rationality that undermines the very relationship it attempts to represent.

‘Backwash’ is another favoured image for the relationship between curriculum and assessment (Hargreaves, 1989; Hargreaves, *et al*, 1996). This backwash is not always presented as a negative effect. It can be a tool for curriculum reform. Hargreaves (1989), for example, suggests that the driving force behind assessment reform should be the goal of meeting curriculum and learning objectives more effectively. In the 1990s in both the U.S. and U.K., assessment-led reform has become a significant component of the education policy ensemble. Such reform is credited with promoting higher standards of teaching and learning and increasing the accountability of teachers and the education system generally (Gipps, 1994). More recently, the potential of classroom assessment as a tool for reform has been promoted in a range of developments under the headings of assessment for learning or feedback for learning (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996; Black, 1998).

In the Republic of Ireland, assessment, in the form of two formal and high stakes certificate examinations in post-primary schools, is almost universally presented as having a negative impact on curriculum, and on the educational experience of students generally. At the National Education Convention, held in preparation to the drafting of the Education Act (1999) this negative impact was highlighted:

Furthermore, subjects which are not formally assessed in the examination, tend to be under-valued. The form of the examination may also serve to reinforce the subject-centred nature of teaching and learning. Despite the intentions of the curriculum designers, there seems to be little cross-curriculum work in schools and efforts to develop general thinking or problem-solving skills in students are inhibited.

(Coolahan, 1994)

Public submissions sought in 1998 during a review of the university entrance system highlighted the negative impact of the Leaving Certificate examination and further emphasised Coolahan's analysis. An overview of the submissions notes:

Many submissions make the point that for a greater number of students, the curriculum focuses on a narrow range of academic skills and neglect the development of many other qualities which young people need for life and work. This is regarded as damaging, in particular, to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reference is made to the lack of congruence between the aims and goals of the second-level curriculum and the modes and techniques of assessment of the established Leaving Certificate.

(Commission on the Points System, 1998, p.114)

There has been no movement to introduce any form of assessment-led reform as has happened in the UK with the development of tests and league tables and in the US with the No Child Left Behind policy of the Bush administration. However, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has begun working with teachers on *classroom* assessment in an internet and teacher network based initiative entitled *Assessment for Learning* (NCCA, 2002a).

The developments in assessment for learning in the Republic of Ireland share the same weakness as similar developments in the U.K. – a poorly constructed or entirely absent relationship with curriculum. The cause-and-effect rationality of the 'backwash' or wagging tail is perpetuated in these developments. Black (1998), for example, suggests that if formative assessment is to be effective then the curriculum would need to be expressed in such a way that sequences of achievement could be described. Thus an acknowledgement of the relationship between assessment and curriculum is

made at the *procedural* or practical level, but at the *theoretical* level there is little attempt at connecting or relating the two. Hargreaves, *et al* (1996) acknowledge the difficulty:

Integrating new assessment strategies into curriculum and learning is one of the greatest practical and conceptual leaps to be made in assessment reform. (p.110)

Similarly, Sadler summarises the challenge of bringing curriculum and assessment together in classrooms:

If teacher-supplied feedback is to give way to self-assessment and self monitoring some of what the teacher brings to the assessment must itself become part of the curriculum for the student, not an accidental or inconsequential adjunct to it.

(1998, p.82)

It is not simply the failure of assessment scholars or policy-makers to see beyond the technical and procedural in the assessment-curriculum relationship; curriculum scholars share the responsibility. Those working within the field of curriculum have a long tradition of ignoring assessment! Herrick and Tyler (1947) in their overview of the proceedings of the 1947 Chicago conference on curriculum theory, state that the 'general task of curriculum theory is to give perspective and a sense of relationship to all involved in the development of an educational programme' (p.1). The relationship with assessment remains untouched in the conference papers. Even Stenhouse (1975) offers only a limited analysis suggesting that his process model of curriculum is probably not compatible with public examinations, especially for 'weaker students.'

Set against this long tradition of an under-theorised relationship, Spillane's 'core technology' marks a significant shift. Shephard, in her keynote address to the American Educational Research Association in 1999 set the foundation in proposing a new symbiosis for curriculum and assessment, one that would be both procedural and theoretical. Curriculum and assessment **together** must support the development of the ability to use knowledge and skills in real

world settings. She identifies the implications of this for the 'form' and 'content' of assessment. The form, she asserts, must match the thinking and problem-solving skills associated with each of the curricular areas. And the content of the assessment must match the context of application. The implications for curriculum of the symbiosis she suggests between curriculum and assessment are clear. A curriculum theory cannot be constructed without an assessment theory. Attempts to do so can only lead to fragmentation and lack of coherence.

While this review has focused initially on the relationship between curriculum and assessment, the contrast in *tone* between the literatures concerned with both curriculum and assessment is significant. Previous work claimed that while assessment literature, especially that associated with classroom assessment and assessment for learning is decidedly utopian in tone, curriculum literature exhibits a decidedly dystopian cast. According to one commentator, curriculum discourse 'has diversified and fragmented to such an extent that it appears to have put to rest the possibility of continuing to falsely describe it as a cohesive field' (Wright, 2000). Curriculum, it is claimed, is suffering from a crisis of 'domain identity' (Shord, 1991). The gap between the 'theorizing' and the 'practice' is one aspect of the problem. It is a gap that can leave curriculum practice at the mercy of procedures and at risk from the 'faddish character of curriculum change' (Hlebowitsh, 1993), and from 'bandwagon mentality' (Huebner, 1975). More recently, McDonald (2003) suggests that curriculum studies are in disarray while Wraga and Hlebowitsh (2003) refer to a 'sense of continuous crisis' (p.25) in the curriculum field. They claim that this crisis has lasted for the best part of the twentieth century and continues into the twenty-first.

Curriculum theorists working in the US have different views on how the gap can be overcome from those working in the UK. In the US praxis is the answer:



Thus we can identify any number of examples of how theory and practice come together in praxis and individuals alternate and/or blend the roles of theorist and practitioner in spite of restrictive labels which tend to fix them as one or the other.

(Wright 2000, p.9)

Interestingly, the zone of this praxis, in Wright's analysis, is outside schools in new educative spaces such as museums, cityscapes and cyberspace. The challenge of closing the curriculum theory/curriculum practice gap in formal education settings is not addressed. This is a characteristic disposition of what is generally called the reconceptualization of curriculum. As Wraga and Hlebowitsh (2003) note, scholars associated with this reconceptualization tend to be more interested in the development of theory rather than in the development of curriculum. There are, they suggest, too many spectators and not enough agents.

In the UK however, attempts to cross the theory/practice divide are focused firmly on the classroom. Thus Goodson (1994) calls for new forms of theorizing that deal with 'what might be' instead of being bound by 'what is'. Elliott is particularly harsh in his criticism of 'what is' and how it is perceived. He suggests that the curriculum in schools, and much of the discussion associated with it suffers from nostalgia and paranoia. He describes it as a

dreamtime curriculum conjured up from a fast vanishing world and increasingly disconnected from the way knowledge is becoming constructed and organised in advanced industrialised societies.

(2000, p.191)

Much of current assessment literature, in contrast to the literature associated with curriculum, is optimistic in tone and almost utopian in orientation:

The important message now confronting the educational community is that assessment which is explicitly designed to promote learning is the single most powerful tool we can have for both raising standards and empowering lifelong learning.

(Black and Wiliam,1998, p. 3)

It is a compelling rhetoric. Assessment can deliver, or so it seems to be claimed, on most of the policy priorities of the developed world and reputable research has shown this to be true. For the policy makers, at whom the report of the Assessment Reform Group is directed, this rhetoric is difficult to ignore. The group draws on a wide range of research in setting out the features of the new paradigm of assessment for learning. One of the key features is an emphasis on the provision of high-quality feedback to the learner – beyond grades or scores. A second feature is an insistence that students have to be involved in their own learning. Thirdly, the paradigm requires that the feedback generated by assessment should be used by teachers to inform learning. A further feature is an emphasis on the positive impact of assessment on learner motivation and self-esteem. Finally, the new paradigm is characterised by a recognition of the need for pupils to be able to engage in self-assessment, to understand their own learning and to develop strategies to improve that learning.

Even the apparently negative backwash associated with assessment can have a positive dimension. Firestone *et al* (2000) suggest that teaching to the test could be used to transform large numbers of classrooms. They contrast the approach to reform in England and Wales with that in the US and suggest that while curriculum continues to be the major policy instrument in education on this side of the Atlantic (although such an assertion might be contested by those working within the system), in the US where the idea of a national curriculum is anathema, assessment is the major policy tool. Filer and Pollard (2000) describe assessment data as the currency of all educational marketplaces and call for greater engagement with parents in the assessment of their children.

Darling Hammond (1994), in advocating assessment reform, outlines the significant impact such reform can have on the education system as a whole. Assessment, she suggests, can be a lever for change in the organizing of schooling. It can exert a powerful influence on the curriculum. Paul Black (2001) shares Darling Hammond's view of the potential of assessment as an

instrument of reform rather than as a part of a wider reform agenda. Formative assessment, suggests Black, may be a ‘Trojan Horse for better learning practices’ (p.79). Of note from the work of Black is both the significance accorded assessment in reform efforts – as a reform movement in itself – and the language in which that role is expressed. It is part of an ‘assessment dream’.... Utopian overtones abound here.

Interestingly, Broadfoot (1996) does not separate assessment from the system in which it operates as Black and Darling Hammond attempt to do in their presentation of assessment as an instrument of reform. For Broadfoot ‘assessment practices reflect and reinforce the often conflicting values embodied in education systems’ (1996, p.25). Assessment is a contextualized process that cannot be isolated from the other dimensions of the education system.

This unbridled optimism in assessment literature and research is not without its critics. Torrance and Pryor (1998) suggest that

the claims for the positive effects of formative assessment on learning are both overstated in terms of empirical evidence and under-theorized in terms of how learning actually takes place in social contexts.  
(p.xx)

Subsequent to this criticism, Torrance (2000) has raised further questions about current assessment discourse suggesting that it is in need of a re-think in the face of the complexity of the post-modern classroom. Tunstall (2003) also calls for a re-think, suggesting that the discourse of what she calls educational assessment has not been the subject of any real extended critique.

Despite the reservations, the contrast between the relative pessimism of curriculum literature and the relative optimism of the assessment literature is striking. It will be of interest to see whether this contrast in tone is also found in data collected in this study. Equally, the data may point to some implications

of the under-theorized relationship between curriculum and assessment for the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy.

### **Conclusion**

Four collections of literature – on policy, on school change, on teachers professional development and on curriculum and assessment – have been interrogated in an attempt to provide some navigational guidance for the research; indeed they also informed the development of the research question as point of departure.

These literatures will be referred to again in the account of the study, particularly in the analysis of the data and the discussion of the findings.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research design and methodological issues**

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter sets out the theoretical framework within which the research is conducted, with particular reference to the implications of a research setting placed within a policy context. The ethical issues associated with the study are discussed, notably the placing of the researcher within the policy process under scrutiny. The research design is presented and the methods for data collection and analysis are discussed.

#### **Research in a policy context**

Researching teacher reaction to education policy changes in Oregon in the U.S., Conley and Goldman noted in 1995 that there were relatively few studies that systematically examine the process by which educators interpret, reform and mediate state-level initiatives' (1995, p 514). Since then, it is evident that such studies have begun to emerge, although most of these have been from outside the U.S. Studies have emerged from Norway (Broadhead, 2001), from Scotland (Simpson and Goulder, 1997), from Canada (Hargreaves *et al*, 2001) and from Holland (Roelofs and Terwel, 1999). Of late, in the U.S., the 'No Child Left Behind' strategy has begun to give rise to a number of state-level research projects on the implementation of the federal mandates. This is reflected in the number of papers on the theme at the American Education Research Association annual meeting of 2003 in Chicago (AERA, 2003) In the U.K. the evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies by Earl, Fullan, Leithwood and colleagues (2000, 2003) represents a significant contribution to this field of study.

Researching what Broadhead (2001) calls 'what happens when teachers endeavour to turn policy and principles into practice' (p.25) is a complex enterprise. Maguire and Ball (1994) identify three kinds of policy research in

the U.K. They refer to studies among senior policy makers and decision makers as *elite studies*. Gleeson's (2000) analysis of the curriculum policy process in the Republic of Ireland based on interviews with key figures in the policy process falls into this category. Research which follows a policy through its various stages of development comes under the heading of *trajectory studies*. The work of Fitz, Halpin and Power (1994) on the policy relating to grant maintained schools in the U.K. can be classified in this way. Maguire and Ball's final category – *implementation studies* – encompasses research into the translation of policy texts into practice. In general terms, they describe a recent shift away from a focus on elite studies and the intentions of policy makers to a new interest in implementation studies and the effects of the policy on practitioners and their practice. In Maguire and Ball's typology, the research study presented here would probably fall under the heading of implementation studies, although that term should be interpreted in the light of Ball's later criticism of studies of implementation that fail to take account of the more complex policy processes operating to shape both the policy and the practice. Inevitably, he suggests, such studies end up accusing teachers of implementation failure. The research question for this study focuses on how the implementation of policy works, rather than how effectively the curriculum and assessment policy was implemented.

Placing the research in this manner has a number of implications. Firstly, it increases the theoretical complexity of the study, with ensuing implications for the research design. For example, as was concluded in previous work, the formulation of any design which is to operate in a policy context must be as sensitive to political assumptions as it is to ontological, epistemological and methodological suppositions (Looney, 2000a). Issues of power arise, as well as issues of identity and knowledge. If as Ball suggests, policies are operational statements of values (Ball, 1990) then policies emerge from a complex configuration of elements and are produced in and shaped by a complex social system. In this context, policy research is always going to be 'in some degree both reactive and parasitic' (Ball, 1997, p.258). For Dale, education policy research should attend to the 'agenda for education and the processes and structures through which it is created' (1994, p.35).

Positioning the study as policy research also has ontological implications. The complexity of the social system under investigation makes what Elliott Eisner called ‘immaculate perception’ (1993, p.51) – ontological objectivity – difficult, if not impossible. For Conley and Goldman (1995), researching the implementation of education policy in the U.S., this means that they cannot propose a formal hypothesis for the study. Instead they seek to ‘shed light’ on a particular issue and ‘bring a policy analysis perspective to this investigation’ (p.517). The epistemological implications are clear. If policy research is both parasitic and reactive, knowledge will be contextualised, embedded in the processes under investigation. In Spillane’s study of the implementation of state policy in South Carolina in the U.S. this interactive approach to knowledge is highlighted in his discussion of data collection. Noting that there was some interaction between the collection and the analysis of data in his study he continues:

This interaction between data analysis and data collection allowed researchers to test working hypotheses that began to emerge from the data analysis. By continually considering the interaction of data analysis with data collection, researchers clarified and strengthened their understanding of educator’s ideas through searching for, confirming and disconfirming evidence.

(1998, p.222-223)

It is clear that for researchers working in a policy context who accept the complexity of that context, disentangling the processes from the product is an almost impossible task. The methodology for such studies needs to take account of this entanglement.

### **Methodological implications**

Methodological implications emerge. If policy research has to take account of political processes, research placed within a positivist paradigm may be open to accusations of political naivety. Noting that the literature on the methodological challenges faced by policy researchers is as yet undeveloped, Taylor *et al* (1997) suggest that while the kinds of questions

asked will determine the data needed and the means for its collection, the complexities of the processes under consideration in policy research will demand a more engaged and interpretive approach. Ball (1997) suggests that attempts at policy research from within a positivist paradigm are guilty of ahistoricism, the abstraction of knowledge from its contexts. Researchers working in a positivist paradigm, he suggests,

...close down the possibilities for interpretation and rip the actors who feature in the drama of education out of their social totality and their multiple struggles.

(1997, p.269)

However, such 'ripping' of actors from their context, has a certain appeal for policy makers and for others interested in the implementation of education policy. Donmoyer (1995) points out that, from a policy-makers perspective, a researcher working within a positivist paradigm is a 'hero', providing real answers to real questions, 'telling it like it is'. A researcher working from an interpretative paradigm, by contrast, is an irritant, exposing problems and providing further questions instead of answers. Eisner's 'immaculate perception' has a wide appeal for those who must design and fund education policies. Humes and Bryce (2003) note the differing perspectives on the policy process held by those who work in it and those who research it. From the policy-maker's perspective, the policy arena is characterised by decisions which, for a decision-maker generally represent a point of closure. On the other hand, for a researcher working in the policy arena, decisions can never be points of closure, they must always be open to re-interpretation.

Goldstein and Blatchford's overview of research into the relationship between class size and student achievement points to the complexities of 'simulating the reality of social systems' (1998, p.266). They are particularly critical of positivist-inspired accounts of classroom processes. The complexity of the social interactions in classrooms, they conclude, are beyond the capture of positivist research. The social processes of policy making and policy implementation seem to be even further out of the reach of positivist research. All that can be achieved is, as Biddle and Anderson (1991) suggest, a



fragmentary account of an infinitely complex reality. Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that effective policy research needs to move beyond the traditional epistemological poles of positivism and relativism and focus instead on the mechanics of explanation. Fitz *et al* (1994) suggest that given the complexity and shifting realities of the policy process, a design for policy research will have to address the challenge of 'engaging with the changing contours of the policy process' (p.63). Taylor *et al* (1997) similarly reject the positivist paradigm for policy research. They use the term 'policy analysis' for the model they propose, to distinguish it from the 'policy science' tradition that worked to 'determine the technically best course of action to adopt in order to implement a decision or achieve a goal' (p.17). They state their position:

What we 'see' when we examine the processes involved in the development and implementation of any particular policy is framed by larger questions, which are themselves linked to the normative positions we might adopt about education and its role in creating conditions for social reproduction or transformation.

(pp.18-19)

For them no social scientific knowledge can be value neutral.

Previous work in designing for policy research proposed three possible models for research in a policy context (Looney, 2000). The first of these, a model focused on the investigation of policy from within a positivist paradigm placed the researcher in the role of technician. The second model, research as interpretation, was informed by the constructivist rather than the positivist paradigm and presented the researcher as interpreter (of the meaning and effects of the policy) rather than technician. The third model – research as interrogation – was informed by neo-Marxist theories. In this third model the research function is merged with a social transformation function, the researcher generating not simply new knowledge but capacity to transform the context under consideration. The weaknesses of the positivist paradigm for policy research have already been alluded to. Its inherent ahistoricism renders it unsuitable for the complexity of the policy process. The third model takes greater account of both the complexity of the process and the contexts in which

policies are developed and implemented. Issues of power and agency are raised. However while it is of relevance for this study and has an influence on the design of the research instruments, especially in its emphasis on discourse theories, it is not the dominant paradigm within which this research is placed. There are three reasons why this is the case. Firstly, as a researcher, previous work in the policy arena has been undertaken from an interpretative perspective and the model proved both robust and useful for the work, notable for the work pursued in the Institution Focused Study. Secondly, by using the policy cycle as a heuristic for the curriculum and assessment policy process, an interpretive ethos informs even the research question itself. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, given the dual role of researcher-policy maker adopted by the researcher in this study, an antithetical stance on the policy process itself, or a commitment to effect a transformation in the policy process, is not tenable. Simply put, as a significant actor in the curriculum and assessment policy process in the Republic of Ireland, a public statement, albeit within an academic enterprise in the pursuit of a doctoral qualification, cannot actively subvert the policy process. Further discussion of these insider issues is presented below.

Labelling the project as ‘interpretive’ is cautiously done. Generally, interpretative studies are associated with grounded theory approaches:

But what of the interpretative researchers? They begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. Theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations; it should be ‘grounded’ on data generated by the research act. Theory should not precede research but follow it.

(Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.37)

This study is not theoretically *tabula rasa*. The policy cycle has informed the research question, the data collection instruments and will inform the data analysis. An explicit attempt is made to place the interpretative tools in the hands of the participants to use in interpreting their own social realities. This sets the study beyond the usual limits of a normative and positivist approach. Blaikie (1993) suggests that ‘Interpretivism’

entails an ontology in which social reality is regarded as a product of processes by which social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations; it is a complex of socially constructed meanings (p.96)

Critics of 'Interpretative' research, according to Blaikie, come from those working within this form of research as well as from outside it. One such criticism he cites is a claim that explanations of social reality other than those provided by the actors within it should be taken account of in the research. Thus, he notes that critical theory has 'incorporated Interpretivism as an aspect of its overall scheme, but is aware of its limitations (p.110)'. In the study presented here, the account provided by the contextualised social actors is informed by another – that of the policy cycle – from the outset in an attempt to uncover the complexities of the processes operating in the implementation of policy.

### **The challenges of insider research**

From the outset, undertaking any research work as part of the Ed. D. programme has posed some difficulties for this researcher working within the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the statutory body responsible for curriculum and assessment in the Republic of Ireland. It was particularly acute in the Institution Focused Study and was extensively documented in a research diary accompanying that study and resulted in the withholding of permission for public access to the final report (Looney, 2001). Choosing to use the qualitative approaches advocated for policy research further complicates the issues because, as Delamont (1992) suggests, qualitative research qualitatively changes both the researcher and the researched.

The literature on insider research is limited. Robson (1993) provides a useful overview of the advantages and disadvantages of researching as insider. He presents the advantages on a continuum from the simple and practical, such as reduced travel time and costs, to more complex advantages such as the inside knowledge of the historical and social context for the study. In

summary, Robson notes that an insider has a lot of information it would take an outsider a long time to acquire. The disadvantages arise from sharing the role of researcher and colleague and Robson notes the particular challenges that can arise in organisations when the research design involves interviews. He notes the difficulty for the insider in maintaining 'objectivity' given his/her relationship to colleagues and to the institution. Robson asks 'more fundamentally, how are you going to maintain objectivity, given your previous and present close contact with the institution and your colleagues?' (p.300). The use of the word 'objectivity' is interesting given the discussions above about the difficulty of attaining Eisner's 'immaculate perception' in policy contexts in general. Whether Robson's warning pertains only to research from within the positivist paradigm is debatable; what is clear is that the objectivity issues flagged by Robson relating to researching from inside an *organisation* are going to be accentuated by researching from inside a *policy process*.

For Taylor *et al* (1997) all are insiders in some sense – no-one is outside the policy process as observer, technician or analyst. However, it is of note that while some, if limited, attention, is given by the literature to the challenges of insider research, no attention is paid to the complexities that can arise not just from the *placement* of the researcher inside an organisation, or policy process, but from the *position* of the researcher in the organisational hierarchy or within a policy system. For this researcher, being an insider has been compounded by being a 'senior' insider in the organisation and in the policy process at national level. Robson notes that the situation of an insider can be more complex when a colleague being interviewed in the course of a research project is a superior; he does not mention the even greater complexities that can arise when it is the researcher who is the superior.

Zeni (2001) explores the ethical implication of 'practitioner research', focusing chiefly on the implication of teachers engaging in action research in their own classrooms or other educators reflecting on their own practice. She acknowledges the limitations of existing and accepted ethical safeguards for such practitioner research:

We find the ethical safeguards of the outsider doing quantitative, experimental research (random selection, control groups, removing the personal influence of the researcher) either irrelevant or problematic for us as insiders. In the same way, the ethical safeguards of the outsider doing qualitative research (anonymous informants, disguised settings) are subverted as soon as the insider author is named. In addition, anonymity may defeat the insider's goal of open communication with students, colleagues and parents. Ethical issues need to be rethought for the special case of research by practitioners in their own workplaces (p.155).

A similar claim can be made for researchers working within the policy process under investigation. No particular reference is made by Zeni to the position or authority of the researcher in the insider setting and complexities that may arise when a researcher is a senior figure in an organisation or other setting.

Thomson (1998), an Ed. D. student, in a paper presented at the Scottish Educational Research Association Annual Conference, explores, what he called the 'alternative personas' (p.1) of the researcher and the educational professional. Particular difficulties arise, he notes, when the focus of the research coincides with professional responsibilities. He identifies this as an ethical issue, and, in light of the growing number of Ed. D. programmes that encourage a professional-researcher interface, a pressing one for the educational research community. For Thomson, the situation was made more complex by his being a senior manager in the educational institution in which he was conducting his research. His solution was to draw up a statement of ethical commitment, and to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the research in which they were participating. This statement of ethical commitment covered confidentiality, access to data, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study. He also gave explicit attention to subjective personal positions – his personal ontology – and how they interfaced with the research as it progressed. He admits that the ambiguities did not disappear, but he felt that the commitment given allowed for 'meaningful attentiveness' (p.8) in his work. Thomson's short paper is a significant contribution to a neglected area. However, notably, he does not deal with the potential vulnerability of junior staff who participate in research, nor does he mention the unforeseen, but inevitable, organisational and systemic developments in the course of a study

that can have significant implications for the research. For the study presented here, for example, the announcement of significant budget cuts for the curriculum support services as the invitations to participate in the focus group research were being prepared had a significant impact on the timing of the convening of the focus groups, and, as is suggested in chapter four, some impact on their content. This impact arose not just from the general discontent of support service staff in the face of possible cuts, but because the researcher they encountered was also a key decision maker on the future of their organisation.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with similar difficulties in earlier research, work by Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) on interviewing policy ‘elites’ had proven useful. The insider difficulty associated with this study – the collision between the role of researcher and the role as, to use Ozga and Gewirtz’s phrase, a member of the policy elite – is not specifically addressed by them, but consideration is given to the problems that those involved in the policy process may have in participating in research. They offer three suggestions arising from their own experience that have relevance for this study. The first is that a researcher working in such circumstances needs to be self-reflexive about value positions, about theoretical positions and about the research project as it progresses. The second recommendation they make is that there needs to be an awareness of the potential for the exploitation of the research subject – in their case, the policy elites, but in this study those whose careers come within the sphere of influence of the researcher. The third suggestion they make is that the design needs to take account of the fact that interviews with policy makers tend to expose only ‘polished surfaces’ (p.131). It seems likely that those participating in this study may be similarly disposed although for different reasons.

The conduct of the research for the Institution Focused Study was supported by a research diary that documented the research activities and any ‘insider issues’ as they arose. It was a useful tool for self-reflexivity and the

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted however that while in general I would participate in the selection process for any re-hiring of support service staff, I did not participate during the course of the research, nominating other members of staff in my place.

research for this study was accompanied in a similar manner (Appendix one). Thomson's commitment to clear communications and openness about confidentiality, access to data, and anonymity was also emulated in this study. Zeni's concerns about insider researchers who attempt to maintain their own anonymity were also taken on board. Initially, this was considered as a means to ensure that data collected was not unduly influenced by the participants' awareness of the researchers identity and the role of the researcher in the policy process. However, feedback from the pilot phase of the questionnaire on the issue of submitting the completed questionnaire to an anonymous researcher revealed that researcher anonymity led to participant anxiety.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a clear statement about the purpose of the researcher and the destination of the data was necessary if exploitation of the research subjects was to be avoided. Put simply, hiding the professional role of the researcher behind the researcher role would be duping participants and was felt to be less than honest. The differences between the researcher and the researched in terms of power and influence in the policy process increased this sense that anonymity would 'dupe' participants.

In summary, three strategies are adopted in this study for addressing the ethical problems of researching a policy process as a member of an 'elite'. First, the reflexivity recommended by Ozga and Gewirtz is adopted and made explicit through the research diary. Second, the clarity of purpose recommended by Thomas from his Ed. D. experience is also adopted. Third, as suggested by both Thomas and Zeni, no dissembling is attempted in relation to the identity or the position of the researcher. In addition, the code of ethics of the British Educational Research Association (2003) generally used by the Educational Studies Association of Ireland to guide research in the Republic of Ireland, was also drawn upon in planning and conducting the research.

However, it is worth noting that while these strategies were adopted in the face of the insider issues, such issues did not disappear. They were present throughout the study to a greater or lesser extent at different phases. An insider

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<sup>8</sup> See research diary in Appendix one for further discussion on this issue

will remain an insider, she or he cannot pretend to be otherwise. What the strategies used in this study did achieve was to ensure that the researcher and the researched were cognisant of this throughout.

Insider issues, together with a commitment to working within the interpretative paradigm, influenced the shaping of the research design.

## **Design**

Arising from the research questions discussed in chapter one, from theoretical positions mapped above, from the complex insider issues pertaining to the study, and from the practical requirements of engaging with the work schedules and regional spread of support service personnel, a design emerged based on two phases of data collection – a postal questionnaire followed by focus group discussion.

This approach offers a number of advantages, especially when the research is placed within an interpretative paradigm. The potential for triangulation is obvious. But equally, there is potential for some interpretative relationship to be established between the two sets of data – patterns emerging in the first phase of data collection and analysis can be further interrogated in the second. Combining methods in this manner means that the many layers of a complex process – such as the implementation of policy – can be exposed. Creswell (1994), in his analysis of combination designs, likens this to peeling the layers of an onion.

In Creswell's analysis he differentiates between two phase design, dominant-less dominant design, and mixed methodology design. In the first of these, the research consists of two distinct phases, each informed by a different set of theoretical principles. In the second type of combination, the design is rooted in a single dominant paradigm with a minor component of the study drawn from an alternative paradigm. The mixed methodology design draws on both paradigms for the duration of the study. The study presented here, drawing on an interpretative ontology and contextualised epistemology, is



probably best aligned to the second category of Creswell's typology. The questionnaire will result in quantitative results, but these will be considered in the light of the more dominant interpretative paradigm within which the study is placed, and used to inform the focus group discussions.

The use of a combined method approach to data collection is a feature of a number of studies of the implementation of policy. Broadhead (2001) for example, in her investigation of curriculum change in Norway, administered questionnaires to a small group of teachers followed by interviews with subject leaders involved in the process of curriculum development. Simpson and Goulter's (1997) study of the implementation of the 5-14 programme in Scottish secondary schools collected data by means of a national survey followed by annual interviewing of principals and teachers in a number of schools. Hargreaves *et al* (2001) used interviews and observation methods in sixteen schools implementing standards-based reforms. In proposing a similar combined method approach, this study is drawing on an established pattern in other studies.

In any mixed method approach, even of the dominant-less dominant type as identified by Creswell, the researcher must be aware of the potential for fragmentation and the threat to overall coherence in the study. In this study, the policy cycle as a heuristic for the policy process serves as one unifying factor. The fact that the data is collected from the same population, albeit a sample of the population for the focus groups, also serves as a source of unity and coherence.

### **Data collection – the questionnaire**

The first set of data was collected using a postal questionnaire. The population of relevant support service personnel, those working in the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy at the time of the administration of the questionnaire (May 2002), was 172. Using a questionnaire afforded an opportunity to collect data from the whole population. In addition, it allowed for respondent anonymity, an important

safeguard for those participating in the study.<sup>9</sup> A self-completed questionnaire also allowed members of the curriculum support services to reflect on their role in supporting teachers and in the policy process. However, the warning of Robson (1993) in respect of surveys was considered:

Falsely prestigious because of their quantitative nature, the findings are seen as a product of largely uninvolved respondents whose answers owe more to some unknown mixture of politeness, boredom, desire to be seen in a good light, etc., than their true feelings, beliefs or behaviour.

(p.125)

A questionnaire on policy implementation, a complex process, has the potential to have little internal validity if it allows for the submission of pious positioning rather than the insights and experiences of the respondents. The temptation for participants to give such responses was considered. However, informal discussions with other researchers on this issue pointed to a strong mitigating factor in the case of this research study – the person collecting the data is a person who can change how things are done, someone who can influence the policy process under investigation.

A copy of the questionnaire as administered is included as appendix two. The initial items allowed for the identification of respondents with a particular support service and collected data on respondent gender and length of service. Association with a particular curriculum support service was expected to be an important item. Significant differences were not expected between the different services, but earlier work had shown that people who had worked as primary teachers had quite different views on curriculum and assessment from those who had worked as post-primary teachers (Looney 2001). Collecting data on support service affiliation allowed for the primary or post-primary background of the respondent to be identified, without primary/post-primary divisions being flagged at the outset in the questionnaire.

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<sup>9</sup> A number of respondents chose to sign the questionnaire and include contact details if further information was needed. There was a strong correlation between extended responses to the open items in the questionnaire and a willingness to sacrifice anonymity.

One of the curriculum support services listed, SPHE – social, personal and health education – was not included in the final mailing of the questionnaire, reducing the numbers mailed to 150. The exclusion of this post-primary curriculum support service was based on information to which the researcher had access because of her ‘insider’ role in the system. At the time of the distribution of the questionnaire for this study, the SPHE support service working with post-primary teachers implementing a new curriculum for social personal and health education for lower-secondary education was the subject of evaluation. Research being conducted as part of this evaluation had become controversial among staff of the support service. The issue was raised at the management committee, of which the researcher was a member. Sending a questionnaire to members of the support service in such circumstances was considered impolitic.<sup>10</sup>

The rest of the questionnaire had five main sections. Three—on working with teachers, on curriculum and on assessment—featured a number of related scaled items for response. The fourth asked respondents to choose a statement that reflected their confidence in dealing with curriculum issues by comparison with their confidence dealing with assessment issues with teachers. This section also included an open item on the relationship between curriculum and assessment. These sections were designed to be user-friendly and inviting. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the curriculum support service working year, in advance of holiday time. It was considered that lengthy and taxing items would inevitably lower the response rate.

The construction of the items drew on three sources. The literatures on curriculum, assessment and professional development for teachers were significant in developing the items, but it was previous work on curriculum, assessment and their relationship that had the greatest influence on the drafting of these items. (Looney 1999; 2000; 2001). The third factor that shaped the items was the piloting of the questionnaire. This resulted in some refinement, re-wording, exclusions and inclusions in these sections. The pilot version of

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<sup>10</sup> This is also discussed in the Research Diary in Appendix one.

the questionnaire is included in Appendix three. While the items dealt with a number of issues under the major headings, what unified them was that they required the respondents to position themselves in their work, to make judgements about the value of their work and its impact, and to consider how teachers viewed them and their work. This approach invited participants to enter into an interpretative process, not simply to describe what they were doing, but to reflect on it and evaluate it. This interpretative space created by the questionnaire was made particularly explicit in the final item on the policy cycle.

In the final section of the questionnaire participants were offered a diagram of the policy cycle similar to Fig 1. (p. 23). An explanatory note was offered, and then respondents were asked to place themselves on the diagram. Space was offered for an additional comment. In the pilot version of the questionnaire, the shaded area – the area outside the policy cycle diagram – was not included. The participants in the piloting process suggested the addition of a shaded area to offer respondents the possibility of placing themselves outside the triangular diagram. As with the items in the rest of the questionnaire, an explicit attempt was made in the design to offer participants an opportunity not simply to account for their own experiences but to engage in some interpretation of that experience. In offering the diagram, an explicit attempt is made to test the cycle as a heuristic for the policy process, not just for use by those attempting policy analysis, but also for those attempting to understand their own role in the policy process. The degree to which the researched shared in the interpretative work of the research, rather than simply providing the raw material, became clearer as the collection and analysis of data progressed.

The piloting of the questionnaire in April 2002 involved five participants completing a draft questionnaire. The five, three men and two women, were all former members of the support services, and were personally known to the researcher. All were asked to provide information on the time taken to complete the questionnaire (not more than half an hour in all cases), and any other comments they had on the content and design of the instrument. All were

made aware of the purpose of the questionnaire and the target population for the final version. The feedback on the draft was generally positive. Three out of the five commented on the informal style and lack of jargon in the questionnaire as positive features. Apart from some suggestions about wording and phrasing of the scaled items on working with teachers, and on curriculum and assessment, almost all of the follow-up comments focused on the final item on the policy process. None of the five had difficulty completing the diagram, and all availed themselves of the space for an open comment. Two suggested the addition of the shaded area behind the document to allow people to indicate if they felt outside the process. This suggestion was adopted in the final version. All described the item as stimulating or interesting, and as the most challenging item on the questionnaire. One of the participants in the piloting predicted that some support service personnel might have difficulty completing this item because of its apparent complexity.

The participants also offered advice on whether the researcher should attempt to remain anonymous in the course of the data collection process. They were of one mind on this issue – participants in the study would, they believed, be *somewhat* annoyed if they discovered the identity of the researcher afterwards, and *very* annoyed if they discovered it was the Chief Executive Officer of the NCCA.

### Access

While the piloting of the questionnaire was in progress, contact was made with the national co-ordinator to negotiate access to the staff of the support services. While preparations had been made to write to request permission and provide background information, this proved unnecessary. Access was given in each case without hesitation, and without any request for further information. This ease of access was undoubtedly related to the professional role of the researcher rather than the innate appeal of the study. Any researcher welcomes such co-operation; in this case however, while it was welcome, it nonetheless served as a reminder of the complex insider issues associated with this study.

The redrafted questionnaire was mailed in the first week in May 2002, from the researcher's home address, with a covering letter that stated the nature and purpose of the research, and guaranteed the anonymity of responses (Appendix four). No reference was made in the letter to the professional role of the researcher – however all who received the letter would have recognised the name of the person who was inviting them to participate in the research. An opportunity to clarify any issue was offered. No contact, either for questions or concerns, was received during the three-week response period. In the third week a combined thank-you and reminder letter was sent to all who received the questionnaire.

### **Data collection – focus group discussions**

Multiple (and often contradictory) definitions and descriptions of focus group discussions exist in the literature. The varying titles given to this method of data collection illustrated the conceptual confusion. *Group interviews, focus groups, group discussions, focused interviews* – all these terms are used, sometimes interchangeably. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) attempt to clarify matters declaring that 'focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues' (p.4). They make a clear distinction between focus groups and group interviews. In focus groups it is the interaction between the group members that generates the data as well as engagement with the facilitator; in group interviews the data is generated between the interviewer and the group. Cunningham-Burley *et al* (1999) offer a useful distinction between focus groups used for market research and social science:

.... their use in social research has been characterized as distinct from market research, precisely because of an allegiance to an interpretivist rather than a positivist paradigm (p.188).

Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) outline the advantages of focus groups as a method of data collection. Of particular relevance to the nature of this study, is that this method allows participants to generate their own questions and to raise opinions and concerns that might be outside those of the researcher on the

issue under investigation. Comparing this method of data collection with questionnaires, they suggest that while questionnaires can provide any information on how many people hold a particular view, a focus group can give an insight into how that view is constructed. Fern (2001) notes that focus groups also provide the researcher with access to the passions and emotions of the research subjects.

Focus group discussions have obvious disadvantages as research tools. They are unpredictable, discussions can be dominated by one individual or unduly influenced by the group dynamics, only a limited number of questions can be discussed and the order in which they are discussed will affect the way the members react. Cunningham-Burley et al (1999) advocate a high degree of reflexivity on the part of any researcher availing of focus group methods. Issues of power and control arise given the differential power relations between the participants in a focus group and the facilitator. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) suggest that there can be occasions when a focus group may wrest control from a facilitator and take control of the agenda. But they note that this is rare!

The kind of data created by focus groups is also of note. Given that the participants are socially located, data is going to be socially dependent and heavily contextualised. Cunningham-Burley *at al* (1999) note:

Focus groups should not be seen as a way to access some static but as yet untapped set of opinions or preferences. The participants need to be considered as active subjects, who are involved in constructing social reality through interaction, both in their daily lives and in the focus group (p.191).

Therefore, the researcher does not have full control over the process and the outcomes can be somewhat unpredictable.

Unlike other research methods, statistical representation is not the aim of most focus group research. Sampling is a less complex issue for this method than it is for other methods. The characteristics of the participants will only emerge in the course of the discussion. Given the maxim 'recruit more than

you need' the full population of the support services was invited to participate in the focus group stage of the research. The invitations – one for the primary support service, and one for the post-primary<sup>11</sup> – were extended at a time when cuts in personnel in the support service had been announced, and there was some uncertainty as to who would be retained in the following school year.<sup>12</sup> Informal enquiries indicated that members of the support service were not well disposed towards giving up their free time for a researcher who was identified with the 'system' that had put their jobs on the line. This was particularly the case for the post-primary support service where the proposed budget cuts were more severe. If more volunteered than was needed for the two planned discussions, then some screening could be used to ensure a lively interaction. As it transpired, screening was not an option, and given the low number of volunteers, recruitment agents had to be used to make personal contact with support service members to encourage them to participate.

The invitation to the primary curriculum support service members was issued in person during an address to their annual gathering and the researcher remained to meet with any potential volunteers. Twelve members proffered their contact details. Five convened for the focus group discussion. The invitation to members of the post-primary support service was sent via e-mail, as many members were travelling in the course of their work. Ten positive responses were returned, but as the time for the planned focus group collided with interviews for employment in the next phase of the project, some of these became unavailable as the date approached. In the end, an 'agent' was used to recruit the five participants for the post-primary focus group. Rossman and Rallis (1998) claim that a researcher's relationship with his or her participants is constantly evolving through ongoing negotiations, based on terms and conditions set during entry to the research setting. What is not included in these analyses of the relationship between the researcher and the researched is the impact of contextual factors – such as the change in budgets for the support service – on that relationship.

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<sup>11</sup> See pages 14-15 for discussion of the differences between the two groups.

<sup>12</sup> See Research Diary in Appendix one for discussion of these events.



While proponents of focus group methods for market research insist that participants do not know each other, this may not be possible in social research. For this study, the members of the support services were known to each other. This has implications for the confidentiality of the process. While the anonymity of the participants may be guaranteed by the researcher, the participants themselves are not similarly bound, regardless of the undertakings given. The facilitator (the researcher) was also well-known to participants, some of whom may not have had a previous opportunity for any face-to-face engagement with someone as senior in the education system. Consideration was given to hiring a facilitator for the discussions. However, given Barbour and Kitzinger's insistence that the facilitator should know both the issue under investigation and the culture of the group (1999), and taking into account previous negative experience of hiring an outsider to conduct interviews for the Institution Focused Study (Looney, 2001), it was decided that facilitation would be undertaken by the researcher. However the note-taker, a former member of the support services, was given an extensive briefing on the insider issues associated with the research and he agreed to take on a 'moderating' role in the process. Immediately after each focus group discussion we de-briefed on points where he thought that the 'insider' issue might have been a factor.

The focus groups convened in May and June of 2003. The discussions were audio-taped. The discussion guide arose from the analysis of the questionnaire data (see chapter four for further discussion) and is included as appendix five.

## **Analysis**

From the outset, this study has been placed within an interpretative paradigm, focusing on the participants in context, on the insights they have developed through their involvement in the policy process and on the exploration of those insights. A qualitative rather than a quantitative approach is proposed, although quantitative data will be collected through the questionnaire, leading to some decontextualisation but generating important data for understanding the positioning of the support services in the policy process. The need for some further decontextualising distance from the data

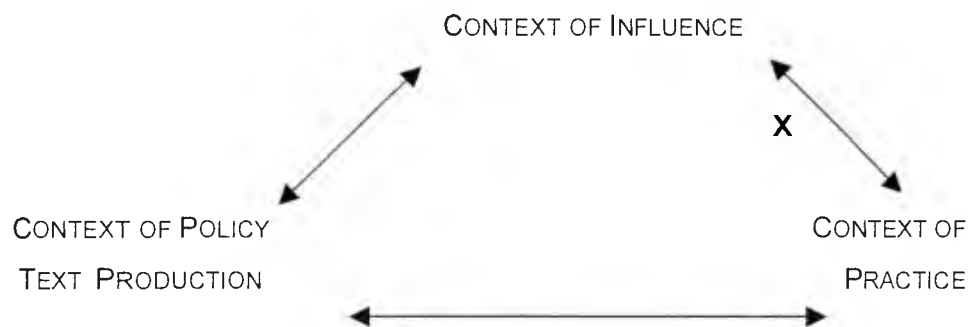
collected arises from the very particular insider circumstances associated with this study. In these circumstances, it is not that the data needs to be ‘removed’ from the settings in which participants work. After all, it is these settings – the policy process in action – that are at the heart of the study. It is the researcher who needs to be ‘distanced’ from the data. Sharing the same setting, working in the same policy space as the support services, the researcher needs to adopt a reflexive approach to the analysis of the data, as well as to its collection.

Previous work for the Institution Focused Study had shown the value of using qualitative software in this regard. The coding process in NUD\*IST 4 in that study had allowed for reflective distance to be established between the insider researcher and the data collected which related to the researchers own institution (Looney, 2000). Interestingly, one of the early criticisms of software for qualitative data analysis arose from a concern that they might alienate researchers from their data (Kelle *et al*, 1995). It could play a similar role in this study, with the development of NUD\*IST 5 (N5) allowing for the easy integration of the SPSS files generated in the analysis of the closed items in the questionnaire data.

Following the input of the open questionnaire items and the focus group discussions, the data was coded using the free code approach offered in N5. The coding categories were based on the literature associated with the policy cycle – the policy cycle was used as a heuristic tool in the data analysis. However, the coding categories were created as work-in-progress with some hermeneutic at work between the codes and the text. This is in keeping with the overall philosophical positioning of the study within an interpretative paradigm.

Most of the questionnaire data – collected a year in advance of the focus group data – was analysed first using SPSS. This was straightforward given the small range of axial variables and the size of N (104). Data was carefully tagged to allow for merging with N5. The analysis of responses to the final item, the graphic representation of the policy cycle, was more complex and was given some consideration during the development of the item, with most

of those consulted suggesting a form of documentary analysis or content analysis. However, work published after the data was collected provided the most useful solution (Allen 2002). This paper, on the trilinear plotting of three variables to allow for the identification of patterns in the relationships between the variables, focused on the use of a triangular graphic in representing complex statistics in public policy analysis. The author showed how different sectors of the triangle could represent the different positions of the respondents to a survey, or even of voters in an election. Each sector was defined in relation to one variable, and opposed to the other two. The positioning of the various sectors on the triangle was based on statistics and mapped on a linear scale associated with each apex of the triangle. In this study, the participants were asked to position *themselves* on the diagram, but the potential for representing that position in relation to the apexes remained. Thus the following response (Fig x) could be represented as a node called INFPPRA, between the context of influence and the context of practice, but not having a relationship to the context of text production. The code INFPPRA could be incorporated as a free node in N5 and correlated with other data.



**Fig 4. Siting on the policy cycle coded as INFPPRA**

This was the approach adapted; it provided for some interesting results as is discussed in chapter four.

## Conclusion

Positioning the research within an interpretive paradigm informed the development of a design based on two methods of data collection – postal

questionnaire and focus group discussions. The ongoing consideration of insider issues throughout the formulation of the design (and, subsequently in the analysis) is also informed by this interpretive paradigm. The reflexivity demanded of the researcher by her role in the policy process led to ongoing interpretation of the researcher-researched relationship. The use of the policy cycle as a heuristic for the experience of implementing curriculum and assessment policy allow for it to be used in interpretation, but also allows for it to be tested as heuristic. The analysis of the data shows that the interpretative frame of the research was extended to the researched – they were offered the opportunity to interpret and interrogate their own experiences in representing them for the researcher.

This multi-layered approach posed a number of challenges for the analysis of the data and for the interpretation of the findings. This analysis, and some initial discussion, is presented in chapter four.

## Chapter Four

### Interrogating the policy process – analysis of data

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#### Introduction

This chapter presents the outcomes of the analysis of the questionnaire and focus group data. The process of analysis, arising from the theoretical and methodological framework set out in the previous chapter, was characterised by three distinct, though interlinked, interpretative relationships. The first of these was the relationship between the data and the policy cycle as presented in the work of Bowe *et al* (1992) and discussed extensively in chapter one and two. The second relationship was that between the two sets of data—questionnaire and focus group. The differences in the nature of the data collection instruments, in the data collected, and the one-year gap between the two collection events allowed for ongoing comparative analysis as well as some hermeneutic explorations. There was also some opportunity for triangulation. In this study, the data are not mutually exclusive, drawing on the same population, and sharing the policy cycle as data collection instrument and analytical tool. The view of Denzin (1988) that the use of multiple methods can assist in the positioning of social phenomena is relevant here.

The third relationship was that between the researcher and the data. This was particularly challenging for the researcher. Given the presence of the researcher in the data collection process, and the influence of the researcher as professional on that process (see discussion on researcher as insider, p. 59 and the research diary in Appendix one), establishing and maintaining some ‘distance’ from the data was difficult. The use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising (NUD\*IST) software for the coding and analysis was important in this regard. Lee and Fielding (1995) note that some users of computer software for the analysis of qualitative data reported anxieties about distance or alienation from the data. In the case of this project, this feature of

the software—the insertion of the software logic between the coder and the data—was welcome. A fourth relationship was that between the literature and the data, largely mediated through the researcher and considered as part of that relationship.

In presenting the results of the analysis in the first part of this chapter, the questionnaire data is presented first and the focus group data is used to triangulate or challenge the questionnaire patterns, or to provide illustrative examples or comment on the emerging patterns. The post-primary focus group members are identified as Lorcan, Donal, Niall, Irene and Kieran, and the members of the primary group as Veronica, Nora, Deirdre, Orla and Frances.

### **About the respondents**

All respondents to the questionnaire, as members of the curriculum support services (p. 14) are seconded from positions as teachers or school principals and hold permanent positions, a requirement for secondment.

	Number of respondents	Years of experience min	Years of experience max	Mean	SD
All	104	2	40	20.6	8.1
Female	73	2	40	19.0	8.1
Male	31	11	35	24.5	6.4

Table 1. Career experience of respondents

Table 1 indicates the average number of years of experience was 20.6 (standard deviation of 8) with the males generally having more years of teaching experience (mean 24.5, SD 6.4) than the females (19.0, SD 8.1). The respondents had a considerable amount of teaching experience. This is to be expected – as discussed in chapter one, to be appointed to any of the curriculum support services will generally require at least 7 years teaching experience and, usually, a post-graduate qualification.

Males were over-represented in the respondent group relative to the proportion of males in the teaching profession generally in the Republic of Ireland, particularly the proportion of males working in primary schools, where they comprise only 19.7% of the total (Department of Education and Science, 2001, p.32). The general perception of secondment to a support service as a promotion within the profession however may be a contributing factor in this regard. As is shown in Table 2, this over-representation is most acute in the post-primary curriculum support services.

In the post-primary focus group males outnumbered females four to one. The primary focus group was an all-female group. While the gender of the participants was a concern in planning for the focus groups, the analysis of the questionnaire data had indicated that gender did not appear to be a significant variable for this study. Ideally, greater balance would have been preferred in the composition of the focus groups.

Respondents were asked to identify themselves with a particular support service and a full list of current support services was given. The purpose of this item was to determine whether the respondent was working with primary or post-primary teachers. Previous research in the area of curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland had shown that alignment with the primary or post-primary sector was a significant factor in attitudes to curriculum and assessment (Looney, 2001). As discussed in chapter three, the full list of curriculum support services was included to ensure that sectoral alignment was not explicitly referenced in any of the items.

Sector	Males	Female	Total
Primary	12	46	58
Post-primary	19	27	46

Table 2. Number of respondents from each sector

While the analysis of gender and years of experience provides a snapshot of the respondents, in subsequent analysis, neither the gender of the respondents

nor their years of experience as a teacher or principal were significant factors in determining the pattern of responses.

### About working with teachers

Table 3 presents the respondents' views of their work with teachers and their perceptions of how that work is viewed by the teachers. The items are presented in descending order – those with the strongest levels of agreement are presented first. The numbers are presented as raw scores.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I give teachers information about changes in curriculum	83	16	4			103
Teachers see me as a support	67	32	2		1	102
I play an important role in the professional development of teachers	70	28	3	1	1	103
Teachers value my work	57	41	2	1	1	102
I help teachers to implement changes in curriculum in their schools and classrooms	69	27	5	1	1	103
I give teachers information about changes in assessment	48	39	10	4	1	102
My work is valued by the education system	32	52	11	3	1	99
Teachers see me as an agent of the Department of Education and Science	39	41	11	9	3	103
My work has a direct impact on teachers' classroom practice	27	51	23	1		102
I help teachers to implement changes in assessment in their schools and classrooms	30	41	20	10	2	103
I play an important role in ensuring that policy decisions are implemented as intended	16	38	30	10	7	101
I have little idea of the impact of my work in classrooms	6	15	23	48	10	102

Table 3. Perceptions of work with teachers

This table shows that members of the curriculum support services appear to place themselves closer to teachers than to classrooms, although there is still



considerable agreement that their work has a direct impact on classroom practice. Given their brief in the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy, it is notable that the ‘implementation site’ includes the interaction with teachers. Also of note in this table is the difference between the responses to the statement on curriculum and those to the statement on assessment.

The message or information-carrying role, which was rated highest by questionnaire respondents, is supported by comments made in the focus group discussions. The post-primary focus group (PPFG) discussed how they sometimes feel like missionaries for official initiatives:

But I think the fact that nearly all of us began life within a programme or a subject that came into existence as a result of a Department and NCCA initiative, meant that there was a sense of carrying a message (Lorcan).

A support service, a team of people is put in place, as a sort of crude instrument for a period of two to three years and it’s just there to get the message across, and in the early years of the implementation of a new syllabus or curriculum, that is what it is about, getting this particular message across (Niall).

Equally, their colleagues in the primary focus group (PFG) talked about the ‘message on the day’ and the importance of the message being delivered well.

I think they value the continuity of the message across all the schools. If an inspector visits from the DES<sup>13</sup> or from School Development Planning they will hear the same message (Orla).

Further analysis data from this section of questionnaire was conducted to establish whether the gender of the respondents was a significant factor in the pattern of responses. Tables 4 and 5 present this analysis for the items with greatest and lowest levels of support, in relation to gender. Raw and percentage figures are presented to allow for male/female comparisons.

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<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Science

<b>I give information about changes in curriculum.</b>							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Male	24	6	1				31
%	77.4	19.4	3.2				100
Female	59	10	3			1	73
%	80.8	13.7	4.1			1.4	100
Total	83	16	4			1	104
%	79.8	15.4	3.8			1.0	100

Table 4. Analysis by gender of strongest item

<b>I have little idea of impact of work in classrooms</b>							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Male	2	2	4	16	7		31
%	6.5	6.5	12.9	51.6	22.6		100
Female	4	13	19	32	3	2	73
%	5.5	17.8	26.0	43.8	4.1	2.7	100
Total	6	15	23	48	10	2	104
%	5.8	14.4	22.1	46.2	9.6	1.9	100

Table 5. Analysis by gender of weakest item

The patterns for these two analyses are repeated for all others; the gender of the respondents was not a significant factor. A similar pattern was identified for years of experience.

As expected from previous work (Looney 2001), whether the respondents were working with primary or post-primary teachers was related to a number of the items on working with teachers, notably on the issues of classroom impact and policy implementation.

<b>My work has a direct impact on teachers' classroom practice</b>							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary	37	16	1			1	57
%	63.7	27.7	1.7			1.7	
Post-primary	24	10	3	6			45
%	53.3	22.2	4.3	13			100
Total	61	26	4	6		1	102
%	59.8	25.5	3.8	5.8		.9	100

Table 6. Analysis by sector of how respondents view the impact of their work on classroom practice.

As Table 6 shows, a considerably greater proportion of those working with primary teachers felt that their work had a direct impact on the practice of teachers. 6 (13%) of the respondents from the post-primary support services disagreed with the statement that their work had a direct impact on classrooms. By comparison, none of their primary colleagues did so. However, as Table 7 shows, there was little difference between the two groups on whether they knew what kind of impact they were having, with a slightly greater proportion (21.7%) of respondents from the post-primary support services agreeing that they had little idea of the impact of their work in classrooms by comparison with 18.9% of the respondents from the primary curriculum support service.

		<b>I have little idea of the impact of my work in classrooms.</b>						
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary		2	9	15	25	6	1	58
%		3.4	15.5	25.9	43.1	10.3	1.7	100
Post-primary		4	6	8	23	4	1	46
%		8.7	13.0	17.4	50.0	8.7	2.2	100
Total		6	15	23	48	10	2	104
%		5.8	14.4	22.1	46.2	9.6	1.9	100

Table 7. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of their knowledge of the impact of their work.

There were also differences between the primary and post-primary support services on the item about ensuring that policy decisions are implemented in classrooms.

		<b>I play an important role in ensuring that policy decisions are implemented as intended</b>						
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary		8	16	18	8	5	3	58
%		13.8	27.6	31.0	13.8	8.6	5.2	100
Post-primary		8	22	12	2	2		46
%		17.4	47.8	26.1	4.3	4.3		100
Total		16	38	30	10	7	3	104
%		15.4	36.5	28.8	9.6	6.7	2.9	100

Table 8. Analysis by sector of how respondents view their work in relation to policy implementation

65.2% of post-primary respondents agreed that they had role in ensuring that policy was implemented yet only 41.4% of primary respondents agreed with this description.

A different picture emerges when the comments on the policy process collected in section 6 of the questionnaire are analysed. It appears from this analysis that primary respondents are much more likely than their post-primary colleagues to describe their work as part of a process of policy implementation. The following are typical:

My current work involves interpreting and delivering the content of policy documents to practitioners who will implement them (R19).

I help with the implementation of policy (R64).

Post-primary respondents rarely describe themselves in these terms – in fact analysis shows only one post-primary response coded at the ‘implementation of policy’ node:

As part of a support service, I would hope to have a role to play in helping teachers to implement policy – in this case a revised syllabus – while being conscious of how the process originated (R49).

Most post-primary respondents who made a comment on the policy process focused on the aspects of the process in which they felt they had no role, or from which they felt excluded. The following is typical:

Decisions on policy documents did not involve, or do not involve people in my position. Our work is completely on the implementation of the syllabus (R100).

The respondent below used the policy contexts presented in the policy cycle to position his work:

Nearest to practice, down the line from text production, far removed from decision-making. (R51)

Further consideration of this issue is presented later in the chapter when data collected in the policy cycle item is analysed and the relationship between the different policy sites is considered in more detail.

The members of the post-primary focus group tended to describe themselves more in terms of supporting teachers, or providing continuing professional development for teachers. Niall, for example, describes what he does ‘as encouraging teachers in their practice, trying to create a culture of reflective practice. I say that I work in support of teachers’. Donal narrows the description somewhat:

Supporting teachers, yeah. But only teachers who have to deal with new programmes or subjects or curriculum change. We don't really deal with all teachers at senior cycle.

By contrast, Deirdre, in the primary group, describes herself as ‘supporting the revised English curriculum in schools’. This difference in emphasis between the primary and post-primary focus groups is not reflected in the questionnaire data on curriculum, although, as analysis of the diagram and comments on policy will show, the differences between the two sectors are more complex than they might initially appear. The research design for this study brought together qualitative and quantitative data in an interpretative framework. Here, the challenge of such an approach is brought to the fore. The findings appear contradictory; triangulation is not possible, but the interrogation of one finding using the other is. The meaning of both findings requires close examination in an attempt to construct an explanation. This examination is conducted in chapter five when an attempt is made to map the location of the support services using a number of reference points drawn from the findings – even the contradictory ones.

The analysis of views on assessment also shows a difference between the sectors with those working with post-primary teachers more likely to describe their work as supporting changes in assessment.

<b>I help teachers to implement changes in assessment in their schools and classrooms</b>							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary	11	23	13	8	2	1	58
%	19.0	39.7	22.4	13.8	3.4	1.7	100
Post-primary	19	18	7	2			46
%	41.3	39.1	15.2	4.3			100
Total	30	41	20	10	2	1	104
%	28.8	39.4	19.2	9.6	1.9	1.0	100

Table 9. Analysis by sector of how respondents view their work with assessment.

The analysis of the focus group data shows that assessment was given greater attention in the primary discussion, with an emphasis on teacher fear and anxiety around record keeping and reporting. The following exchange is typical:

Nora: There's a fear factor out there – we haven't mentioned the word fear yet and certainly in relation to SPHE<sup>14</sup>, people were paranoid about committing anything to paper that might seem judgemental about a child because you know the points about teacher observation<sup>15</sup> that are there in the SPHE curriculum

Deirdre: They found those points very good though.

Nora: They knew they were doing this all the time, yes, but they found them a bit threatening (PFG).

Similar concerns were also identified for English and for Visual Arts:

Deirdre: Teachers have a lot of worries about any tests, especially about who is going to ask for the results, I mean the inspector, or the parents of the principal.....

Frances: But in art they worry that any kind of assessment will somehow spoil the enjoyment of art and undermine children's creativity. They still focus too much on the end product instead of on the process.

<sup>14</sup> Social, Personal and Health Education, a component of the primary curriculum as well as a stand alone subject at post-primary level

<sup>15</sup> One of the assessment methods listed in the curriculum for SPHE.

In the post-primary discussions, consideration of assessment was confined to examinations and in particular, to members of the support service believing that they did not have adequate access to information about the examinations. As discussed in chapter one, the remit for the support services includes engaging with teachers on these issues.

Assessment was painful stuff, and the support service did not necessarily have the answers to the queries people had, nor did they have the authority necessary to provide the information. (Niall)

These differences are revisited in the analysis of the assessment section of the questionnaire.

### About curriculum

Table 10 presents the perceptions of the respondents of the curriculum aspects of their work. The items are again presented in descending order of agreement, the numbers presented in raw form.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Curriculum change means more work for teachers	37	53	10	4		104
Textbooks have a greater impact than the curriculum on classroom practice	28	53	15	8		104
Curriculum is developed centrally and implemented locally	29	51	10	12	1	103
Teachers have considerable freedom in how they implement the curriculum in their classrooms	21	55	11	14	3	104
Curriculum is going to be a controversial issue for policy makers in the near future	16	51	26	10		103
I play an important role in the development of curriculum in the education system as a whole	16	46	28	12	1	103
Teachers have a good understanding of the principles underpinning curriculum	1	55	25	20	3	104

Table 10. Respondents' views of curriculum.

The significance in the role of text-books in shaping curriculum was somewhat unexpected in the perceptions of the support services. Of note is the fact that in the Republic of Ireland the choice of text-books is made at school level and the production of school text-books, although governed by general guidelines produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, is a commercial and private enterprise. Hall and Kavanagh (2002) note that 'primary teachers have, since the early 1970's, enjoyed considerable autonomy over matters of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment' (p. 261). This autonomy extends to the use and choice of text-books.

The issue was also highlighted in the primary focus group, although not mentioned by the post-primary group. Veronica, a member of the primary group noted:

But its still an often asked question in SPHE– when is the book coming out? You say its there already, in the different programmes, but they are still looking for 'the book'. I would sometimes say to them, come on, that we don't need to sell ourselves to the tyranny of the publishers and so on. But they just want them there. And teachers will complain about the price of their booklists, even for junior infants!

This circumscription of the professional role of the teachers was balanced somewhat by the relatively strong agreement with the idea that teachers have considerable freedom in how they implement the curriculum in classrooms.

Respondents were not wholly convinced that teachers have a good understanding of the principles underpinning the curriculum. This seems at odds with the strong identification with the information-giving role the respondents ascribe to themselves in the first section of the questionnaire – what exactly are the support teams giving information about? However, this finding concurs with the analysis of the state of curriculum presented in the literature review in chapter two. In the light of the shift to the technical, in the absence of new and accessible curriculum theories, why should the support service personnel emphasise the underpinning principles if the needs of teachers and schools are associated with the management of curriculum rather than its deconstruction?



In the data collected on curriculum, primary or post-primary affiliation was less influential than in the data collected on work with teachers. Interestingly, both groups were of one mind on the fact that curriculum change means more work for teachers! There was also very little difference on the issue of textbooks – this is somewhat surprising given a general perception that text books would be less significant in primary schools given the absence of high stakes testing. Hall and Kavanagh (2002) note that a different culture exists in post-primary schools in Ireland due to the backwash of public examinations in post-primary schools.

There were some differences between the primary and post-primary groups in the sample on whether curriculum was going to be controversial for policy makers with 58.6% of respondents working with primary teachers agreeing that curriculum was going to be a controversial issue for policy makers soon, in comparison with 71.9% of those working with post-primary teachers.

		Curriculum is soon going to be a controversial issue for policy-makers						
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary		8	26	17	7			58
%		13.8	44.8	29.3	12.1			100
Post-primary		8	25	9	3		1	46
%		17.4	54.3	19.6	6.5		2.2	100
Total		16	51	26	10		1	104
%		15.4	49.0	25.0	9.6		1.0	100

Table 11. Analysis by sector of respondents' perceptions of curriculum as a controversial issue.

The findings on the perceptions of the curriculum support services of their participation in the development of curriculum as a whole are interesting. The differences between the primary and post-primary support services are of note here, particularly the 21.8% of post-primary respondents who disagree that they have any role in this work.

<b>I play important role in curriculum development in system</b>							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary	13	24	18	3			58
%	22.4	41.4	31.0	5.2			100
Post-primary	3	22	10	9	1	1	46
%	6.5	47.8	21.7	19.6	2.2	2.2	100
Total	16	46	28	12	1	1	104
%	15.4	44.2	26.9	11.5	1.0	1.0	100

Table 12. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of their role in curriculum development

As with the items under the heading of working with teachers, neither the gender of the respondents, nor their years of service, significantly impacted on the rank ordering of the items.

### **About assessment**

Respondents appear generally less certain in their views on assessment than in their views on curriculum with responses being much more widely distributed than responses on curriculum. Table 13 presents their views on assessment, again in descending order of agreement:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Assessment is going to be a controversial issue for policy makers in the near future	34	50	17	1		102
Changes in assessment mean more work for teachers	38	43	15	7		103
Assessment shapes the curriculum in classrooms	33	28	15	26	2	104
Teachers are convinced that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning	17	38	20	24	4	103
Teachers see the purpose of assessment in classrooms as gathering data for reporting to parents	9	46	18	27	3	103
Teachers see the purpose of assessment as providing feedback for learners	6	45	25	25	2	103
I play an important role in the development of assessment in the education system as a whole	3	30	41	25	5	104
Teachers are confident in their assessment practice in classrooms		30	21	47	5	103
In general, schools have well-developed reporting strategies	2	25	25	46	6	104
In general, schools have well developed assessment policies	1	16	23	57	7	104

Table 13. Respondents' views on assessment.

The uncertainty about the purposes of assessment in classrooms and schools is clearly evident. On the issue of reporting to parents for example, 55 (52.8%) respondents agreed that teachers see the purpose of the assessment in classrooms as gathering data for reporting to parents, but 30 (28.8%) disagreed with this. There was a similar split on the issue of feedback for learners as the purpose of assessment. This is not surprising given Hall and Kavanagh's analysis of assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland which concluded that 'official policy lacks clarity and suffers from epistemological weaknesses in relation to the different purposes and forms of assessment' (2002, p. 262).

The respondents were more united in their negative perceptions of teacher confidence in assessment and school policies and structures for supporting assessment. For example 64 (61.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the assertion that schools have well developed assessment policies, with only 17 (26.6%) agreeing that the policies were well developed.

Working within a primary or post-primary context was strongly associated with some, but not all, data on assessment. On whether assessment was going to be a controversial issue in the future, there was little difference between the sectors, and on the issue of more work for teachers, the difference was only in the region of 6%.

However, as Table 14 reveals, there was a striking difference between the primary and post-primary groups on the backwash of assessment in classrooms with post-primary teachers almost unanimous (close to 90%) in their perception of the impact of assessment on classroom practice. By contrast, about a third of those working with primary teachers held the same view.

	Assessment shapes curriculum in classrooms						Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	
Primary	6	14	13	23	2		58
%	10.3	24.1	22.4	39.7	3.4		100
Post-primary	27	14	2	3			46
%	58.7	30.4	4.3	6.5			100
Total	33	28	15	26	2		104
%	31.7	26.9	14.4	25.0	1.9		100

Table 14. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of the impact of assessment on classrooms.

The focus group data supports the questionnaire findings. While the discussions on assessment in the PPFG largely related to examinations, both groups agreed that teachers were confused and even fearful when issues of assessment were being discussed. The exchange quoted earlier in this chapter (page 86) about teachers' reactions to assessment in SPHE illustrates this

point. The discussion continues with an observation about the teacher union concerns about assessment. Nora recounts her experiences:

I remember all that about SPHE. I'd say there is still a general sense of 'no' to assessment in SPHE, regardless of what it says in the curriculum documents. Last year in particular when you mentioned assessment, strong teacher union people asked 'where does the union stand on this, I thought we were not going to be ticking boxes etc? So there was a strong anti-assessment message. This was certainly how it was last year.

Deirdre adds a dramatic anecdote about newspaper waving teachers when she attempted to deal with assessment at a teacher seminar. The 'profiles' she mentions were assessment tools for English that were published in 2001 without notice by the Department of Education and Science. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the powerful primary teachers' union promptly embargoed their use, an embargo that remains in place to this day. She relates:

The problem with assessment was that the PR got out ahead of the documents! So in year one, you came to the session and it was always a dread when you got to the assessment part of the session, the body language changed and everyone got defensive. But when you got them in to the documents and they started to see what was involved and they realised that they were already doing it. But the profiles were a disaster. They came out at the wrong time, when the stuff about leagues tables was going on in England. People came to the seminars with the English newspapers and waved them around!

The PFG continues their discussion to recount how their own induction into the profiles was less than successful. Veronica remembers:

When we had our own sessions, do you remember Deirdre, people were up in arms when we tried to use them, because we all ticked different boxes.

The PFG discussed similar fears and dramatic encounters with teachers on the issue of assessment, but the 'angst', a phrase used by Lorcan to describe teachers' reactions to assessment, was directed towards the public state examinations:

If you are the person supplying the information on assessment, well there can sometimes be a little bit of angst around that. And in that sense we were the agents or informants because we were explaining the assessment system and were associated with the Department, so that made it fraught.

Just as Deirdre, in the PFG, described the change on body language of seminar attendees when assessment was discussed, Niall makes a similar observation suggesting that ‘talking about assessment with teachers de-rails the support process in a way’. He describes it as ‘painful stuff’. Painful it might have been but all members of the post-primary group agreed with Kieran that ‘everyone wanted to talk about examinations’.

One very clear difference emerges between the two focus group discussions on the assessment issue. While the issue was controversial for the primary curriculum support service, focus group members do not identify this as problematic for them, or as a source of stress. After the waving of the English newspaper incident, for example, Deirdre observes:

The curious thing about it is that four years later, so many people will say that the profiles are really useful.

The controversy is overcome, teachers are persuaded. Frances describes her strategy working on assessment for the visual arts curriculum with teachers.

When I came to assessment I asked them to think about why we teach art—as a way of knowing— so then you just have to check that there is learning happening.

By contrast, members of the post-primary focus group do not feel themselves to be well equipped to meet teachers’ needs in relation to assessment. The needs are straightforward—information about the examination. Niall notes that

.....the support service did not necessarily have the answers to the queries people had, nor did they have the authority which would have been with the inspector responsible for the assessment.

This idea of ‘not having the authority’ is echoed by Kieran:

When it comes to assessment, I mean we are the point of contact for teachers, and we don’t have access to the necessary information about assessment. In other words we are not allowed to participate in the marking conferences so we are going to give the in-service without the information-so it puts you in an impossible situation with teachers.

Lorcan explains how he feels like an advocate for the subject when he is working with teachers on curriculum issues, but acts as an advocate for teachers in relation to assessment, feeding back their concerns and questions about the examination:

I always felt that the advocacy role we had in relation to the curriculum was with the teachers. When it came to assessment, the advocacy role was going back to the Department and voicing concerns. It moved both ways.

The post-primary focus group members appear to position assessment outside their interactions with teachers, as an external largely negative influence.

The questionnaire data shows that, despite the backwash, members of the post-primary support services ascribe greater confidence in assessment to teachers than their primary counterparts. Table 15 shows however, that even though the post-primary teachers are presented as having greater confidence, no questionnaire respondent strongly agreed that teachers had confidence in their assessment practice.

		Teachers are confident in their assessment practice						
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary	Count		10	11	34	3		58
	%		17.2	19.0	58.6	5.2		100
Secondary	Count		20	10	13	2	1	46
	%		43.5	21.7	28.3	4.3	2.2	100
Total	Count		30	21	47	5	1	104
	%		28.8	20.2	45.2	4.8	1.0	100

Table 15. Analysis by sector of respondents’ views of teacher confidence in assessment practice.

As noted earlier, the post-primary focus group discussed examinations and their role in giving information about the examinations to teachers. They did not allude to teachers' assessment practice, only to teacher concerns in relation to examinations. The discussions in the primary focus group included this exchange about the use of standardised tests that appears to support the findings of the questionnaire data about perceived lack of teacher confidence in assessment:

Veronica: I don't think schools make enough out of the tests they do. They just do them, but that's it. They don't use them to inform planning and teaching.

Orla: They do them to get extra resources, and for learning support, and for selection.

Nora: That's true

Deirdre: And I'd say some of them just do the tests for the parents. Parents want the test scores.

The analysis by sector in Table 16 of the item on assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning shows a similar lack of confidence in teachers' assessment abilities.

		Teachers are convinced that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning						
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary			22	14	20	2		58
%			37.9	24.1	34.5	3.2		100
Post-primary		17	16	6	4	2		46
%		37.8	35.6	13.3	8.9	4.4		100
Total		17	38	20	24	4		104

Table 16. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of teachers' beliefs that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

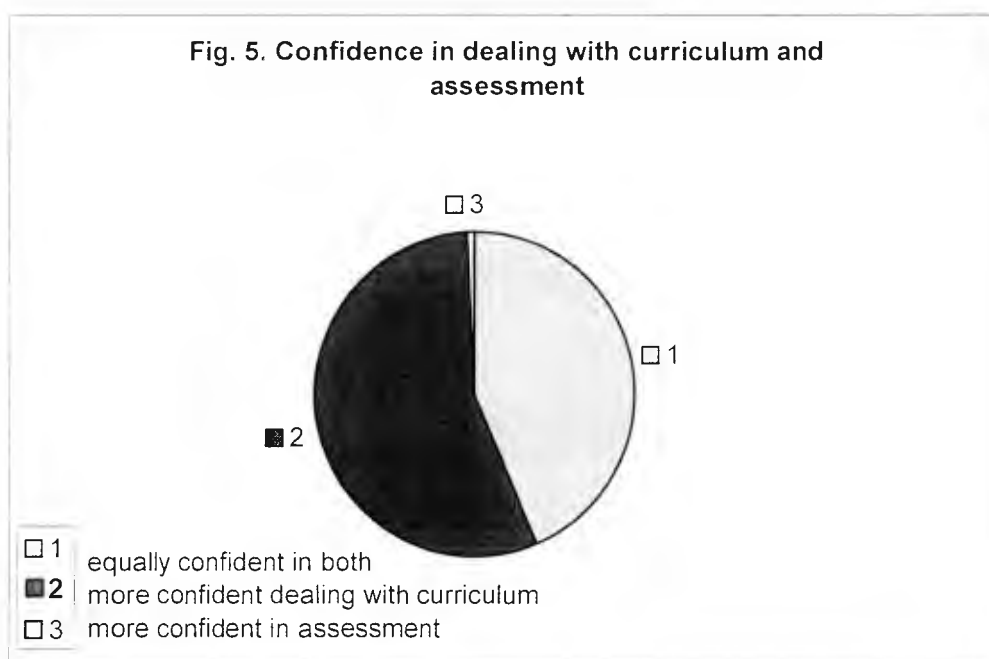
In this item, in a repeat of the pattern on general confidence in assessment practice, post-primary teachers are rated more highly than their primary colleagues. This is somewhat surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the analysis of the comments on the respondents' own understanding of the relationship between curriculum and assessment (p. 24) shows that this pattern is reversed,



with members of the primary curriculum support service more likely to describe assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning. Secondly, 'assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning' is listed as one of the 'defining features of the curriculum' in the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999, p 10-11). This issue is discussed further in chapter five.

### Confidence in dealing with curriculum and assessment

In section 6 of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt equally confident when dealing with curriculum issues and assessment issues with teachers, or whether they felt more confident in dealing with either curriculum or assessment issues. While the pattern of the data to-date would lead to an expectation of greater confidence in curriculum, the lack of confidence in assessment was striking, with only one respondent indicating a greater degree of confidence in assessment.



There were differences between the confidence expressed by those working with primary teachers and that of those working with post-primary teachers – but there were also somewhat surprising similarities.

	<b>Confidence in dealing with curriculum and assessment</b>		
	Equally confident in both	More confident in curriculum	More confident in assessment
Primary	22	36	0
%	37.9	62.1	
Post-primary	23	21	1
%	50.0	45.6	-
Total	45	57	1
%	43.2	54.8	-

Table 17. Analysis by sector of respondents' confidence dealing with curriculum and assessment

Given the impact accorded to assessment and examinations by the support service personnel working with post-primary teachers it was expected that this would be an area in which they would feel particularly professionally competent. While they certainly claimed more confidence in assessment than their colleagues working with primary teachers, the difference between the two groups was not as significant as might have been expected.

The 'gap' between curriculum and assessment was further highlighted when considered alongside data collected earlier in the questionnaire on the issue of giving teachers information about changes in curriculum and assessment. Drawing on the findings presented in Table 3, the following comparison shows that the support service accords greater priority to working on curriculum than on assessment.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I give teachers information about changes in curriculum	83	16	4			103
I give teachers information about changes in assessment	48	39	10	4	1	102

Table 18. Respondents' views of their work with curriculum and assessment.

A similar pattern was evident in how respondents viewed their work in relation to contributing to the development of curriculum and the development of assessment in the education system as a whole.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I play an important role in the development of curriculum in the education system as a whole	16	46	28	12	1	103
I play an important role in the development of assessment in the education system as a whole	3	30	41	25	5	104

Table 19. Respondents' views of their role in the development of curriculum and assessment.

Further analysis of the data in Table 20 shows some notable differences between the respondents from the PCSP and those working with post-primary support services.

	<b>I play important role in curriculum development in the system</b>						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	Total
Primary	13	24	18	3			58
%	22.4	41.4	31.0	5.2			100
Post-primary	3	22	10	9	1	1	46
%	6.5	47.8	21.7	19.6	2.2	2.2	100
Total	16	46	28	12	1	1	104
%	15.4	44.2	26.9	11.5	1.0	1.0	100

Table 20. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of their role in the development of curriculum.

Clearly, the primary respondents see themselves as having a greater role in the development of curriculum than their post-primary colleagues. This difference is even more acute on the issue of the development of assessment.

	I play important role in assessment development in the system						Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing	
Primary	13	20	18	6			58
%	22.4	35.7	31.0	10.7			100
Post-primary	1	9	11	21	3	1	46
%	2.2	19.5	23.9	45.6	6.5	2.2	100
Total	14	39	29	27	3	1	104
%	13.4	37.5	27.9	25.9	2.8	.9	100

Table 21. Analysis by sector of respondents' views of their role in the development of assessment in the system.

While the pattern of a lesser claim to a role in the development of assessment than in the development of curriculum is shared across all respondents, it is particularly acute in the post-primary respondents.

### **The relationship between curriculum and assessment**

This section of the questionnaire concluded with an open item inviting respondents to provide a summary of their understanding of the relationship between curriculum and assessment. Only 10 of those who responded to the questionnaire chose to leave this item blank, 4 working with the post-primary curriculum support services, and 6 with the primary curriculum support programme. An additional respondent commented simply that she had no idea what the relationship was or was supposed to be.

Coding the remainder of the responses was a complex task using multiple nodes, and involved coding many of the comments under a number of categories. The complexity arose from the widely differing comments, from the differences in emphases even within similar comments, and from the enthusiasm of a number of respondents to comment on assessment issues generally, without addressing the question of the relationship between curriculum and assessment! These latter comments were coded however and included in the overall analysis. In the first instance they are important data in

support of the findings about general conceptual confusion regarding assessment. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they offer insight into how respondents place assessment in the policy process.

The coding categories drew on the literature on curriculum and assessment and on the closed items in the questionnaire. As some of the responses did not refer specifically to the relationship between curriculum and assessment, codes for these emerged from the data itself.

Of those comments that did deal with the question asked, most used either ‘integral’ or ‘central’ to describe the position of assessment in relation to the curriculum, with members of the PCSP more likely to use this terminology than their post-primary colleagues. The following were typical:

Assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum (R16).

Assessment should be seen as an integral part of the curriculum and not an add on at the end (R29).

My belief is that both are an integral part of the education system. You can’t have one without the other (R95).

Other phrases used to describe the relationship between the two include ‘interlinked’ (R57), ‘reciprocal’ (R66) and ‘hand in hand’ (R21). One of the respondents offered a more reflective comment on how the ‘integration might work’:

The relationship between curriculum and assessment is cyclical: Curriculum informs assessment, which, in turn, informs curriculum. It is really similar to an action research model (R19).

A subset of these ‘integral’ or ‘central’ comments was the set of comments that placed assessment as integral to teaching and learning. The relationship with curriculum, in such comments, is mediated through teacher planning and action:

Assessment should be an integral part of the teaching and learning (R36).

Assessment is critical to the cycle of teaching and learning (R45).

Assessment is an on-going part of the teaching and learning process in all subject areas (R70).

The comments from the primary respondents on this theme of the place of assessment as integral to teaching and learning outnumbered the comments from post-primary respondents two to one. It is of note that in the data collected in section 4 of the questionnaire, primary teachers were less likely to agree that teachers considered assessment to be an integral part of teaching and learning. The members of the primary curriculum support service may hold strong opinions on this matter, but they are not convinced that their colleagues in classrooms are similarly convinced.

Primary respondents were also over-represented, although not to the same degree, in the comments that described an evaluative relationship between assessment and curriculum. Assessment, in this set of comments, can provide information to the teacher.

I believe that the assessment and evaluation process should inform school/teacher planning and curriculum implementation (R22).

Curriculum/how curriculum is implemented is influenced by how the teacher interprets assessment findings which in turn influences future assessment (R69).

Other comments focused on how assessment can provide information to the system at large on the progress of curriculum implementation.

Assessment shows, how well, or not, curriculum is being implemented (R28).

Assessment is a means of gauging how successful implementation of curriculum is and what progress is being made (R87).

One of the post-primary respondents combined both the teacher and the system perspective on curriculum evaluation.

Where assessment is valid, equitable and consistent it encourages the implementation of the curriculum by those whose responsibility it is to implement it i.e. teachers in the classroom. It also gives credibility to in-service providers and fosters a relationship of trust between the partners in education involved in the area of curriculum and assessment (R 38).

While these comments about the 'integral' relationship between curriculum and assessment were spread across primary and post-primary respondents with a greater number coming from the primary support services, the second most popular type of comment was largely the preserve (with only two exceptions) of members of the post-primary curriculum support services. These comments were coded under a category labelled 'tail-and-dog' and were characterised by an instrumental perspective, and a largely negative presentation of the impact of assessment on curriculum.

Assessment currently drives the curriculum. Increasingly teachers teach the examination over the curriculum so it is the examination content that becomes the curriculum the students encounter. Curriculum without any assessment is dreaded by teachers. Formative assessment is the way forward but we are at very early stages of convincing teachers that it has merits (R.1).

Assessment distorts the curriculum in both planning and delivery (R.104).

Words like 'distort' and 'drive' are features of the comments of post-primary respondents on the relationship between curriculum and assessment. Four respondents expressed a concern that the curriculum was 'narrowed' by the pressures of the examination system. Three went so far as to suggest that there was no real relationship between curriculum and assessment:

Curriculum and assessment are two distinct aspects of the educational process at second level. There is no connection (R.58).

Currently, curriculum and assessment although they appear to be interlinked are, in fact, two separate and distinct aspects of the educational process at second level<sup>16</sup> (R31).

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<sup>16</sup> Post-primary education is also referred to a second level education

This (the relationship between curriculum and assessment) does not exist, especially in the junior cycle in schools. It's the gap between curriculum and assessment that exists (R41).

One respondent included a long reflective comment on his own experience as a teacher of physics. His comment on the 'pathetic' electronics section of the syllabus is a notable example of a participant in the study availing of the data collection process to convey a message to the researcher in her professional capacity. This phenomenon also presents in the discussion of School Development Planning in the PFG analysed later in this chapter.

Because of the 'points'<sup>17</sup> system, assessment is the crucial part, particularly for exam classes. It really doesn't matter what's on the curriculum, as long as the teacher ensures that the students are geared to gain maximum points. As a former physics teacher I would have very strong views about what it and what isn't on the syllabus (particularly the pathetic electronics section) which I know is not the same as curriculum, but as the years go by I am more concerned with maximising points (R3).

The focus group discussions did not deal with the issue of the relationship between curriculum and assessment, except when teachers' perspectives on assessment were being discussed. The schedule for the focus group did not include the relationship as a separate item. The questionnaire item gathered respondents' understandings of the relationship; this was not considered appropriate for focus groups where some of the data is created in the interaction between the participants – it was unlikely that any agreed or shared understanding would have been produced. In hindsight, some discussion of this specific issue might have been productive.

'Integral' and its associations coded the most comments (34) followed the 'tail-wagging the dog' (21) followed by 'evaluation' (17).<sup>18</sup> However, 14 comments were placed in the 'planning' category. These comments described how assessment helped with planning curriculum, and teaching and learning strategies.

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<sup>17</sup> The points are used for university entrance in the Republic of Ireland. They are based solely on the grades achieved in the Leaving Certificate examinations.

<sup>18</sup> Comments can be coded in more than one category.



What is particularly interesting about these comments was that they came from primary respondents only. Whether this may relate to other data where there were significant differences between the primary and the post-primary curriculum support services is considered in chapter 5. The following comments on how the relationship between curriculum and assessment was mediated through school or teacher planning were typical:

Assessment should be a basis for curriculum planning, implementation, and teaching and learning (R65).

Practice of teaching/learning must take account of learning outcomes as identified by formal and informal assessment procedures (R80).

Assessment is vital to all! Teachers must use it to help individual teachers and schools as entire units to reflect upon the progress of students, the appropriateness of programmes of work and the general learning outcomes of all students (R20).

The PFG also concerned itself with planning. Deirdre notes that, as the primary curriculum emphasises, planning is the key to change:

For the subject to be changed in the school, you have to move from the individual teacher in the school willing to make change, to the school planning for change. This is how it happens, and it is starting to happen now.

There was also considerable discussion of the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), where school staffs have to work together to produce school development plans. For the PFG this initiative was causing confusion among teachers. These comments may be similar to the observation about the 'pathetic electronics' section of the physics syllabus made in one of the questionnaires. They may be less about ideas about planning, and more about making a point to the researcher! The following is an extract from what was quite an extended (at least five minutes) criticism of School Development Planning and the SDPI personnel.

Veronica: School Development Planning though, they see themselves as different.

Orla: Some schools don't see any difference though, they don't see the two as separate.

Veronica: No, they don't.

Orla: I know principals who would ask me do I know so and so, and that person

would be from SDPS – they really don't see the two as different.

Deirdre: I would see when the conflict arises though is when you begin to sit down with teachers to do planning with them and, you know, and I have been in so many situations where conflict has happened in the first ten minutes because I am coming with a very different outlook, a very different framework of what planning in the subject is, it is terribly difficult to handle that situation because you don't want to give the impression that we are all saying something different here...

The other curriculum and assessment relationship that featured in the comments was the relationship between curriculum aims and assessment objectives and methods. These comments were evenly spread across primary and post-primary respondents:

Assessment should be matched to the objectives of the curriculum (R36).

Assessment must support the full range of curriculum aims (R66).

The curriculum must be appropriate to the modes of assessment and vice versa (R88).

The relationship envisaged here is less 'integral' and more 'causal', focusing more on summative assessment events.

The range of comments on assessment more generally, but not on the relationship between curriculum and assessment, was broad and diffuse. A number dealt with the aims of assessment – information for parents, improving teaching, motivating students were three mentioned. Ten of the comments from primary respondents were about the diagnostic function of assessment especially in the identification of early difficulties. Most of these were 'should' comments and presented aspirations for how assessment should be. This is typical:

Assessment should be used constructively to highlight strengths and weaknesses in children and in teaching (R68).

Five of the comments from primary respondents focused on assessment being more work for teachers. Two are presented below. Note the capitals and exclamation marks in the first.

Curriculum and assessment are both equally important and each school needs an assessment policy – MORE work for teachers already overloaded!!! (R15).

Teachers see assessment paperwork as creating more work for them and interfering with teaching time (R92).

As previously discussed, the first comment may be one for the Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, rather than a response to a questionnaire item.

### **The policy process**

This item proved as challenging in its analysis as in its design. As discussed in chapter three, this research study is placed within an interpretative paradigm; this item attempts to bring the participants into that interpretative frame by offering them an opportunity to interpret their own experience of the policy process.

Coding, informed by work on the analysis of trilinear plots (Allen, 2002), was by way of a simple grid system that allowed for each mark on the diagram to be recorded as a lettered code. Thus a mark on the line between the context of influence and the context of practice was recorded as INFRA and a mark outside that line but in the shaded area and INFRA1. Initially, a more complex coding system was envisaged to allow for marks that might be closer to one 'context' than another. However, when the grid was applied to the policy cycle diagram, all of the marks fell within the area that mapped as the mid-point between any two of the apexes, except for those in the centre and those placed outside the triangle in the shaded area. A more detailed analysis

might have been possible had the original presentation of the policy cycle in the questionnaire been carefully scaled and positioned. However, it is questionable whether this might have provided any further data, and whether such an approach would be appropriate for a theoretical model.

Site of Mark	Code
Centre	CENTRE
Between context of influence and context of practice	INF PRA
Between context of influence and context of text production	INF PRO
Between context of text production and context of practice	PRO PRA
Between these lines and the shaded boundaries	CODE1
On the context of practice	PRA
On the context of influence	INF
On the context of text production	PRO

Table 22. Coding of responses to policy cycle data

Four respondents did not mark the diagram; in the case of three of them a comment was added to the effect that they did not understand what was being asked of them in the item.

Using Nud\*ist, each mark was assigned a code. Table 23 shows the distribution of marks across the policy cycle. The numbers presented here are raw scores.

Site	PRA	INF PRA	CEN TRE	PRO PRA	INF	Blank	INF PRO	PRO	INF PRA1	INF1
Freq.	31	25	12	14	13	4	2	1	1	1

Table 23. Frequency of site marks

It is clear that the curriculum support services align their own work close to the contexts of practice and influence. An open item in the questionnaire, placed underneath the diagram of the policy cycle, offered respondents an opportunity to add a comment. 54 respondents availed of this option. These comments provided further insight into how the respondents viewed their role in the policy process:

I help with the implementation of policy (R64).

My role is one of influencing practice in schools through the policy documents – its is about mediating the curriculum (R45).

As part of a curriculum support service, I would have a role to play in helping teachers to implement policy – in this case a revised syllabus, while being conscious of how the process originated (R49).

A number of respondents, all working in the post-primary curriculum support services, offered comments that defined their role in terms of what they were *not* involved in, or what they were excluded from. Some of these comments were quoted earlier in this chapter, but are re-presented here to illustrate this point:

I am not involved in policy development or in text production but I am involved in the implementation of curriculum change (R.6).

Nearest to practice. Down the line from text production. Far removed from decision making (R.51).

Decisions on policy documents did not involve, or do not involve, people in my position. Our work is completely on the implementation of the syllabus (R100).

We have absolutely no input into the first two contexts, so by a process of elimination I have placed my x at the context of practice (R3).

This interpretation of the role of the support services in terms of its distance from decision-making (as opposed to an alignment or affiliation with another context) is striking, and found only in post-primary comments.

An analysis of the breakdown of the frequency by sector shows other notable differences between the primary and post-primary support services:

Site	PRA	INF PRA	CEN TRE	PRO PRA	INF	Blank	INF PRO	PRO	INF PRA1	INF1
Freq. Primary	13	12	7	9	10	3	2	1	1	1
Freq. Post-Primary	18	13	5	5	3	1	0	1	0	0

Table 24. Frequency of site marks by sector

Particularly striking are the comparisons between those working with primary and those working with post-primary teachers for the five most popular sites on the policy cycle. In Table 25, the data is expressed as a % of the total number of primary or post-primary respondents.

Site	PRA	INF PRA	CEN TRE	PRO PRA	INF
% total Primary	22.4	20.7	12.1	15.5	17.2
% total Post - Primary	39.1	28.2	10.8	10.8	10.8

Table 25. Analysis of site marks by sector

Respondents working with the post-primary curriculum support service position themselves closer to the context of practice than their colleagues in the primary curriculum support service. However, this apparent affiliation with teachers and classrooms must be considered alongside the data collected in section 1 of the questionnaire and the comments associated with this section on the policy cycle. Analysis of section 1, on working with teachers, found considerable distance between members of the curriculum support services and teachers and classrooms. The comments on policy from post-primary respondents (p.33) seem to indicate that a positioning in the context of practice is a circumscription and a denial of any role in any of the other contexts.

That members of the curriculum support services working with primary teachers placed themselves closer to the context of influence than their colleagues working with post-primary teachers is clear. However, analysis of the responses to the open items reveals the nature of the 'context of influence' as they envisage it.

My personal vision of my current role is more towards influencing change in relation to practice which will inform policy (R100).

I feel I influence teachers in their curriculum implementation (R10).

This view shifts the context to influence much closer to the context of practice; in many ways it re-defines the context of practice as a site of influence. Other respondents added a further dimension to the context of practice seeing it also as a site of document production:

My work is directed primarily at practice, but we help schools in drawing up school policy documents on curriculum and assessment (R.40).

While the work of the PCSP trainer is directed primarily at practice, we also have a role in drawing up school policy (R76).

This comment supports the findings that respondents working with the primary curriculum support service were more likely to associate themselves with the context of text production.

Those respondents who positioned themselves at the centre of the policy cycle made some interesting observations about their role in the process. They saw themselves as mediators, or links between the different contexts:

Our major policy documents are in situ, needing revision, but set for now. The contexts of influence and of practice have in reality to be constantly interacting with each other (R35).

I would see my current work as a central link between all of this policy process and the teachers in the classrooms who will implement policy changes in their school (R86).

I think I mediate between text production and the context of practice (R61).

The focus group discussions provided some elaboration on the implications of this connecting or mediating role for working with teachers. The post-primary group discuss how in two instances, teachers' complaints about an assessment component in the examination, was 'relayed back to the Department' and changes made. Irene notes:

Now that gave teachers a lot of confidence in us, in voicing their concerns in a way that was rigorous and suddenly they realised that the things they said in the seminars might make a difference.

This is noteworthy in the light of other discussions in the post-primary focus group about members of the curriculum support services not having the information needed to handle teachers questions about assessment, and that being a source of considerable anxiety. The primary focus group also included a discussion on this idea of mediating messages back, although, it appears that members of the support service saw this as part of teacher reaction to the new curriculum. This exchange between Nora and Veronica illustrates this point:

Veronica: I have lots of days when I felt like that because people's response was to get angry and say 'you tell them' whoever they are... you know..

Nora: And they use us as a sounding board, they think that we can walk up to the Minister tomorrow, or in to Anne Looney in the NCCA, and say things like 'will you tell whoever sent you out, that we have too much to do in our school!'

Orla, also of the PFG, recounts how whole-school seminars were organised on the issue of learning support in response to teachers' requests:

There was a call for whole school learning support seminars because if you just have two people from the school its very difficult to get a partnership model, so everyone asked for that. And then I was able to say that this day has come about because it was asked for and teachers felt positive that their views counted.



Notably, for the PFG participants, getting the message heard was important for the teachers. For Irene from the PPF, it was important for the credibility of the support services.

What appears to emerging from the analysis of the respondents' views of their own work is a representation of the context of practice as an unstable construct. While it is a site of practice it is also a site of influence and text production. One respondent both expressed and interrogated this view:

As our support service is involved in developing documentation we have influence on policy would be on practice. We are probably in all three areas – is that possible? (R.40).

This is further discussed in chapter five.

#### The public curriculum – a perspective of the primary focus group

While the analysis showed some differences between both the primary and post-primary questionnaire respondents and the primary and post-primary focus groups in a number of key areas relating to curriculum and assessment policy, only one 'erratic' appeared on the data of the landscape – a set of views that belonged only to one group and did not appear in the other. In each of the focus groups the first question was 'how do you describe what you do?' (see Focus Group Outline in Appendix five) and participants began to describe their work in terms of teacher or curriculum support, or providing information on the new syllabus or course. However, in the primary focus group the discussion expanded to include the *public* perception of the work and of the new curriculum and of explaining the work of the primary curriculum support service to the general public. Nora explains what she says when people ask her what she works at:

I remind them that their kids are off for in-service days and I would explain that I am one of the people giving the in-service.

Frances explains how people react when she says that she works with teachers on the new visual arts curriculum, and Veronica adds a comment:

Frances: And then people say, 'oh art?' And they go 'oh that must be lovely, that must be interesting'. That's the general response. If its art it must be lovely.

Veronica: Do people ask you are you the one that show teachers what to make with all those paper plates and all the lovely things that the children bring home?

Later, towards the end of the discussion, when the group is discussing whether the curriculum is impacting on classrooms, Deirdre reflects on her experience as a parent.

Its lovely to see it as a parent, to see the curriculum coming home so to speak. My son was sketching with a pencil last night, Van Gogh's chair. Just a pencil! He sees all those paintings as one story after another. And he does drafts!

This sense of a public response, or a public perspective on the work of the curriculum support service is unique to the primary focus group. It did not appear in any of the questionnaire comments, nor in the post-primary discussions. By contrast, Lorcan, one of the post-primary focus group bemoans the lack of public recognition for or awareness of the work of the curriculum support services:

But I think our big flaw is that we don't tell enough people what we do. I think we should be much more proactive in letting the system know what benefits we bring to it.

This will be discussed further in the consideration of the findings of the data analysis in chapter five.

## Chapter Five

### Back to the question

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#### Introduction

This study set out to establish and explore the role of the curriculum support services in the curriculum and assessment policy process in the Republic of Ireland. From the outset the research was positioned in that much-researched space between policy development and policy implementation. In drawing on the work of Stephen Ball, particularly on the policy cycle, it eschewed simple and linear constructions of the policy process and, specifically, policy implementation. In such perspectives, the role of the curriculum support service is fairly straightforward – they deliver the new policies from the policy makers to the policy practitioners. In the more complex view of the policy process proposed by Ball and others (Scott, 1996; Gale, 1997; Taylor et al, 1997; Baachi, 2000) the work of the support services is more multi-faceted. If practitioners don't simply implement policies but re-configure them for their own circumstances, then the support services are more than 'evangelists' for change.

In order to consider the role of the curriculum support services in these circumstances, the findings presented in the previous chapter are interrogated here under a number of headings. Firstly, the issue of location is considered. Where do the curriculum support services position themselves in relation to the teachers with whom they work, and the curriculum and assessment policies they 'support'? Secondly, the issue of action is explored. What do the curriculum support services do and how do they describe this work? Thirdly, the question of efficacy is examined. How effective is this work of 'implementation', and to what degree is there a sense of agency about their understanding of their work. In all of these discussions, the policy cycle is revisited as a means of capturing the policy process and tested as a heuristic for curriculum and assessment policy.

## **A matter of location**

### Positioning in the policy cycle

The analysis of the data shows that the curriculum support services, primary and post-primary, locate themselves and their work closer to teachers than to classrooms. This is not surprising given the remit of the support services in teacher professional development as well as in curriculum and assessment change, and the relatively recent development of advisers working in classrooms with teachers on the visual arts curriculum. While there were no significant differences between the respondents from the PCSP and the various post-primary curriculum support services on the closed items in the questionnaire associated with this location close to teachers, there was a notable difference between the focus groups. In the post-primary focus group (PPFG) there was a strong identification with teachers; in the primary focus group (PFG) the identification seemed to be with the curriculum. Members of the latter group tended to describe themselves as working to support the curriculum, or the 'new curriculum' while their post-primary colleagues spoke of working 'in support of teachers' or 'providing continuing professional development for teachers'.

The analysis of the data collected using the policy cycle diagram shows a similar difference, with 39.1% of post-primary respondents locating themselves at the context of practice, compared with 22.4% of primary respondents (Table 18). The post-primary respondents were also more likely to site themselves between the context of text production and the context of practice. The findings on how the respondents viewed their role in ensuring that policy is implemented in classrooms also points to this 'distancing' by the primary respondents from implementation sites – classrooms and schools. 65.2% of post-primary respondents agreed that they had a role in ensuring policy was implemented, yet only 41.4% of primary respondents agreed with this description (Table 6). From the perspective of the linear approach to policy implementation (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Fullan, 2001) it may appear that the post-primary curriculum support services are better located to implement policy. If curriculum and assessment policy is targeted at teachers and

classrooms, then the post-primary respondents appear to be well located for the task. Their primary colleagues appear somewhat adrift, reluctant to identify themselves with the implementation of policy, or with classrooms as sites of implementation. It may be tempting to conclude that the post-primary support services are doing a better job, positioning themselves closer to teachers and committed to ensuring that curriculum and assessment policy is implemented as intended. However, as the discussion on curriculum and assessment will show, this apparent commitment to the context of practice is not as straightforward as it might seem; while they may present themselves as better placed, the post-primary curriculum support services also see themselves as somewhat constrained, lacking agency and authority, especially when it comes to assessment.

While the context of practice was also the most popular site for respondents from the primary curriculum support service, the distribution of responses from this group was much more evenly spread across the other 'sites' in the policy cycle (Table 18). By comparison, the post-primary respondents clustered around the context of practice. Of note was the higher proportion of primary respondents (17.2%) than post-primary (10.8%) who placed themselves at the context of influence. The open items in the questionnaire and the focus group discussions shed some light on the meaning of this location at the context of influence. The discussions in the primary focus group showed that the participants viewed their engagements with teachers in the context of practice as 'influencing' that practice. As one of the questionnaire respondents summarised: 'I feel I influence teachers in their curriculum implementation' (R10). This collapsing of the context of influence and the context of practice is further complicated by the views of some primary respondents that they are also involved in text production, through working with teachers and schools to draw up plans and policy documents. The comments of the post-primary respondents present an entirely different perspective on the context of practice – as a site where activities are restricted and circumscribed, 'far removed from decision making' 'not involved in policy documents, 'not involved in policy development or in text production' (quoted in full on p. 109)

The perspectives of the post-primary respondents appear at odds with the view proposed by Ball that at each site in the policy process, policy – at least curriculum and assessment policy – is overwritten by a new set of social actors. Rather, they would seem to support the assertions of Cornbleth and Waugh (1993) and Hatcher and Troyna (1994) who suggest that the policy cycle is overly optimistic, and fails to take account of the relative power of those involved. The post-primary respondents' concerns about their lack of 'authority' to deal with assessment, and their perceived lack of information about the examinations, seem to point to this apparent naivety in the policy cycle. Similarly, the concerns of Gale (1999) that the model of the policy cycle does not give enough attention to what he calls 'interdiscursive politics' (p.396) seem to be supported by the findings of this study that show that the various contexts can implode or collapse on themselves in the actions of the primary curriculum support service who lay claim to the context of influence, and the context of text production, as well as to the context of practice.

Taylor (1997) suggested that traditional models for understanding policy-making have been exposed as too simplistic to deal with the complexities of the process; she refers to these models as 'old conceptual tools' and accuses them of being 'too blunt'. Is the policy cycle exhibiting some of that conceptual bluntness? In Taylor's view, discourse theories are better placed to understand implementation as an arena of struggle over meaning. Earlier, in chapter two, it was suggested that the policy cycle was a contested heuristic. Here, the question arises as to whether it is viable, or useful for the complexities of the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland. This question is revisited later in this chapter.

Positioning in relation to curriculum and assessment

The first reference point for the location of the curriculum support services is drawn from the policy cycle 'map'. The second can be plotted from how they present their relationship to curriculum and assessment. While a discussion of the work of the support services in curriculum and assessment is

presented in the next section of this chapter, it is worth noting here that both primary and post-primary cohorts place themselves closer to curriculum than assessment (Table 19) and consider themselves more confident in working on curriculum than on assessment (Fig. 4 p. 97). Yet, as primary respondents noted in many of their comments, assessment is 'integral' to curriculum and to teaching and learning and, as post-primary respondents emphasised, assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog.

A number of factors may be identified as contributing to this 'distancing' from assessment. In the first instance, as discussed in chapter one, while assessment is included in the terms of reference of the curriculum support services, it is, at best, accorded second place to curriculum. Secondly, as previous work showed, the curriculum and assessment policy-makers (staff of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) do not share a coherent view of the relationship between curriculum and assessment, or of the place of assessment in the education system as a whole (Looney 2001). The work of Hall (2000) and Hall and Kavanagh (2002) suggests that this conceptual uncertainty is reflected throughout the system – from the policy makers, to the teachers. The questionnaire respondents would support this view. As Table 13 shows, they are less than certain that teachers are convinced that assessment is an integral part of their work in teaching and learning. Finally, and particularly for the post-primary support service, it can appear as if assessment and examinations is itself distanced from the work of teachers, and therefore, from the work of the support services. Thus the post-primary focus group's concerns about having the correct information, and having the 'authority' to speak about it may arise because of a belief that assessment is someone else's business. This reluctance of Irish post-primary teachers to take ownership of assessment, especially for certification purposes, is well-established (NCCA, 1998). Teachers do not provide any data on student performance even in coursework that would contribute to a final grade, in either of the two certificate examinations. While the same issue does not arise in primary schools, the comments of two members of the primary focus group on teachers' 'fears' about writing anything down (p. 107) show similar reservations.

### Positioning in relation to the researcher

The third reference point for locating the curriculum support services is somewhat different from the other two. The analysis showed that both questionnaire respondents and focus group participants were conscious of their participation in the study and of the researcher in her professional role. Comments on curriculum and assessment issues ranging from the electronics section of the physics syllabus, to the overlap between the work of the PCSP and the School Development planning initiative, showed that, while the researcher had some control over the data collection process, the participants in the study availed of the opportunity to raise issues of relevance of concern to them. While the study attempts to locate the curriculum support services, it is worth noting that the support services were conscious of their location in the study, and the relationship it afforded them with, to use Ball's phrase, the context of influence.

### Positioning in relation to the public at large

The fourth reference point belongs to the primary focus group alone. They located their work in a public arena, in the public eye. Their constant referencing to parents, to 'what people say to them' and to the public reaction to changes in the curriculum, placed their work in a setting beyond schooling and education. It is not possible to conclude that they view their work as a public service, nonetheless, they demonstrate a strong awareness of a public audience for, and public interest in, their work. The post-primary focus group presented no evidence of a sense of public audience. In contrast, their discussions were more circumscribed and related more to issues internal to the policy process and its operation.

Following from the discussion of the location of the curriculum support services, consideration moves to the findings in respect of the actions of the support services, the work that they do and their engagement with teachers and others.



## **Actions**

### Giving information to teachers

Giving information to teachers about changes in curriculum is rated highest in the list of work descriptors (Table 3). Members of the support service do not generally work in classrooms, although in recent times, particularly for visual arts in the primary curriculum, members of the primary curriculum support programme have been working alongside teachers in classrooms. The message-giving function of the curriculum support services was also highlighted in the focus group discussions. This finding supports the view of Elmore and McLoughlin (1988) that teachers are the ultimate target of all education policy. From this perspective, the curriculum support services consider themselves to be 'on target'. The analysis by Sugrue *et al* (2001) of teacher professional development in Ireland concluded that courses were effective at conveying information. The aims and underlying principles set out for the various curriculum support services place an emphasis on this information-giving role. Clearly then, one feature of the role of the curriculum support services in the policy process is to give information about changes in curriculum, or changed or new curriculum policies. However, as commented on in the previous section, the support services are less certain that their work is about giving messages and information about changes in assessment, or in assessment policy (Table 3). The high priority given to this information giving role appears to support the view summarised by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) that most education policy makers have 'more or less assumed that teachers who know more teach better' (p.1).

### Developing curriculum policy

The findings on the perceptions of the support services of their involvement in the development of curriculum policy and assessment policy shows a similar distancing from working with assessment (Table 20), a distancing that is particularly striking for the post-primary support services (Table 21). The primary curriculum support services are also less likely to

describe their work as contributing to the development of curriculum policy than their primary colleagues, with 21.8% disagreeing with the idea that they contribute to curriculum development, compared with only 5.2% of the PCSP Table 20). Earlier, it was noted that the post-primary respondents presented themselves as closer to teachers, in the context of practice, with greater influence on their work. This apparent distancing from curriculum development seems to be at odds with the confident placing at the coal-face of implementation. Yet some of the comments on the policy cycle, illustrate this sense of distance from the 'system', a sense of being, as one respondent said 'far removed from decision making' (R51).

### Developing assessment policy

On their involvement in assessment policy, 51.5% of post-primary respondents say they have no role compared with 10.7% of the PCSP. These are striking differences. As discussed in chapter one, the support services at primary and post-primary level share broadly the same remit, with the post-primary services placing a greater emphasis on assessment given the role of the certificate examinations at that stage of education. Yet, they appear to understand their work in somewhat different terms. On the issue of assessment, while both give it a lower profile than curriculum, the post-primary support service seems to distance itself from involvement in the development of assessment. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it appears that the post-primary curriculum support services, while positioning themselves in the context of practice, view their role as circumscribed and even restricted. This finding seems to support Baachi's (2000) criticism of the policy cycle for failing to take account of the relative power of those involved in the process. However, Bowe *et al* (1982) do emphasise the political circumstances in each context to which actors in the policy process must respond. Might the way in which the Republic of Ireland shapes its assessment policies – conceptually loose at primary level and dominated by formal examinations at post-primary level – create the political circumstances in which the support services have to conduct their work?

It is notable that Fullan's model of authority in the path from policy making to policy implementation (Fig 3, p. 37) appears inadequate to present or account for the 'authority' issues associated with the findings from the post-primary curriculum support services. His binary approach – those who have authority, and those who don't – may be honest, but it is overly simplistic.

#### Sending messages to policy makers

As noted, considerable attention is given by the questionnaire respondents and the focus group participants to the information-giving work of the support services. In the focus group discussions, another dimension of this role was revealed – sending information or messages back to the policy-makers. For the post-primary support service, when the message was 'heard' they perceived that teachers had more confidence in the support service as a result. Getting the message 'heard' gave them greater credibility, even authority. (see comment from Irene, quoted on p. 112). The messages discussed by the PPFG all related to assessment. The PFG also had a discussion about sending messages, about using the support service 'as a sounding board'. Interestingly, for this group, issues of confidence and authority did not arise. For the PFG, when the message was 'heard' it was a positive experience for teachers. For the PPFG, when the message was 'heard' it was a positive experience for the support service who felt they had greater credibility as a result. Similarly, the comments of the primary curriculum support programme respondents to the questionnaire who positioned themselves in the centre of the policy process showed that they viewed themselves as having a 'mediating' role, keeping all the contexts in contact with each other, 'being the central link in all of this policy process'. The respondents found the policy cycle a useful tool in describing this work and in placing themselves at the heart of this constant interaction.

#### Supporting teachers

A further aspect of the work of the curriculum support services that merits some consideration is the work of 'supporting teachers'. This was a theme of

the PPFG whose members described themselves in these terms, as opposed to the PFG who tended to describe themselves as ‘supporting the new curriculum’. In the questionnaire data, there were no significant differences between the primary and post-primary respondents on this item (Table 1, p. 78). The finding from the focus groups seems somewhat surprising given the ‘distancing’ of the post-primary support services that appears to characterise both their location and their work. The qualitative data appears to be at odds with the quantitative. Supporting teachers features in the role description of both primary and post-primary curriculum support services, and, as discussed in chapter one, there is a strong relationship between the work of implementing curriculum and assessment policy and the professional development of teachers. What ‘support’ do the PPFG envisage? Donal’s comments (p. 85) about supporting only those teachers having to deal with policy change evokes Cochrane-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) observation that the real aim of ‘teacher support’ is to get teachers to do what policy makers want them to do. The policy cycle is important in illuminating this finding. Without it, it might appear that the post-primary curriculum support services are engaged in the active support of teachers in their professional practice, while their primary colleagues are buried in curriculum documents and assessment policies. By bringing the participants in the study into the interpretative dynamic, by offering them the policy cycle as an interpretative tool, the emergence of a different picture is facilitated. This ‘different picture’ is one of constraint and lack of agency on the part of the post-primary curriculum support services and engagement and empowerment for the PCSP.

Just how ‘constrained’ the post-primary curriculum support services perceive themselves to be in comparison to their primary colleagues can be explored under the third heading for the interrogation of the data – the matter of efficacy.

### **Efficacy**

McLaughlin’s caveat that ‘a teacher with new information about how to do better in the classroom does not necessarily apply or sustain it’ (1991, p.61)

resonates with some of the concerns of the support services in relation to the impact of the information that they give. While there was considerable support for the idea that their work was having some impact on classrooms, albeit greater among those working with primary teachers (Table 6, p.82) respondents were less confident about the nature and degree of that impact (Table 7, p.83). However, confidence in the impact of the message appears to dissipate when respondents are asked to consider how effectively the support services ensure that policy decisions are implemented as intended, with only 40.4% of primary respondents and 65.2% of post-primary respondents agreeing that they have this role.

A number of factors were considered in attempting to interpret this finding. If, for example, the members of the curriculum support services did not use 'policy implementation' as a way of describing or thinking about their work, if they did not use the language of policy, then this result might have been understandable. However, the piloting of the questionnaire had shown no such difficulty, and the comments on the policy cycle in the final item in the questionnaire showed some familiarity and ease with the language of policy as did the discussions in the focus groups.

A second factor considered in an attempt to understand this finding was whether the use of the word 'ensure' implied some agency or authority with which the curriculum support services did not identify. However, the relatively strong support for the idea that 'teachers see me as an agent of the Department of Education and Science' (Table 3, p. 80) would seem to belie any distancing from such authority. Equally, the discussions in the focus groups on ensuring policy is implemented would seem to indicate that there is some ownership of 'ensuring'. For example, the primary focus group discussed how the 'continuity of the message' is important for the education system generally. Orla noted:

I think they value the continuity of the message across all the schools. If the inspector visits from the DES or someone comes from School Development Planning, they will hear the same message. And we gave that message to the schools.

Similarly, Donal, in the post-primary group claims authority as the bearer of ‘the Department’s wishes’:

So they (the teachers) saw us, whatever programme it was, coming out to present it and support it. That’s linked to the Department’s wishes to implement the programmes in question.

Given these comments, it is unlikely that claiming authority or agency was a difficulty for the curriculum support services. However, discussions earlier in this chapter on the apparent constraints of the post-primary support service are relevant here. In the findings under discussion here, the post-primary respondents appear to rate themselves higher in efficacy and agency than their primary colleagues. It seems to be a ‘constrained efficacy’, a sense that they are doing what the Department asks of them. Combined with their commitment to giving information, and their admission that they have little idea of their impact in classrooms, their claim to efficacy is at best shallow, at worse, evidence of a naïve view of how policy is implemented.

#### Text-books and efficacy

Both primary and post-primary curriculum support services identified a somewhat unexpected source of constraint on the effectiveness of their work, and a block to getting curriculum and assessment messages across. In the questionnaire findings and in the discussions of the PFG, text-books were ascribed a greater influence on classroom practice than the curriculum. In the opinion of the curriculum support services, the autonomy afforded to schools and teachers in the Republic of Ireland in the selection and purchase of textbooks, does not lessen their influence. It is somewhat surprising that this perceived dominance of the text-book is spread across the two sectors given the established view that primary teachers enjoy considerable more autonomy than their post-primary counterparts (OECD, 1991; Hall and Kavanagh, 2002). Clearly, text-books appear to be doing somewhat more than the ‘framing and supporting of teaching and learning’ proposed for the curriculum guidelines by Gudem and Sivesind (1997, p.8). Curriculum specifications and guidelines in

the Republic of Ireland are generally flexible with a strong emphasis on teacher choice and planning (Looney, 2001a). Hence, the strong support in the questionnaire for the idea that teachers have considerable freedom in how they implement the curriculum in their classrooms. While in other countries the text-book might be considered as a policy text, in Ireland, given the ‘hands off’ approach by both the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, text-books appear to be inserted into the context of practice (by a combination of teacher choice and commercial interest) as a part of the implementation process. The considerable freedom teachers have in how they implement the curriculum (Table 8), a view shared by both primary and post-primary support services, extends to text-book use and selection. In the views of the support services however, the text-books act as a constraint on the effective implementation of the curriculum. No data was collected on the impact of text-books on assessment practice in classrooms.

#### The role of policy documents

The findings on the policy texts – the curriculum and assessment policy documents – and their place in the work of the support services are interesting. The collapsing of the context of practice and the context of text production in the comments of the PCSP respondents and the PFG discussions has been proposed earlier. The PCSP members see themselves as ‘mediating’ the curriculum documents, as well as working with teachers and schools to produce their own curriculum plans and documents. The comment of one respondent shows how this work is also placed in the context of influence.

My role is one of influencing practice in schools through the policy documents – it’s about mediating the curriculum (R45).

Post-primary respondents claimed no such work in text production. As noted in chapter four, they referred to their non-involvement in any work of this kind. Someone else produced the texts. Their job was simply to make sure that teachers knew what was in them. The idea that teachers might re-write the texts for themselves, or produce or create their own texts, as envisaged by the PCSP was not part of the post-primary agenda. The view put forward by Andy

Hargreaves (1999), that the ‘decoding’ of policy texts in relation to teacher beliefs and practices is a neglected aspect of school reform is challenged by the enthusiasm of the PCSP in this regard, and confirmed by the post-primary view that their job is simply to make sure everyone gets the message.

### Getting the message

Do they get the message? Worryingly for policy-makers in the Republic of Ireland, the support services, primary and post-primary, appear less than convinced that teachers have a good understanding of the principles underpinning the curriculum (Table 8, p.83) with post-primary respondents (who place a high premium on getting the message across) even less confident than their primary colleagues (Table 9, p. 86).

The work of Spillane *et al* (2002) may be useful in further illuminating this issue. Using situated cognition theories, they examine the path from policy development to implementation and suggest that implementation agents will always work to make the strange familiar, ‘preserving existing frames, rather than radically transforming them’ (p.398). While this ‘sense-making’ theory may be relevant to Ball’s context of practice (called ‘enactment zone’ by Spillane, the place where policy and practice meet) it is also of relevance to the staff of the support services themselves. What ‘sense-making’ did they go through when inducted into their role in teacher support? In the primary focus group discussion for example, there was an interesting exchange on ‘fundamental principles’:

Deirdre: Not just that, but we have to be reminded to use the language of the curriculum documents at every opportunity in every subject. We have to talk about the two principles of the 1971 curriculum becoming the fifteen principles of 1999...

Veronica: God, I never heard that before!

Deirdre: Well I feel that’s the thing we need to be emphasising.

Veronica: No, really! I never heard that before!

Later in the discussion, Frances wonders about the professional development that members of the curriculum support service receive for themselves:



Somewhere along the way, the original introduction to the curriculum should be repeated with all of us every year to remind us how it's all supposed to fit together. You only take in so much every time you hear it. I read two of the curriculum documents this morning. And in the drama document, I realised that it was very good!

The account of the background to and remit of the curriculum support services presented in chapter one is relevant here. The concerns articulated by the NCCA about the set-up phase, and about key messages (see extract from discussion paper, quoted on p. 18) appear to be justified in the light of the comments above.

The work of Hill (2001) with mathematics teachers in the US may also be relevant here – the policy makers saw the change as requiring a radical shift in curriculum planning and practice, but the teachers viewed the change as peripheral, having little impact on traditional curriculum patterns. Spillane *et al* challenge the traditional view of policy implementation based in rational choice theories – this view presents the policy as the stimulus for change and the agents of implementation as the resistors and saboteurs of the change.

Viewing failure in implementation as demonstrating lack of capacity or a deliberate attempt to ignore policy, one loses the complexity of the sense-making process. Sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy process; in general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual's rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs and attitudes (p391).

While work of the support services is focused on the teachers as implementation agents, perhaps insufficient consideration is given to the support service staff themselves in this implementation role. How much of the perception of teachers they represent is in fact based on their own knowledge, beliefs and attitudes – their own sense-making frames. And in situated cognition theory, the context for any change is not a backdrop, but a constituent element of any change process.

The differences between the confidence of the primary and post-primary support services in teachers' understanding of the fundamental principles of the curriculum may be illuminated by two factors. The first relates to the remit of the support services as discussed in chapter one. Those working in the PCSP work across the curriculum as well as providing support in one or two subjects. In the first year of its establishment, the PCSP worked with teachers on the fundamental principles. Those working in the post-primary support services tend to be associated with particular subjects or programmes which may afford teachers less opportunity to engage with fundamental principles. Equally, and the second factor that may contribute to the finding under discussion, the concerns of teachers in relation to the examinations may leave little room for underpinning principles. Niall describes how this can happen:

Everyone wanted to talk about the exam. And if you were foolish enough to say that you were going to work through last years examination papers or something like that then you had a full house and you could not get away from it. I mean if you had it down as an element of a day it would expand to take over the whole day and encroach on the time you had set out for other stuff.

Assessment and examinations may be covertly influencing the shape of the teacher seminars. It is evident from the other findings of the study that assessment and examinations are having a far-reaching and pervasive influence on the policy process and on the perceived efficacy of the support services.

Assessment: a different message?

The findings on assessment appear relatively straightforward and uncomplicated. A number of these have been the subject of comment earlier in the chapter. The support services are more likely to describe their work in terms of curriculum than assessment. According to the support services teachers are less confident in their assessment practice than in their curriculum work, a lack of confidence shared by the support service personnel themselves. Assessment is more likely to be controversial than curriculum. Both focus groups discussed assessment as a source of anxiety for teachers.

However, there are notable differences between the PCSP and the post-primary support services on assessment. On the ‘backwash’, post-primary respondents were almost unanimous in the view that assessment shapes curriculum in schools. However, for the post-primary focus group, this anxiety extended to the members of the support service who felt that they had neither the information, nor the authority to give teachers the clarifications they sought about the examinations. The role of assessment in locating the support services was discussed earlier in the chapter, and the idea of ‘distancing’ proposed. Assessment, it is proposed, is something external to the interaction the post-primary curriculum support services have with teachers, it is not part of the dynamic of teacher support. As Niall notes, ‘support goes out the window when you talk about examinations’.

It is reasonable to conclude that curriculum and assessment are not shaping the policy process in the same way, especially at post-primary level. Implementing curriculum policy is one thing, implementing assessment something different. Despite the rhetoric – in the policy documents, and in the respondent’s own comments and discussions – of assessment being ‘integral’ to curriculum and teaching and learning, there is a fracturing of assessment from curriculum at post-primary level, and at least some cracks in the relationship at primary level. This fracturing does not simply mean that curriculum and assessment policies are implemented separately. It means that they are implemented *differently*. In the case of post-primary curriculum and assessment policy, this separation has its own ‘backwash’. Just as the examinations impact on the post-primary curriculum it seems that the implementation of assessment policy impacts on the assessment of post-primary curriculum policy and on those charged with its implementation.

#### Reflections on the policy cycle

The use of the policy cycle in the analysis of the data allowed for the policy process and participants in it to be mapped and located. Arguably, a discourse model, the work of Bacchi or Gale for example, might also have allowed for such mapping. The latter might even have pointed to more complex issues of

power and agency. It is debatable however whether the latter models would have exposed the different processes at work in curriculum and assessment – the exposure of these two related, and at times competing, processes relied heavily on the comments of the respondents on the policy process. Presenting the policy cycle to the participants in the study as a tool with which to interpret their own experience was critical to uncovering this data. Giving them a language to describe their experiences, albeit in a limited fashion, allowed for the particular meanings of the ‘context of influence’ for the PCSP to emerge, for example and for the constraints of the post-primary support service around the context of practice to be exposed. Gale’s (1999) critique of the policy cycle, that the contexts are too close to each other to allow for meaningful analysis, is not upheld by this study. In the analysis of the data from the primary respondents and focus group participants, the contexts did collapse and there was considerable merging. However, this was not without meaning. In the construct of the policy cycle such overlay and shifting of and between contexts is assumed. *Bowe et al* (1992) describe an uneasy symbiosis between the contexts, particularly between the context of influence and the context of text production. The primary curriculum support service, in collapsing the contexts, creating a context of influence within the context of practice, showed that the policy cycle was at least a useful heuristic, and, perhaps, a means of capturing something of the complexity of curriculum and assessment change. As Ball notes:

Policies are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable. Policy *as* practice is ‘created’ in a trialectic of dominance, resistance and chaos/freedom. (1994a, pp.10-11).

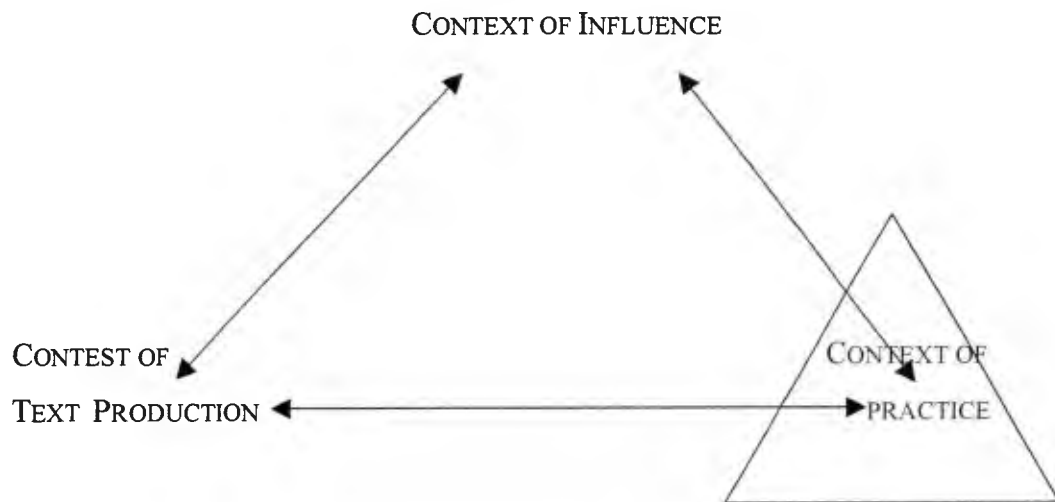
In the research design, it was envisaged that the qualitative data from the focus groups discussions would be the richest source of data with which to understand and interpret the quantitative findings. As it transpired, it was the use of the policy cycle as a ‘blunt instrument’ in the data collection process that uncovered meanings and relationships in and between the quantitative findings and patterns.

While theorists of school reform or teacher professional development have generally included curriculum and assessment within their models and as part of their agenda, this study shows that policy theorists have much to offer in illuminating that path from development to implementation. Equally, at a time when curriculum is suffering from ‘a sense of continuing crisis’ (Wraga and Hlebowitsh, 2003, p. 425), while not wishing to contribute to the ideological fragmentation and feuding that appears to characterise curriculum theorising, might the policy cycle, or variations on it offer a useful theoretical framework for bringing theory and practice together?

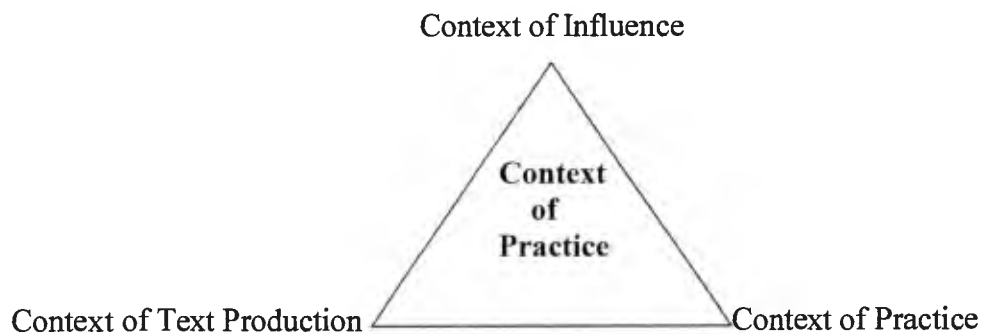
That models such as the policy cycle can be helpful in highlighting different policy processes at work is suggested above. Developing those models can allow for more detailed analysis of what happens when teachers engage with those core technologies – curriculum and assessment in classrooms. An initial attempt at such development is presented below.

#### **The Policy Cycle – tested heuristic**

The policy cycle has shown itself to be a useful heuristic tool for the support service personnel working with post-primary teachers. It appears however, that those working with primary teachers offer a development of the policy cycle as constructed by Ball and colleagues which would see the context of practice as a ‘micro’ policy process with its own site of influence, document production and practice.



**Fig.6 The curriculum and assessment policy cycle**



**Fig.7 The context of practice in the curriculum and assessment policy cycle**

Participants in the study from the PCSP describe their work as ‘influencing’ teachers who implement new curriculum and assessment practices. They describe how they work with teachers to produce documents—plans and policies—for their work in schools and in classrooms. This ‘writerly’ process, to use Barthes’ terminology sees teachers reconstituting curriculum and assessment policies in their own classrooms. Stephen Ball’s recent work on performativity and his suggestions that the production of such texts may be associated with a representation of action rather than real action, raises some concern (Ball, 1999, 2003), although in the light of the general absence of a

culture of accountability in primary education in Ireland (OECD, 1991) such fears may well be misplaced.

For the post-primary support services, there is no such re-writing, no creation of new documents and plans. There appears to be a more 'readerly' engagement and interaction with teachers shaped as such by the dominance of examinations. The post-primary support services claim no influence, nor any role in text production. Of concern may be that this lack of agency is communicated to teachers thus ensuring that teachers 'do' while others 'decide' and 'plan' and, most definitely, 'assess'.

## **Chapter Six**

### **The study in contexts**

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#### **Introduction**

The final chapter considers this study of the role of the support services in the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland in a number of contexts.

Firstly, the main findings of the study are summarised and considered as policy research and as a contribution to the field. The possibilities for using a policy research approach to curriculum and assessment issues are also discussed. Secondly, emerging possibilities for further research are identified. Thirdly, the implications of the findings are discussed, both for the researcher in her professional role, and for those who participate in the education policy process on the Republic of Ireland. Some dissemination possibilities are also suggested.

#### **The context of policy research**

The study set out to establish and interrogate the role of the curriculum support services in the Republic of Ireland in that much-research and much-contested space between policy development and policy implementation. From the outset, the study was premised on a view that the path from intention to results was more than a matter of effective delivery. It assumed that this process was complex and multi-layered, an assumption based on the findings of the Institution Focused Study (IFS) that investigated curriculum and assessment policy in its developmental phase (Looney 2001b). The IFS and other work on education policy for the Ed. D. (Looney 2001a) had shown the potential of the policy cycle as a heuristic for the complexities involved in the different phases of the policy process and embedded in the relationships between those phases. In this study, the policy cycle was both a tool for



analysis and interpretation, and the object of analysis. It served as a heuristic for the curriculum and assessment policy process, but the process of analysis and interrogation also served to 'test' the policy cycle as an interpretive tool. As analytical tool it illuminated some of the complexities of the processes under consideration. In particular, it showed that the apparently straightforward was more complex than it appeared. In the ever-shifting dynamics of the policy process, it allowed for actors to be positioned and to position themselves.

The mapping of these positions, and the identification of the relationships between them, was supported by the policy cycle used by the researcher and the researched to interpret the work of policy implementation. Elmore and McLaughlin's assertion, quoted at the beginning of chapter one, appears to be justified:

Policymakers initiate, administrators and practitioners implement. In the process of reform, the mode of transition from one structure to another is nearly everything.

(1988, p.59)

The 'mode of transition' for curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland is indeed 'nearly everything'. The process of implementation shapes those who are assigned the 'implementation task'. The question arises then, to what degree does this 'shaping' of the role of the curriculum and assessment support services extend to 'shaping' the curriculum and assessment policies being implemented? Does the implementation process shape what is being implemented? To what extent does the 'overwriting' proposed by Ball re-shape the policy itself? Further consideration of this is presented in the discussion of directions for future research.

For the purposes of this study the policy cycle has shown itself to be a useful tool. Its theoretical coherence allows for complexity to be exposed and interrogated; its simplicity allows for practitioner engagement, and offers those immersed in the policy process a language to describe and critique their own work. Hatcher and Troyna's (1994) criticism of the policy cycle's failure to take account of the relative power of actors in the process is somewhat

challenged by the findings of this study – it was the use of the policy cycle as an analytical tool that allowed for issues of agency and efficacy to be exposed, and for participants in the study – particularly those working in the post-primary curriculum support services – to identify experiences of constraint and circumscription. However, their assertion that the policy cycle is constructed on a simple binary between a view of the state as causal and normative, and a pluralist, multi site perspective – a binary that fails to take account of the complexities of the states insertion into the policy process, is salient. While the presence of the ‘Department’ was a constant in the findings of the research, there was little engagement with the relationship between the state and the curriculum, with place of teachers and their professional identity. What was uncovered was the fact that in the curriculum and assessment policy process, something different was happening in primary as opposed to post-primary schools. Arguably, to use Taylor’s (1997) assertion, the policy cycle may have been too blunt to dig deeper.

### **The context of curriculum and assessment**

Applying the policy cycle to the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy has shown how focusing on curriculum and assessment as *policy* (rather than as components of an education system, or aspects of reform, or the actions of teachers) can uncover important aspects of each, and of the relationship between them. In this study, the use of the policy cycle allowed for the positioning of the support services in relation to both curriculum and assessment and revealed the strong emphasis on curriculum as a set of messages for the post-primary support services, compared to the greater emphasis on process held by those working at primary level. The distancing from the policy-process by the post-primary support services was notable – they saw themselves as serving that process rather than participating in it. For the field of curriculum studies, swamped by the technical and managerialist approaches to curriculum discussed in chapter two, the policy cycle, and policy studies generally, may offer new theoretical possibilities. The purpose of theory, Ball suggests, is to ‘begin from what is normally excluded’. He continues:

The point of theory and of intellectual endeavour in the social sciences should be, in Foucault's words 'to sap power', to engage in struggle, to reveal and undermine what is most invisible and insidious in prevailing practices. Theories offer another language, a language of distance, of irony, of imagination'. (1995, p. 267).

Curriculum, associated with 'a sense of continuous crisis' (Wraga and Hlebowitsh, 2003, p. 25), stands in need of new language, of rescuing from the 'bland, technical and desolate languages of policy science and policy entrepreneurship' (Ball, 1995, p. 26).

Assessment, however, has a new language - the optimistic, almost utopian language of assessment for learning. This language finds its way into the curriculum and assessment policies of the Republic of Ireland with the strong and repeated emphasis in the Primary Curriculum document on assessment as 'integral' to teaching and learning. What the policy cycle exposed in this study, was that in the Republic of Ireland, the utopianism is apparently superficial, and confined to the policy documents. The anxieties observed in teachers by the primary support service and the anxieties shared by the members of the post-primary focus group on assessment issues show that the experiences of assessment do not match the rhetoric. In the post-primary system in the Republic of Ireland, the backwash of the formal examination system was of sufficient strength to undermine any sense of agency in those charged with supporting the implementation of new assessment policies. It confined them to a context of practice that was circumscribed and engagement with teachers restricted to giving 'correct' information. .

### **A context for emerging questions**

A number of possible avenues for further research can be readily identified in the findings. The role of text-books in the education system in the Republic of Ireland is clearly under-estimated and under-researched, especially their role in primary classrooms. From the perspective of the NCCA, it would appear that such research is urgent in light of the non-involvement of the NCCA or the

Department of Education and Science in the sanctioning or production of text-books, the ongoing introduction of the revised curriculum and the unequivocal findings of the study, that text-books have a greater impact on classroom practice than the curriculum.

The place of assessment in both primary and post-primary education also merits some research. The absence of national testing in primary schools, and the relative freedom of teachers to devise their own assessment strategies (from a range of options set out in the primary curriculum) does not seem to allay teacher anxieties in relation to assessment. If, as Broadfoot suggests, ‘assessment practices reflect and reinforce the often conflicting values embodied in education systems’ (1996, p.25), then investigating those practices, and the attitudes towards them, presents itself as a worthwhile project. The apparent contestation associated with post-primary assessment (the examinations) also merits some study. Given the recent establishment of the State Examinations Commission to run the two public examinations in post-primary schools, and the ending of the inspectorate’s role in examinations, such research would be timely and apposite. As curriculum support services continue to be established in this new landscape<sup>19</sup>, some clarification is needed as to where ‘authority’ really does lie, and as to how teachers learn about and engage with new examination components and procedures.

Two further related areas of research also present themselves, although perhaps not at first glance. The first is of particular significance for the NCCA and relates to the curriculum and assessment documents that are given to teachers at in-service sessions, sent to schools, or disseminated on-line. If members of the PCSP are uncertain of the core messages contained in the documents (as the focus group members admitted) some concern arises as to how (and if) teachers engage with the documents. The regulatory function of these texts was mentioned in chapter one – they contribute to the indicators for inspection and for whole school evaluation. Does the traditional lack of

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<sup>19</sup> In September 2002, curriculum support services for History, Geography and Science were established.

specification in such documents in the Republic of Ireland support the professional role of teachers in planning for and constructing their own learning environments? Or does it mean that teachers just ignore them and use text-books and examination requirements as the basis for teaching and learning?

A second possibility for further research on the issue of texts also emerges, in this case on the texts produced by primary teachers as part of the implementation of the revised curriculum. The questionnaire respondents from the PCSP, and the primary focus group all alluded to these 'texts' that formed the focus of some of their engagement with teachers and to their role in 'influencing' that text production. The primary focus group discussed the conflict over the texts produced by School Development Planning. In chapter five, the discussion of the processes of text production by teachers – plans, policies, etc. – presented it as a positive, as evidence of the sense of efficacy of the support service and the empowerment of teachers. The presentation of the context of practice as a site of text production and a context of influence is underpinned by this positive interpretation. This process of text production merits further investigation. What purposes are served by these new 'policy texts'? In chapter two there was some consideration of the different approaches to 'text' taken by Gale (1999) who suggested that policy texts were ideological artefacts, and Ball (2003) who suggested that the ideological artefacts of the policy process were not only the policy documents, but the outputs of the policy process – the plans and policies required from schools. Whether the documents produced by teachers and schools in the Republic of Ireland are designed to serve the performative systems described by Ball (1999) or are evidence of teacher professionalism and of the continued teacher autonomy described by the OECD (1991) merits some investigation. In this regard, the following extract from a discussion paper produced by the primary teachers' union on policies and planning is of note:

Primary schools have engaged in the process of planning and policy development for many years. In recent times however, due to the changing societal, legislative, insurance and operational context for schools, the demands and expectations for policies on a wide range of administrative and curricular areas have grown inordinately. Many

teachers feel that the workload imposed by such demands has reached excessively high levels, and is impacting on the core element in schools – delivering a quality education to our pupils. (INTO, 2003, p.1).

### **In the professional context**

The challenges of being both researcher interrogating the policy process and professional working at a senior level in that process were discussed in chapter three. Further implications of this dual role are presented in the research diary in Appendix one. The challenges of being both researcher and professional – of being an insider in the process under consideration – were significant in the planning and conduct of the research; at the end of the study new challenges present themselves from this dual role. As researcher, I have access to important information on the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy in the Republic of Ireland. I have raised issues and concerns that may have implications for how the curriculum support services are established and organised in the future and for how curriculum, and especially assessment policy is developed and disseminated. I have illuminated significant differences between how the support services engage with teachers at primary and post-primary levels. As professional – as Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment – I have a leadership role in all of these areas. As researcher, I have raised issues. As professional I have a responsibility to begin to address them, or at least to bring them into the public arena. The requirement for self-reflexivity that was necessary in the course of the study in the face of so many complex insider issues, is replaced, at the end of the study with the demands of professional responsibility.

The privilege of this position is acknowledged; at least one key decision maker (the researcher) in the policy process is aware of the findings! For this reason, there appears to be no need for dissemination; for this reason, however, dissemination is essential and the first step in taking on the professional responsibilities that arise from the study. Having proposed the policy cycle as a heuristic for the curriculum and assessment policy process, and having invited others in the policy process to view their work in these terms, sharing the

findings with participants and others in the policy process seems a logical –  
and ethical – first step.

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## **Appendix one**

### **Research Diary**

**Working on the proposal. January 2002**

In working on the research proposal I have become aware of how my current job impacts on my choices as to what, where and how I can collect data or conduct any kind of research. I can't work in schools or classrooms – that's now clear. In the months since September 2001 when I took up the job of CEO I have become more aware of how I am perceived by teachers and schools – as part of the 'system'. I get letters from teachers and principals on every issue – overcrowded classrooms are as common a topic as the overcrowded curriculum. I don't imagine that getting access to schools would be a problem, but teachers might be somewhat wary of engaging with me on curriculum and assessment. I have chatted to some teachers about this and they have told me in no uncertain terms that were I to try and interview them about curriculum and assessment, they would lie!

As a result I have changed the focus of my original plans and looked to the curriculum support services and their role in the implementation of curriculum and assessment policy. I am aware that insider issues remain – they will always be there for someone in my position – but they seem less acute with the support services. My involvement in the management of a couple of these is fairly circumscribed, and I can remove myself for the period of the research from any interviewing for promotion or recruitment.

**Piloting the questionnaire and negotiating access. April 2002**

The piloting went well. Having agreed a draft of the questionnaire with a colleague now working in the support services, I gave it to five former members of the support service and they filled it in and then gave me comments. Most of the comments focused on the last item, and they suggested a couple of changes to the way in which other items were worded.

One issue that did come up with the participants in the pilot process was whether or not I should attempt to remain anonymous in the process. They were strongly of the view that members of curriculum support teams would feel 'duped' if they filled in a questionnaire, submitted it, and then found out that it was for me. I asked participants if they thought that my role as CEO of NCCA might have an impact on how people would answer. They were all of the view that it might have some impact, but that revealing my identity would ensure a greater response and was more honest from the start. In the light of that discussion and some of the advice in the literature on insider research, I have decided to be open about my identity.

In the meantime I have been contacting the management of the curriculum support services to arrange access and the distribution of the questionnaire. No-one has put forward any objections or obstacles so far; in fact it has been a bit too easy, again part of the cluster of insider issues associated with this research.

#### **The SPHE support service evaluation. April 2002**

The plan for the research included all the support services including the support service for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the post-primary curriculum. However, an issue has arisen that is giving me second thoughts about including them. I am a member of the management committee for this support service and am privy to some controversies associated with the research being conducted to evaluate this support service. The difficulties are focused on a questionnaire sent to schools by the evaluation team and some concerns members of the support service have about the wording of some of the items. I am not sure that a questionnaire from me is appropriate at this time. Following a discussion with another member of the management committee I have decided not to circulate the questionnaire to the SPHE support teams.

#### **Distribution of the Questionnaire. May 2002**

This has gone well, although I underestimated the time it would take for the compiling and mailing of the questionnaires and letters. No queries have come in nor have any clarifications been sought so far.

### **Mailing of thanks and reminder. End May 2002**

The thanks and reminder has been sent. I got a request from two people to e-mail them the questionnaire as they were working outside the country and wanted to fill it in and e-mail it back. I reminded them that in effect they would be sacrificing anonymity, but they were anxious to participate and I agreed to accept the two e-mailed returns.

104 questionnaires had been returned by the cut off date.

### **Initial analysis. Summer 2002**

The initial coding of the questionnaires has been interesting. The comments on the open items have been particularly revealing. A small number of the respondents have taken the opportunity to 'have a few words' with the CEO of the NCCA! A first read of the comments on the open items is already showing differences between those working with primary and post-primary teachers. The comments on the policy cycle seem to show that participants had no difficulty filling in the diagram. The language of the policy cycle does not appear to have 'put them off'.

### **Preparing for focus groups. Spring 2002**

In planning the focus group discussions and setting up the schedule for them I have been reflecting on whether there should be separate groups for primary and post-primary support service personnel. The analysis of the questionnaire data, now complete, shows that there are differences between them. I am more interested in exploring these differences than in testing them by having the two groups engage with each other. Keeping the two groups separate will better facilitate the former I think, although at some point in the future, I'd like to invite a group from both sectors to a discussion on their work – perhaps in the dissemination of the findings of this study.

In checking with the co-ordinator of the PCSP about sending invitations in respect of the focus group, I note that she asks me if I know what's happening next year. I have

been involved in negotiating a 'slowing' down of the timescale for the introduction of the revised primary curriculum in response to requests from schools and teachers for more time to deal with the subjects already implemented. The plan is to continue to provide support for schools in reviewing and consolidating the work they have done, but this will involve some re-organisation of staff, a reorganisation that generally would involve the CEO of the NCCA.

### **The cutbacks are rumoured. March 2003**

As the budgetary estimates process gets underway, it is becoming clear that cutbacks are ahead, and that in-career development may suffer a significant reduction in funding. In approaching the SLSS and PCSP I am aware that there are tensions about this issue, and about my involvement in the future planning process. I hold off formally seeking focus group participants until there is more clarity.

### **The cutbacks are confirmed. April 2003**

Clarity breaks out. Reductions in the SLSS personnel and no new recruitment in the PCSP to replace those who are leaving or returning to school. While I was not involved in the decisions about these reductions, I am, in the minds of the SLSS and the PCSP, associated with them, and with any recruitment/filtering process that lies ahead.

I call both co-ordinators and explain that because of my research I will not be involved in any interview process in the months ahead. I replace myself in the recruitment process with another member of staff and advise the management committee.

I am struck once again by the complexities of researching as an insider. I am enmeshed in the process I am trying to interrogate, and as the dynamics of that process shift, I have to respond to ensure that the research remains feasible. I am convinced that getting focus group participants will be difficult, not simply because they may feel less well disposed towards me, but because they will now be involved in interviewing for their jobs and re-drawing their work plans for 2004-2005.

### **The focus groups. May-June 2003.**

After something of a struggle to convene a post-primary group (where the cuts have hit hardest) both focus group discussions have taken place. I spent some time with the note-taker and briefed him on the research and the purpose of the discussions. As he works in NCCA and was formerly a member of a post-primary support service, he, like myself, was well known to all the participants. This helped to put participants at their ease. Food and drink also helped.

I was conscious in both discussions that at some points the participants were sending 'messages' to me in my professional roles. The note-taker, in our de-briefing session, agreed and identified the same 'messages'. This was an inevitable consequence of the insider role.

### **And beyond – Autumn 2003**

While the data collection is over, the collection process, the questionnaire and focus group discussions are still alive in the minds of those who participated. In my professional role I meet members, especially senior members, of the support services at meetings or at seminars. Inevitably, I am asked 'how's the research going?' and enquiries are made as to when I will have the 'results'...

Like education policy, research is not a ring-fenced event in the lives of participants or researchers; it is inserted into the lives and circumstances of all involved

## **Appendix Two**

### **Questionnaire**

# The Implementation of Curriculum and Assessment Policy

## Questionnaire

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### 1. About you

1a. Sex      male  (i)      female  (ii)

1b. How many years teaching experience do you have? (please round up to the nearest year)

\_\_\_\_\_ years

1c. How many years principalship experience do you have? (please round up to the nearest year)

\_\_\_\_\_ years

1d. Years of experience in a support service or programme (including this year)

Less than 3  (i)      4-6  (ii)      more than 6  (iii)

1e. With which of the following support services are you currently associated?

PCSP  (i)      SLSS  (ii)      SPHE  (iii)      RE  (iv)

Physical sciences  (v)      Home Economics  (vi)      Biology  (vii)

1f. With which of the following support services, if any, were you previously associated?

PCSP  (i)      SLSS  (ii)      SPHE  (iii)      RE  (iv)

Physical sciences  (v)      Home Economics  (vi)      Biology  (vii)

Other  (vii) please specify \_\_\_\_\_



## 2. About your work with teachers

Here is a set of statements about working with teachers. Please say whether you

**strongly agree    agree    are neutral    disagree    strongly disagree**

with/about each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
a) I give teachers information about changes in curriculum					
b) I give teachers information about changes in assessment					
c) I help teachers to implement changes in curriculum in their schools and classrooms					
d) I help teachers to implement changes in assessment in their schools and classrooms					
e) I play an important role in ensuring that policy decisions are implemented as intended					
f) I play an important role in the professional development of teachers					
g) Teachers see me as an agent of the Department of Education and Science					
h) My work is valued by the education system					
i) Teachers' value my work					
j) Teachers see me as a support					
k) My work has a direct impact on teachers' classroom practice					
l) I have little idea of the impact of my work in classrooms					

### 3. About curriculum

Here is a set of statements about curriculum. Please say whether you

**strongly agree      agree      are neutral      disagree      strongly disagree**

with/about each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
a) Curriculum change means more work for teachers					
b) Teachers have a good understanding of the principles underpinning curriculum					
c) Curriculum is developed centrally and implemented locally					
d) Curriculum is going to be a controversial issue for policy makers in the near future					
e) Text books have a greater impact than the curriculum on classroom practice					
f) Teachers have considerable freedom in how they implement the curriculum in their classrooms					
g) I play an important role in the development of curriculum in the education system as a whole					

#### 4. About assessment

Here is a set of statements about assessment. Please say whether you

**strongly agree      agree      are neutral      disagree      strongly disagree**

with/about each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
a) Teachers are confident in their assessment practice in classrooms					
b) Assessment shapes the curriculum in classrooms					
c) Teachers are convinced that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.					
d) In general, schools have well-developed reporting strategies					
e) In general, schools have well developed assessment policies					
f) I play an important role in the development of assessment in the education system as a whole					
g) Teachers see the purpose of assessment in classrooms as gathering data for reporting to parents					
h) Teacher see the purpose of assessment as providing feedback for learners					
i) Assessment is going to be a controversial issue for policy-makers in the near future					
j) Changes in assessment mean more work for teachers					

## 5. The relationship between curriculum and assessment

Please indicate which **ONE** of the following best describes your confidence in dealing with curriculum issues and assessment issues in the course of your work with teachers.

5a. I am equally confident in dealing with curriculum issues and assessment issues with teachers

5b. I am more confident in dealing with curriculum issues than assessment issues with teachers

5c. I am more confident dealing with assessment issues than curriculum issues with teachers.

Please write a short summary of your understanding of the relationship between curriculum and assessment

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## 6. The Policy Process

The diagram below has been developed to represent the policy process.

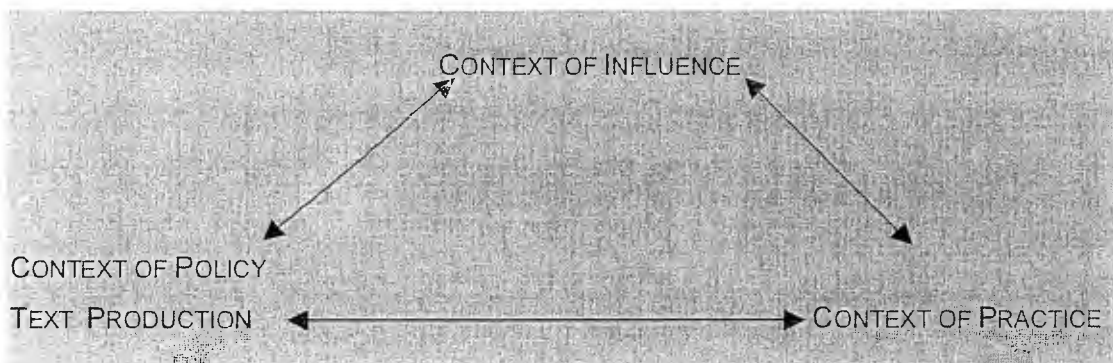
The **context of influence** is the site of consultation, decision making and policy development

The **context of text production** is the site where policy documents are generated.

The **context of practice** is the site where the policy is implemented

Please place an **X** where you would position your current work. Your **X** can be placed anywhere in the shaded area.

If you wish, you may comment on your choice of location in the space underneath the diagram.



COMMENT

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THANK-YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION.

PLEASE RETURN THE COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE USING THE STAMPED ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

## **Appendix Three**

### **Pilot Questionnaire**

## The Implementation of Curriculum and Assessment Policy

### Questionnaire

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#### 1. About you

Sex male  female

#### Years of teaching or principalship experience

Less than 5  5-10  10-15  15-20   
20-25  25-30  30-35  more than 30

#### Years of experience in a support service or programme (including this year)

Less than 3  3-6  more than

#### With which of the following support services are you currently associated?

PCSP  SLSS  SPHE  RE   
Physical sciences  Home Economics  Biology

#### With which of the following support services, if any, were you previously associated?

PCSP  SLSS  SPHE  RE   
Physical sciences  Home Economics  Biology   
Other  please specify \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. About your work with teachers

Here is a set of statements about working with teachers. Please say whether you

strongly agree      agree      are neutral      disagree      strongly disagree

With each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
I give teachers information about changes in curriculum					
I give teachers information about changes in assessment					
I help teachers to implement changes in curriculum in their schools and classrooms					
I help teachers to implement changes in assessment in their schools and classrooms					
I play an important role in ensuring that policy decisions are implemented as intended					
I play an important role in the professional development of teachers					
Teachers see me as an agent of the Department of Education and Science					
My work is valued by the education system					
Teachers' value my work					
Teachers see me as a support					
My work has a direct impact on teachers' classroom practice					
I have little idea of the impact of my work in classrooms					



### 3. About curriculum

Here is a set of statements about curriculum. Please say whether you

strongly agree      agree      are neutral      disagree      strongly disagree

With each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
Curriculum change means more work for teachers					
I help teachers to implement changes in curriculum in their schools and classrooms					
Teachers have a good understanding of the principles underpinning curriculum					
I give teachers information about changes in curriculum					
Curriculum is developed centrally and implemented locally					
Curriculum is going to be controversial issue for policy makers in the near future					
Text books have a greater impact than the curriculum on classroom practice					
Teachers have considerable freedom in how they implement the curriculum in their classrooms					
I play an important role in the development of curriculum in the education system as a whole					

#### 4. About assessment

Here is a set of statements about assessment . Please say whether you

strongly agree      agree      are neutral      disagree      strongly disagree

With each statement by ticking the appropriate box.

statement	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
Teachers are confident in their assessment practice in classrooms					
Assessment shapes the curriculum in classrooms					
Teachers are convinced that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.					
In general, schools have well-developed reporting strategies					
In general, schools have well developed assessment policies					
I give teachers information about changes in assessment					
I play an important role in the development of assessment in the education system as a whole					
Teachers see the purpose of assessment in classrooms as gathering data for reporting to parents					
Teacher see the purpose of assessment as providing feedback for learners					
Assessment is going to be a controversial issue for policy-makers in the near future					
Changes in assessment means more work for teachers					

## 5. The relationship between curriculum and assessment

Please chose true or false

I am equally confident in dealing with curriculum issues and assessment issues with teachers

True                   False

I am more confident in dealing with curriculum issues than assessment issues with teachers

True                   False

I am more confident dealing with assessment issues than curriculum issues with teachers.

True                   False

Please write a short summary of your understanding of the relationship between curriculum and assessment

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## 5. The Policy Process

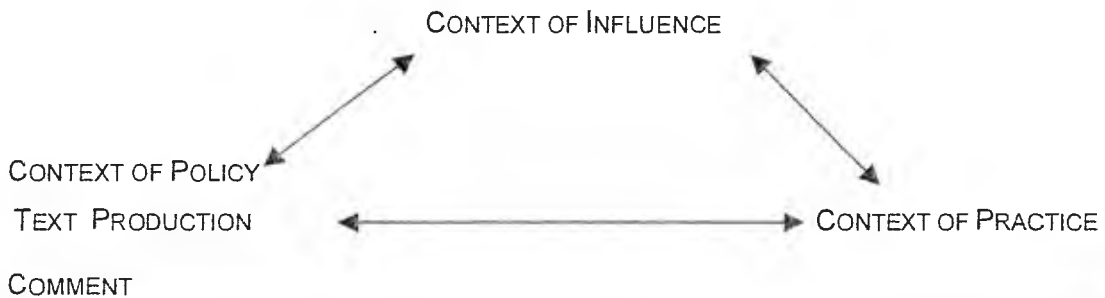
The diagram below has been developed to represent the policy process.

The **context of influence** is the site of consultation, decision making and policy development

The **context of text production** is the site where policy documents are generated.

The **context of practice** is the site where the policy is implemented

Please place an **X** where you would position your current work. If you wish, you may comment on your choice in the space underneath the diagram.



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THANK-YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION.

PLEASE RETURN THE COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE USING THE STAMPED ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

## **Appendix Four**

### **Cover letter accompanying questionnaire**

May 2002

57 Woodford Villas  
Clondalkin  
Dublin 22  
anlooney@indigo.ie

**Research for Doctoral Thesis on The Implementation of Curriculum and Assessment Policy**

Dear member of support team/regional development officer,

As part of my doctoral studies at the Institute of Education of the University of London, I am conducting research into the **implementation of curriculum and assessment policy** in the Republic of Ireland.

As part of this work, I would like to collect data on the experiences and insights of those involved in the provision of in-career support at primary and post-primary levels in the system.

A questionnaire to collect that data is enclosed for your completion. The questionnaire, which is anonymous, takes about fifteen minutes to complete. Please return it to me via e-mail to [anlooney@indigo.ie](mailto:anlooney@indigo.ie)

I am aware of the pressures on your time at present, but I would greatly appreciate your co-operation. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me at the above e-mail address.

Questionnaires should be returned to me by **the end of May**

Yours sincerely

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Anne Looney  
EdD student  
Institute of Education

## **Appendix Five**

### **Focus Group Schedule**

What are teachers worried about?

Are you worried about it?

Teachers getting to grips with the curriculum... not having a grasp of the basic principles... this came out in the questionnaire

**4. Classrooms...** what makes the difference – is practice changing?

What signs do you have of this? Is it shaping up the way you thought it would

In the questionnaire, the view was quite bleak... books dominate, in fact a huge majority said that books have a bigger impact on classroom practice than curriculum

**5. Policy...**

Is the curriculum a policy tool?

Is assessment a policy tool?

Do you see yourself as participating in the policy process