Negotiating the Curriculum: An Integrated Approach
Supporting Meaningful Learning through Learner and Professional Agency

Name: Joanne Fitzpatrick

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Limerick

Supervisors: Dr John O’ Reilly & Dr Emmanuel O’Grady

Submitted to the University of Limerick, March 2016
Abstract

Negotiating the Curriculum: An Integrated Approach Supporting Meaningful Learning through Learner and Professional Agency

Nationally, and internationally, there is a lack of student voice in the curriculum and a relative absence of the role of teachers as curriculum-makers. Furthermore, a dilemma that most national education systems face is the need for the curriculum to adapt reflexively to the social and economic challenges they are faced with. This work takes place within the Irish educational context which is currently going through a reform of lower secondary schooling that proposes significant changes to the curriculum to include the role of teachers and students, the nature of learning, and indeed the very purpose of education. This study seeks to explore the affordances of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) to realise these ambitions and to address some of the deficiencies identified in the Irish education system. NIC is a curriculum design that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organisation of curriculum around the concerns of students, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area boundaries. This study explores a ‘community’ approach to learning where the participation of young people in central decision making processes and meaningful work in a social setting is guided and supported by their teachers. This work consists of a small-scale, qualitative, longitudinal investigation across three schools; two primary and one post-primary. The findings of this work identified that NIC had a significant impact on: the agentic engagement of students and what they considered meaningful in their learning; the social dynamics of the classroom; professional agency in the classroom and; realising policy ambitions in a significant, structured and systemic way. The work concludes by considering the place of the findings of this thesis in the context of the current change environment with recommendations to support the implementation of NIC nationally.

Post-Primary is referred to as ‘Secondary’ school in Ireland.
Declaration

I, Joanne Fitzpatrick, declare that this thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted, in part or whole, to any institution for any other academic award and all academic works that have informed this thesis have been appropriately referenced and acknowledged.

______________________________________________________

Joanne Fitzpatrick, March 2016
Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents. They have always supported and encouraged me in all walks of life especially when making the decision to return to college to pursue a career in education after spending 6 years working in Finance. To my dad for all the proofreading he did over the last number of years and to my mam for all the wedding planning she did while I was busy researching!

I could not have completely this thesis without the invaluable support of several people without whom I may not have gotten to where I am today, at least not sanely.

I would like to sincerely thank my two supervisors Dr John O’Reilly and Dr Emmanuel O’Grady. I would like to thank Dr John O’Reilly for considering me as an appropriate candidate to carry out this hugely meaningful work. I would like to thank John for his invaluable insights, ideas and support and for opening so many doors for me over the last three years. To Dr Emmanuel O’Grady for being so unbelievably generous with his time throughout this process. For his invaluable feedback and insights on each and every piece of writing I have done and for setting targets for me at every stage of the writing process. Working with Manny made the completion of this thesis manageable and realistic!

I would like to thank Fr. Paul Finnerty and Jerry Cronin in the St. Kieráns initiative for funding this research and for trusting in me to carry out this important work in Limerick schools. I would also like to thank the NCCA, Ger Halbert in particular, for continuously supporting and promoting the central message of NIC in both Irish and international education spaces. To the fantastic principals, teachers and students who embraced NIC over the years and made this research what it is today, I am forever indebted.

To the ‘PhD scholars’ gang for making me feel so welcome in the post-graduate fold with their advice, cups of tea and sometimes not-so-scholarly chats. To all my friends both within and outside UL for all of their support (and proofreading!), I am forever grateful.
In keeping with the tradition of saving the best until last, I would like to thank my best friend and partner Tom. For the greatest eight years of my life and for the constant support in everything I have ever done, especially throughout this PhD. Even though you will probably never read this thesis (!), I could not have completed this work without your encouragement and support. I absolutely cannot wait to marry you in June.
‘Why are you educating me like this and what for?’

(Theo Dorgan, JMB Conference 2014)
# Table of Contents

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................ iii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ iv  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. vii  
List of Figures .................................................................................................................................... xi  
List of Appendices ........................................................................................................................... xiv  
Abbreviations ...................................................................................................................................... xv  
  
Chapter One: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1  
1.1 Research Aim and Objectives .................................................................................................... 1  
  Research Aim .................................................................................................................................. 1  
1.2 Research Questions ................................................................................................................... 2  
1.3 Brief overview of the Irish Context ............................................................................................ 3  
1.4 Original Contribution of Research ............................................................................................ 5  
  Impact on Policy ............................................................................................................................... 5  
  Dissemination of Research ................................................................................................................ 6  
1.5 Thesis Overview ......................................................................................................................... 7  
1.6 Autobiographical Context .......................................................................................................... 10  
  
Chapter Two: Critical Social Constructivist Conceptual Framework underpinning the Thesis .......... 13  
2.1 Ontology .................................................................................................................................... 13  
2.2 Epistemology ............................................................................................................................. 15  
2.3 Implications of the Conceptual Framework for this Research ..................................................... 17  
  
Chapter Three: Literature Review .................................................................................................... 23  
3.1 Curriculum ................................................................................................................................. 23  
  3.1.1 Values and Paradigms in Curricula ......................................................................................... 25  
  3.1.2 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 38  
3.2: Curriculum Intervention ........................................................................................................... 39  
  3.2.1 How is Curriculum Traditionally Selected? ............................................................................. 39  
  3.2.2 Curriculum Reform ................................................................................................................ 42  
  3.2.3 Curriculum Intervention Conclusion ....................................................................................... 49  
3.3: Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) and its Origins .......................................................... 50  
  3.3.1 Understandings of Integrated Curricula ................................................................................. 50  
  3.3.2 History of an Integrated Curriculum ....................................................................................... 60  
  

3.3.3 Benefits and Criticisms of an Integrated Curricula ...............................................................67
3.4: Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) ..................................................................................74
  3.4.1 What is NIC? .........................................................................................................................74
  3.4.2 NIC in Practice ......................................................................................................................78
  3.4.3 Teacher-Student Negotiation .................................................................................................81
  3.4.4 Philosophy underpinning NIC...............................................................................................83
  3.4.5 Conclusion .............................................................................................................................83
3.5.1 Contextual Factors and Values inherent in Irish Education .....................................................85
3.5.2 Curriculum Intervention in Irish Education .............................................................................92
3.5.3 The Limerick Regeneration Context .....................................................................................103

3.5 Conclusion of Literature Review Chapter ..............................................................................106

Chapter Four: Methodology ............................................................................................................107
4.1 Methodological Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................107
  4.1.1 Critical Social Constructivist Conceptual Framework ............................................................107
  4.1.2 Methodological Implications of Conceptual Framework .......................................................109
  4.1.3 Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................111
4.2 Qualitative Research ..................................................................................................................113
  4.2.1 Brief Overview: History of Qualitative Research ..................................................................113
  4.2.2 The Underpinning Assumptions of Qualitative Research ......................................................114
  4.2.3 Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................116
4.3 Methodology of Research ..........................................................................................................118
  4.3.1 Context for study .................................................................................................................118
  4.3.2 Participant Selection ............................................................................................................119
  4.3.3 Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................124
  4.4.1 Participant Observation .......................................................................................................126
  4.4.2 Longitudinal Study .............................................................................................................128
  4.4.3 Interviews ...........................................................................................................................129
  4.4.4 Journaling and Reflections ...................................................................................................132
  4.4.5 Focus Groups .......................................................................................................................134
  4.4.6 Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................136
4.5 Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................136
  4.5.1 Qualitative Data Analysis .....................................................................................................137
  4.5.2 Inductive Thematic Analysis ................................................................................................138
  4.5.3 The Data Analysis Process ....................................................................................................139
  4.5.4 Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................141
4.6 Validity .......................................................................................................................................143
  4.6.1 Confirmability .......................................................................................................................143
  4.6.2 Transferability .......................................................................................................................150
  4.6.3 Authenticity ..........................................................................................................................151
List of Figures

**Chapter Three: Literature Review**

3.1: Drake’s (1998) depiction of a Multidisciplinary Curriculum  
3.2: Drake’s (1998) Interdisciplinary Curriculum  
3.3: Fogarty’s (1991) Webbed Model  
3.4: Drakes (1998) Transdisciplinary Curriculum  
3.5: Fogarty’s (1991) 10 Models of Curriculum Integration  
3.6: Fogarty’s (1991) Cellular Model  
3.7: Fogarty’s (1991) Shared Model  
3.8: Fogarty’s (1991) Threaded Model  
3.9: Fogarty’s (1991) Immersed and Networked Models  
3.10: Boomer’s (1992) Motivation Model  
3.11: Boomer’s (1992) Negotiation Model  
3.12: Beane’s (1997) Design for Curriculum Integration

**Chapter Four: Methodology**

4.1: Breakdown of all participants involved in the NIC study  
4.2: Breakdown of Methods Used  
4.3: Timeframe of longitudinal study  
4.4: Breakdown of interviewees, location and length of interviews  
4.5: Schools and participants for the focus group day

**Chapter Five: Summary of Interventions**

5.1: Outline profile of NIC process in Primary school A  
5.2: Students vote for themes & list of themes with corresponding no. of student votes  
5.3: Students research their project areas for Physical, Mental and Emotional Health  
5.4: Students interview Health Professionals: A Psychologist and Munster Rugby Players  
5.5: Presentation on ‘Physical Health’ as a method of assessment  
5.6: Students answering the four questions in their groups  
5.7: Compilation of students’ answers to Cook’s (1998) Four Questions
5.8: Students conducting the SD&A research day
5.9: Rubric created by teachers and students and script drafting for ‘play’ assessment
5.10: Guest speaker from Nicorette presents information and answers the student’s questions
5.11: Student Presentations
5.12: Drama as a form of assessment
5.13: Student ‘Rap’ on the dangers of alcohol to health
5.14: PE Curriculum designed by students to answer the question ‘Are boys or girls better at sport?’
5.15: Students compete in boys vs. girls PE day
5.16: Students compile and analyze results
5.17: Outline profile of NIC process in Primary school B
5.18: Student Vote and Theme Selection
5.19: Student research day using computers and books
5.20: Preparing questions and collecting items for the LAW visit
5.21: Guest speaker and Bertie the dog from LAW
5.22: Students’ graphing the class survey results on animals
5.23: Students’ drafting final projects
5.24: Student Presentations
5.25: Outline profile of NIC process in the secondary school
5.26: Student vote for themes & breakdown of chosen theme into sub-themes
5.27: Teachers plan the NIC curriculum and select ‘Water Charges’ and ‘Racism’ as sub-themes for perusal
5.28: Newspaper article research
5.29: Students roadmapping their knowledge
5.30: Computer Research
5.31: Student’s check the school toilets for leaks
5.32: Measuring water wastage when brushing teeth with running water versus a cup of water
5.33: Analysis of experiment results
5.34: Class Survey on Water Charges with informed votes from each student

5.35: One groups project before and after feedback

5.36: Project finalisation and preparation for the presentation evening

5.37: Student podium presentations

5.38: Poster showcases

5.39: Breakdown of project areas and learning activities for the racism theme

5.40: Breakdown of subjects and areas of responsibility for the 6 teachers involved in delivering the racism theme

5.41: Drafting of survey questions and interview questions

5.42: Students interview two guards and an immigrant to Ireland about Racism in Ireland

5.43: Students interview two professional soccer players about racism in their sport

5.44: Racism awareness campaign

5.45: Students conducting surveys

5.46: Analysis of survey results

5.47: Project Finalisation

5.48: Presentations to 4th year students

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1: NIC represented as ‘curriculum as praxis’
List of Appendices

Chapter One: Introduction

Appendix 1: Primary Researchers Response to the NCCA ‘Short Course Development Guide’

Appendix 2: Irish Times NIC Article

Appendix 3: Irish Independent NIC Article

Chapter Four: Methodology

Appendix 4: Member Checking Survey and Questions

Appendix 5: Ethics Forms

Chapter Six: Findings

Appendix 6: Posters before and after feedback

Conclusion Chapter

Appendix 7: NCCA Key Skills

Appendix 8: NCCA Statements of Learning
Abbreviations

AfL: Assessment for Learning
ASTI: Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland
DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES: Department of Education and Science
DoE: Department of Education
IC: Integrated Curriculum
I&I: Innovations and Identity
JCF: Junior Cycle Framework
JMB: Joint Managerial Board
NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NIC: Negotiated Integrated Curriculum
OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLC: Professional Learning Community
SSIRL: Social Inclusion and Regeneration in Limerick
TALIS: Teaching and Learning International Survey
TUI: Teachers Union of Ireland
ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development
Chapter One: Introduction

A Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) is where all learning, to include what is learnt and how, is negotiated with students and based on issues of concern to them. Subjects are drawn upon as necessary to address the questions they generate in relation to their concerns, which constitutes the integrated aspect. The subsequent learning for students emphasises continual student decision-making using largely cooperative learning pedagogies. As such this represents an attempt to realise a more democratic process for students to meaningfully engage with a curriculum.

This chapter will address the significance of this research by detailing the key factors which were influential in its inception. The research aim and objectives provide the underlying rationale for this study and the research questions that guide this work. The national and local context for this study will be examined to provide a framework for the environment within which this work was situated. Lastly, the originality of this research will provide an insight into the novel achievements of this work and the autobiographical context of the researcher as to why it was undertaken.

1.1 Research Aim and Objectives

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to support the development of a sustainable NIC structure to assist students and educational professionals to articulate, design, and enact a high quality and meaningful curriculum. This work aims to provide an improved socio-cultural process of learning where negotiating the curriculum is believed to be an effective way of empowering students to engage with their learning and possibly impact on the professional agency of teachers as they experiment with alternative ways of making knowledge more meaningful for their students.

---

2 The socio-cultural focus of this work is developed further in section 2.3 of Chapter Two in the ‘Processes of Learning’ section.
Research Objectives

This work will:

1. Attempt to create a tentative hypothesis for teachers and students to re-write the curriculum collaboratively through a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC).
2. Aim to enhance the agency of teachers and students as they become curricular decision-makers.
3. Provide a more authentic and rigorous approach to incorporating student voice in the curriculum for greater engagement.
4. Equip schools and teachers with the capacity to co-construct NIC with their students.
5. Afford teachers to enhance their professional development through greater collaboration in the NIC process.

It is these primary aims and objectives upon which the research questions guiding this study are based.

1.2 Research Questions

1. *How does inviting students to co-construct a curriculum with their teachers through a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum impact on student learning, engagement and agency?*

2. *How can a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum impact on the professional agency of teachers?*
1.3 Brief overview of the Irish Context

The Irish education system has a history of resistance to curriculum change (Gleeson 2010; Trant 1998). Previous reform attempts in Ireland have taken a “top-down” approach where attempts at curriculum reform have been largely controlled and implemented by central governments (McCormack 2010; Granville 2004). At a classroom level, Irish teachers employ mostly didactic teaching methods (Gleeson 2010; Carr 1998) where transmission styles of teaching are the norm in Irish classrooms (TALIS Report 2009; Carr and Kemmis 1986). This can result in Irish students being largely reduced to the role of passive learners (Hanrahan 2008) and as a consequence, a diminished sense of student engagement is apparent in Irish classrooms (ESRI 2006; Lawson and Lawson 2013).

The context of curriculum change in Ireland is complex. The relative lack of success of curricular change in Ireland is often attributed to a lack of dialogue between educational policy makers and educational stakeholders such as the practitioners who are expected to implement curricular changes (Eisner 1992; Trant 1998). However, in 2009 the NCCA initiated a consultative approach to curriculum change by inviting teachers and other interested parties to respond to proposed changes to the Junior Cycle, but the response from teachers was relatively small (NCCA 2010). Furthermore, this lack of engagement from Irish teachers to actively engage with curricular reform could be attributed to their lack of connection with the purposes of education (Biesta et al. 2015).

A question from students ‘why are you educating me like this and what for?’ (Dorgan 2014 (in relation to the purpose of Irish schooling) pertains to the purposes of education that some teachers may feel divorced from. Historically in the Irish educational system, and internationally, teachers rarely engage with this kind of question in any fundamental way (Biesta et al. 2015). This work will attempt to provide a structure to address this question in a substantively more meaningful way. Ireland currently stands at an educational crossroads due to the significant changes proposed to lower secondary schooling by the new Junior Cycle Framework. This framework proposes a curriculum with a vision to place students at the centre of the educational

---

3 This section provides a very brief overview of the context of Irish curriculum reform to help legitimise the need for this research and the Irish context will be explored in much more depth in Section 3.5 of the Literature Review chapter.
experience and explicitly names democracy, human dignity, inclusion, and ownership amongst its visions and principles (NCCA 2010). The values that are enunciated through the framework provide a critical context for this study. This study argues that NIC is a structure that can realise the visions of the framework in a manageable and practical way at both a national and local level.

In the local context, this study took place in three schools in the Limerick Regeneration Area where schools are characterised by low levels of student engagement, decreasing enrolments, and low staff morale (Fitzgerald 2007). As this region is often characterised by a “deficit mentality” and deficient levels of educational attainment, there has been a call for the introduction of national strategies to address the low levels of student engagement in this area (Humphreys et al. 2011). NIC seeks to facilitate a developmental process to assist students and educational professionals in this region to articulate, design, and enact a meaningful curriculum which will have a positive impact on student engagement. Fundamentally, this work is not designed to address only this perceived deficit (Humphreys et al. 2011), it is designed as a curriculum which could have a national impact on student engagement and learner and professional agency.
1.4 Original Contribution of Research

The originality of this study is advocated through its influence on a community of educational stakeholders, namely: Policymakers; the Irish Inspectorate; school leaders; teachers; students; and parents. Despite exhaustive literature searches, there does not seem to be any similar implementation of Boomer’s ‘Negotiated Curriculum’ in the Irish context. Furthermore, there is no evidence of an explicit combination of Beane’s (1995) ‘Integrated Curriculum’ and Boomer’s ‘Negotiated Curriculum’ (combined to form ‘NIC’) being introduced to any schools in Ireland (or across Europe). This work is a curriculum initiative that has been introduced across both the primary and secondary sectors, encouraging a communication between both schooling levels at a time of curriculum change in the Irish context with potential implications for transition from primary to secondary. The originality of this work is also evidenced through the impact it has had at policy level.

Impact on Policy

This work is original as it has already had a significant impact at policy level in Ireland. There has been much attention given to this work by the NCCA. Following research interviews conducted with the NCCA, the researcher was approached by them to support this project. The NCCA recognised the potential of NIC to convert aspirations of the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) such as democratic schooling, equality, and human dignity into actualities. Furthermore, the primary researcher identified the opportunity to incorporate new forms of learning included in the NCCA’s ‘key skills’ and ‘statements of learning’ through the ‘short course’ element of the new curriculum. The proposals of the JCF will be detailed in Chapter 3 but the short courses provide flexibility within the current curriculum where there will be time and space for schools to construct curriculum locally. Furthermore, the short courses provide a natural space for curriculum integration but not at the expense of subject specialism or identity. This work is also original because the wording of national documents in relation to the JCF have been changed as a direct result of NIC. The researcher provided the NCCA with feedback on their ‘Short Course Development Guide’ based on the noted lack of involvement of students in the development of short courses. The only student representation in the document was an instruction to teachers to

---

5 Section 3.5.2: Curriculum Intervention in Irish Education
6 http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Short-Course-Development.aspx
‘consider consulting with learners’. Following the submission of a response document by the researcher\(^7\) to the NCCA and a follow up interview, the Short Course Development Guide was changed to make student voice and input a more explicit requirement throughout the planning document. The underlying visions and values of this thesis are in line with Hayward’s (2013) assertions that educational stakeholders should not have to be persuaded of the affordances of including learner voice in curricular decisions. Furthermore, learner participation should not be regarded as an ‘innovation’ or be dependent on the ‘chance’ that individual teachers and policymakers become convinced of the importance learners’ meaningful participation in educational decision-making (Hayward 2013, pp.187 -188).

In 2015, the NCCA commissioned this work to implement NIC in 4 Limerick secondary schools\(^8\). The on-going project involves 8 participating teachers and 5 first year class groups. The primary researcher was hired as a coordinating officer to liaise with each of the schools and facilitate the implementation of NIC. The NCCA have also provided professional development days for the participating teachers. Lastly, the NCCA have incorporated features of NIC into the new, senior cycle ‘Politics’ subject where they are using 6 of the 10 steps from the Beane and Brodhagen ‘NIC model’ which were presented to the NCCA by this this study.

**Dissemination of Research**

A paper has been submitted to the Irish Educational Studies journal detailing the original approach taken in introducing NIC to the Irish educational context. Equally, the originality of this work has been presented at one international research conference and 4 national conferences where the reception from academics and policymakers was that they had not seen this type of curriculum implemented before. At a national level, the Irish Times (2015) published an article on the work carried out by this study at secondary level entitled ‘One Student One Vote, Democracy at Work in the Classroom’\(^9\) and the Irish Independent (2014) published an article on NIC at primary level\(^10\). At a local level, the work carried out by this study featured in the Limerick Schools Project Programme 2015 where two participating teachers presented their

---

\(^7\) See Appendix 1 for the response to the document.

\(^8\) Two schools in the Limerick regeneration area, one rural school and one central school after the official termination of this doctoral research


experiences of NIC at secondary level to the programme and submitted a report on behalf of the school. Lastly, the Munster Rugby website published an article on NIC following the involvement of two players with the project at primary level.

A final championing aspect of this study is that while the concept of implementing NIC in Irish primary and secondary schools may be regarded as novel and innovative, it also has a strong theoretical base and academic rigour which will be detailed in the literature review and methodology chapters.\(^\text{11}\)

1.5 Thesis Overview

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. Chapter one explores the Irish educational context where this study is taking place in addition to identifying the primary purposes of the study, the research questions, and the originality of the work. Chapter two examines the underlying assumptions and values in the conceptual framework which guide and frame this study. In chapter three, existing literature is explored to examine the core concepts of: Curriculum and its underpinning conceptions; values and paradigms; curriculum intervention; and NIC and its origins. Chapter four outlines the methodologies used to conduct the research and highlights the methodological implications of the study. Chapter five provides a summary of the NIC initiatives carried out in each of the three participating schools to foreground the findings and discussion chapters. Chapter six presents the research findings in three distinct sections: Meaningful learning; social dynamics; and learner and teacher agency. Chapter seven situates the findings in the context of what’s already known by consulting the literature in order to gain a deeper level of analysis. The final chapter draws conclusions from the study, highlights limitations and makes recommendations for curriculum change and future research.

1.4 Original Contribution of Research

The originality of this study is advocated through its influence on a community of educational stakeholders, namely: Policymakers; the Irish Inspectorate; school leaders; teachers; students; and parents. Despite exhaustive literature searches, there does not seem to be any similar implementation of Boomer’s ‘Negotiated Curriculum’ in the Irish context. Furthermore, there is

\(^{11}\) Chapters 3 and 4
no evidence of an explicit combination of Beane’s (1995) ‘Integrated Curriculum’ and Boomer’s ‘Negotiated Curriculum’ (combined to form ‘NIC’) being introduced to any schools in Ireland (or across Europe). This work is a curriculum initiative that has been introduced across both the primary and secondary sectors, encouraging a communication between both schooling levels at a time of curriculum change in the Irish context with potential implications for transition from primary to secondary. The originality of this work is also evidenced through the impact it has had at policy level.

Impact on Policy

This work is original as it has already had a significant impact at policy level in Ireland. There has been much attention given to this work by the NCCA. Following research interviews conducted with the NCCA, the researcher was approached by them to support this project. The NCCA recognised the potential of NIC to convert aspirations of the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) such as democratic schooling, equality, and human dignity into actualities. Furthermore, the primary researcher identified the opportunity to incorporate new forms of learning included in the NCCA’s ‘key skills’ and ‘statements of learning’ through the ‘short course’ element of the new curriculum. The proposals of the JCF will be detailed in Chapter 3 but the short courses provide flexibility within the current curriculum where there will be time and space for schools to construct curriculum locally. Furthermore, the short courses provide a natural space for curriculum integration but not at the expense of subject specialism or identity. This work is also original because the wording of national documents in relation to the JCF have been changed as a direct result of NIC.

The researcher provided the NCCA with feedback on their ‘Short Course Development Guide’ based on the noted lack of involvement of students in the development of short courses. The only student representation in the document was an instruction to teachers to ‘consider consulting with learners’. Following the submission of a response document by the researcher to the NCCA and a follow up interview, the Short Course Development Guide was changed to make student voice and input a more explicit requirement throughout the planning document. The

---

12 Section 3.5.2: Curriculum Intervention in Irish Education
13 http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Short-Course-Development.aspx
14 See Appendix 1 for the response to the document.
underlying visions and values of this thesis are in line with Hayward’s (2013) assertions that educational stakeholders should not have to be persuaded of the affordances of including learner voice in curricular decisions. Furthermore, learner participation should not be regarded as an ‘innovation’ or be dependent on the ‘chance’ that individual teachers and policy-makers become convinced of the importance learners’ meaningful participation in educational decision-making (Hayward 2013, pp.187 -188).

In 2015, the NCCA commissioned this work to implement NIC in 4 Limerick secondary schools\(^{15}\). The on-going project involves 8 participating teachers and 5 first year class groups. The primary researcher was hired as a coordinating officer to liaise with each of the schools and facilitate the implementation of NIC. The NCCA have also provided professional development days for the participating teachers. Lastly, the NCCA have incorporated features of NIC into the new, senior cycle ‘Politics’ subject where they are using 6 of the 10 steps from the Beane and Brodhagen ‘NIC model’ which were presented to the NCCA by this this study.

**Dissemination of Research**

A paper has been submitted to the Irish Educational Research journal detailing the original approach taken in introducing NIC to the Irish educational context. Equally, the originality of this work has been presented at one international research conference and 4 national conferences where the reception from academics and policymakers was that they had not seen this type of curriculum implemented before. At a national level, the Irish Times (2015) published an article on the work carried out by this study at secondary level entitled ‘One Student One Vote, Democracy at Work in the Classroom\(^ {16}\)’ and the Irish Independent (2014) published an article on NIC at primary level\(^ {17}\). At a local level, the work carried out by this study featured in the Limerick Schools Project Programme 2015 where two participating teachers presented their experiences of NIC at secondary level to the programme and submitted a report on behalf of the school. Lastly, the Munster Rugby website published an article on NIC following the involvement of two players with the project at primary level.

---

\(^{15}\) Two schools in the Limerick regeneration area, one rural school and one central school after the official termination of this doctoral research


A final championing aspect of this study is that while the concept of implementing NIC into Irish primary and secondary schools may be regarded as novel and innovative, it also has a strong theoretical base and academic rigour which will be detailed in the literature review and methodology chapters.

1.5 Thesis Overview

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. Chapter one explores the Irish educational context where this study is taking place in addition to identifying the primary purposes of the study, the research questions, and the originality of the work. Chapter two examines the underlying assumptions and values in the conceptual framework which guide and frame this study. In chapter three, existing literature is explored to examine the core concepts of: Curriculum and its underpinning conceptions; values and paradigms; curriculum intervention; and NIC and its origins. Chapter four outlines the methodologies used to conduct the research and highlights the methodological implications of the study. Chapter five provides a summary of the NIC initiatives carried out in each of the three participating schools to foreground the findings and discussion chapters. Chapter six presents the research findings in three distinct sections: Meaningful learning; social dynamics; and learner and teacher agency. Chapter seven situates the findings in the context of what’s already known by consulting the literature in order to gain a deeper level of analysis. The final chapter draws conclusions from the study, highlights limitations and makes recommendations for curriculum change and future research.

1.6 Autobiographical Context

This section will briefly outline the researcher’s journey to becoming involved with this project. This thesis is usually written in third person but as this is an autobiographical piece, it will be written in first person for this section only.

I initially returned to the University of Limerick (after a 6 year career in finance) to complete the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PDE) with the primary aim of becoming a secondary school teacher. This decision was motivated by the desire to work in the field of education and

---

18 Chapters 3 and 4
be a ‘good teacher’ like the teachers that had influenced me throughout my own secondary education. As I engaged with the course, my thoughts about education and my understanding of what makes a ‘good teacher’ developed significantly. Things that I had never previously considered such as how curriculum is traditionally selected and who selects it prompted me to question aspects of our education system. Furthermore, modules that encouraged me to identify and examine my own assumptions about teaching revealed a lot about my own bias towards my approach to teaching. When preparing for, and completing, my teaching placement I was always drawn to teaching methodologies that engaged students and allowed them to work more collaboratively. The NCCA launched the new JCF while I was completing my initial teacher education and I was immediately interested in the framework and the opportunities it presented for a more student-centred approach to curriculum. The proposed framework led me to question the existing curriculum at junior cycle and the methods of didactic teaching and passive learning it encouraged. I wrote two papers in response to the framework and conducted interviews with teachers in my placement school to gauge their reaction to the proposed changes as research for the papers. I was extremely surprised at the negative reaction to the proposed changes and the frustrations expressed by teachers regarding their perceived low level of involvement in the consultation process conducted by the NCCA.

When the opportunity arose to explore a PhD in NIC, I was initially excited by the level of student involvement and meaningful learning that this curricular approach facilitated. As I researched NIC further, I also saw the potential affordances it had to give teachers more control over the curriculum and their professional decisions which I interpreted as lacking from the current curriculum when interviewing teachers for my JCF response papers. Ultimately, I undertook this research because it had meaning for me. I saw NIC as a way to initiate change in Irish education in a significant and meaningful way by basing a curriculum around the concerns of students which necessitated more socially constructive teaching methodologies. I perceived the ‘negotiated’ element of NIC as an opportunity to redefine traditional teacher-student relationships towards a more dialogical approach. Furthermore, the approach to integration where different subjects were incorporated into an elected theme as and when needed, simply made sense to me as an approach to learning. The final aspect of the PhD that influenced my decision to fully commit was that it allowed me to teach, and be in the classroom, as I carried out NIC across the three schools over two years, which is the sole reason why I returned to university in the first place.
As detailed in section 1.4\textsuperscript{19}, throughout the course of this research, my relationship with the NCCA changed significantly and I recognise that this could present some potential risks. I had always advocated for the NCCA based on the student-centred visions set forward by the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) but it must be made explicit that my positioning with the NCCA changed one year into the research when the NCCA contributed to the funding of this study. I am aware that this could present the possible risks that: I could be overly supportive of their work; the line between researcher and advocate could become faded and; my design and implementation of NIC could subconsciously be shaped around the underlying aims of the JCF. Since the beginning of my professional relationship with the NCCA, I have engaged very positively with the organisation. When I was a postgraduate student and the NCCA changed the wording of policy documents based on my feedback\textsuperscript{20}, this resulted in me having an honest perception that the NCCA seemed like a positive, forward thinking organisation that are open to change. There is a risk that because I advocate strongly for the work of the NCCA, I may not be critical enough of their approaches to curriculum design and implementation. However, just because I agree with the underlying visions and values of the Junior Cycle Framework, does not mean that I agree with everything they do.

I do not agree with some of the approaches to consultation adopted by the NCCA where one letter was sent to the principal of each school to inform their teachers about the open consultation process. I think that teachers should have been informed directly about the consultation and they should have been supported by the NCCA to participate in the consultation process, for example, by having some of their Continuous Professional Development (CPD) hours dedicated to completing the online consultation questionnaires. Furthermore, I believe that the changes to assessment proposed by the NCCA will require more support than the ‘assessment toolkit’ they have provided. The assessment toolkit cannot help teachers to engage with the curricular process nor can it build on the context and experiences of practitioners who have already undertaken formative approaches to assessment. Moreover, a toolkit assumes that a practitioner can implement these changes on their own as opposed to a curriculum that is socially constructed. Lastly, I wholeheartedly disagree with the NCCA’s initial plans to reduce the amount of Physical Education hours in the Junior Cycle curriculum as I believe that students need this time both to take part in, and be educated about the importance of their physical health.

\textsuperscript{19} ‘Original Contribution of Research’
\textsuperscript{20} As detailed in Section 1.4
Chapter Two: Critical Social Constructivist Conceptual Framework underpinning the Thesis

This chapter will detail the philosophies underpinning this research which will be largely based on literature and the assumptions held by the primary researcher\textsuperscript{21}. ‘The study of assumptions behind inquiry helps us understand the lenses through which we perceive the world and evaluate different aspects of it’ (Schubert 1993, p.107). The assumptions addressed in this chapter stem from a combination of a deep examination of the personal beliefs and values of the researcher and the literature that has been consulted throughout this investigation into the affordances of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC). The ontological and epistemological influences on these assumptions will be addressed with relevant literature drawn upon to provide further insight and depth. This philosophical insight will provide clarity, reasoning and justification for the selection of a critical, social constructivist approach to this work. Aspects of socio-cultural theory will also be considered to frame the learning taking place in NIC. Lastly, this chapter will seek to blend the underpinning philosophical assumptions and practical implications for this research.

2.1 Ontology

The ontological stance of this study is that human beings are fundamentally social creatures. As Aristotle (384 – 322b.c.) observed that ‘man is by nature a social animal’, similarly, Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977) held that people are innately active as both agents and beings that make meaning from their experiences. The ontological outlook of this research is that people are social beings who participate in social environments i.e. the known world around us. This ‘known world’ is understood by this study as a social world and the beliefs of this work are in line with Risse’s (2007) social ontology that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment. This work believes that, as humans, it is natural to try and ascertain our place in the world and given an equal opportunity to participate in social environments, we have the capacity to make valuable contributions to this known world. Ontology is directly linked with reality, that is, what exists in the external world and this work firmly believes that power relations are inherent throughout all societies. It is a belief of this research that both an imbalance

\textsuperscript{21} These are assumptions held as a researcher and are not to be taken as verbatim truth. The assumptions of the researcher will be referred to as the assumptions of ‘this research/study/work’ from now on.
in power dynamics and hierarchies exist, which are part of the inherent nature of this known, social world. This study argues that the existence of power differentials can compromise the agency, voice, and contributions that both individuals and social groups can make to this world.

Power is a highly complex and largely contested area with varied understandings and interpretations. Giddens (1982, 1984) theory on duality shows the very nature of human beings association with power whereby power is exercised by human agents and is also created by them, influences them, and limits them. Weber (1968) viewed power as control and associated it with social relationships. He defined power as ‘the probability that an actor within a social relationship would be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance to it’ (ibid, p.78). More radical and extreme views of power are articulated by Foucault (1971) and Spinoza (1958) who viewed power in terms of domination and repression. Dahl (1961) speaks to the overt face of power and views power as the ability to make somebody do something that he/she otherwise would not have done. Upon examination of the beliefs and experiences held by the primary researcher, this study has taken the stance that power is exercised covertly which is also advocated by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Habermas (1971). In the context of this study, power is understood as a concealed process where an imbalance of power can be linked to decision making and agenda-setting.

Dahl’s (1957) conceptualisation of power focuses on how decisions are made and equates power with success in decision making whereby a person has power if they prevail in the decision-making process. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) speak to ‘non decision-making’ whereby the emergence of people’s voice and values are avoided by preventing their access to relevant decision making arenas. Lukes (1974) builds upon this by associating power with domination and the ability to prevent decision making. It is also possible to influence decisions by shaping agendas and agenda setting (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974). When subjective agendas are set, power is exercised because people are excluded from such agendas. Those in power decide that the agendas of some people do not deserve to be represented (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). It is the integral belief of this study that for a greater balance of power to be achieved, a more egalitarian approach to decision making is required where people take a more active role in decision-making processes and their beliefs are included in the setting of agendas and decision making arenas. In a natural progression from the belief held by this study that humans are social beings, this study also holds that people are inherently communicative beings.
Power can also covertly impact upon communication within decision making arenas and agenda setting scenarios. Habermas’ (1970b) proposes an ‘ideal speech situation’ where there is no imbalance of power between participants to a conversation, nobody can force their opinions on anybody else and all parties are truthful. This theory is acknowledged by Habermas as being ‘unrealisable’ and exists to highlight how power can compromise communication. Habermas (1970a) sets forward communication via discourse as a possible solution to the power imbalance prevalent in communicative interactions. Through discourse, the claims made by participants in communication are subjected to criticism and discussion in a forum where equal contribution to discussions is afforded to all. The reality of how power compromises communication is highlighted through Habermas’ (1970a) ‘systematically distorted communication’ theory where it is claimed that communication is manipulated and hindered due to an imbalance of power. Strategies such as intimidation and seniority can be employed by those in power to silence those who challenge the hypotheses of those in power.

In the context of this educational study, the primary ontological belief held in relation to power dynamics is that a more balanced power differential is needed in schools and classrooms. Those whose voice and agendas are typically excluded from educational decision-making arenas need to be afforded the opportunity for greater participation in order to challenge traditional power relationships. The process of decision making should be more democratic and involve negotiation amongst all actors in order to avoid agenda setting and to facilitate the equal representation of all voices. This egalitarian approach could then lessen the compromise power has on the agency of human beings in the known world and instead contribute to their empowerment. Due to the issues of power that can affect how people learn and the beliefs surrounding the social nature of meaning held by this work, a critical social constructivist approach was selected as an overriding paradigm for this research. These ontological assumptions have epistemological implications around the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed.

2.2 Epistemology

The core epistemological belief of this work is that knowledge can be co-constructed. However, this does not mean that learners cannot construct knowledge on their own. Dewey (1938)
accurately highlights that traditional education is directed towards isolating the learner from all social interaction and is considered in terms of a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned. The term ‘constructivism’ broadly refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves, individually and/or socially. Social constructivists such as Bruner (1990) and Vygotsky (1978) recognise that influences on an individual’s construction of knowledge are derived from, and preceded by, social relationships. Although the assumptions of this study are more aligned with the social constructivist approach to knowledge construction, it wholly recognises the ability of learners to construct knowledge individually and the Vygotskian notion of social constructivism does not mean that humans can only acquire knowledge if they are socially supported (Hatano 1993).

Knowledge can be co-constructed and people create knowledge largely through social interaction with others and through interaction with the world around them. Knowledge is not something independent of the learner, it is something that is constructed by the learner (Piaget 1969; Dewey 1915) and learning is a social construction of meaning (Vygotsky 1972). Indeed, Hein (1991) refers to learning as a social activity and believes that ‘our learning is intimately associated with our connection to other human beings’ (p.4). Social interactions have an important role in knowledge construction and learners are active in building their own knowledge (Bruner 1960). Knowledge is largely a social construct, that is, knowledge is co-constructed with others in social situations. Knowledge is also rooted in social interactions and can be empowering when produced collaboratively. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises this collaborative nature of knowledge construction and believes that social interaction played a fundamental role in the development of cognition.

For knowledge construction and learning to be social communication through language must take place. Vygotsky (1986) believes that ‘the primary function of speech in children and adults is communication and thus, social contact’ (p.35) where speech is the first tool that culture provides for the child to engage in collaborative thinking with others (Hirile 1996). Moreover, it is theorised that learners construct knowledge through language and discourse of that language in social environments (Foucault 1971). Furthermore, language and learning can be inextricably intertwined (Vygotsky 1962) where language is largely regarded as the main mediating tool for learning (Dewey 1963). The Habermasian concept of Universal Pragmatics (1979) sees the function of language as far more than conveying information; it is used to establish social relationships with others through communication. Furthermore, Habermas’ ‘communicative
action’ (1979) concept believes that the aim of language and communication is to reach a mutual agreement via communicative, social, and meaningful interaction between persons.

The search for meaning in life is part of human nature and incentivises people to learn (Frankl 1963; Maddi 1970). Frankl (1959) associated the incentive to learn with human motivation when espousing that ‘man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life’ (p.121). The ontological beliefs of this study speak to human beings connection with the external world and, epistemologically, people create knowledge and meaning through interaction with their world. Human beings have a strong desire to understand themselves in relation to the world around them (Epstein 1985; Higgins 2000) where knowledge does not simply ‘exist’; it is constructed by learners in their interaction with the world (Kincheloe 2000).

This research has an epistemological commitment to critically examining truths and knowledge. Epistemology is concerned with truth; knowing when knowledge is valid and what counts as truthful knowledge (Foucault 2005). In the context of knowledge as that which is communicated to other human beings, Habermas (1979) puts forward four validity claims in order for knowledge to be valid; claims to truth, rightness, sincerity and meaningfulness. These are true for the perception of knowledge that is socially located. The claim of truth believes that all parties to communication must be able to share their understanding of the truth is in line with Habermas’ ‘ideal speech situation’ where all parties in a conversation must be truthful. The remaining claims outline that everyone has a right to say what they are saying, and what they are saying must be sincere and meaningful in order to be valid. Habermas (1979) believes that for knowledge to be valid it must satisfy these four claims, and each of these claims has had an epistemological influence on the process of NIC.

In summary, the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research views human beings as fundamentally social creatures who construct knowledge both individually and in collaboration with others and the world around them.

2.3 Implications of the Conceptual Framework for this Research

The assumptions about human existence, the world around us, and knowledge construction can determine a great deal of what is believed about learning. As such, the philosophical assumptions and beliefs underpinning this research cannot be divorced from the practical implications they
will have for this work with regard to how we approach curriculum, teaching and learning. If this research accepts a critical, social constructivist position then it must provide a democratic learning environment that affords students the opportunity to: participate in decision making; interact socially; actively construct knowledge and; make learning meaningful by relating it to the known world. This section will detail the educational implications for the ontological and epistemological beliefs of the primary researcher. Firstly, the ‘Role of Students and Teachers’ lens will address the ontological and epistemological implications of this study’s beliefs around power dynamics, decision making, communication and validity. Secondly the ‘Processes of Learning’ section will address this works’ ontological and epistemological beliefs around the social and active nature of humans and knowledge and the need for learning to be meaningful.

The Role of Students and Teachers

The overriding concept and connecting thread of this research is negotiation. This study believes that students should be consulted with regarding curricular decisions and this consultation should take place in a social environment which requires communication and collaboration amongst students and teachers. This work argues that by including learners in educational decision-making arenas, this could contribute to a more balanced power differential in the classroom. Students should have increased control and power over their learning by participating in the negotiation of decisions around curriculum content, learning approaches and assessment. The ontological assumptions of this work which reject dominant controlling forces have had a direct impact on the views of this study which believe that curriculum planning and design should take place locally in schools. In the traditional curriculum, students are typically excluded from the decision making process where the agendas of young people are not taken into consideration (Beane 1997). This study believes that students should be placed at the centre of the curriculum. This research is in agreement with Robinson (2009, p.162) who states that ‘at the level of the institution and at the level of the classroom the aim is to increase students’ representation at, and participation in, processes and practices from which they have historically been excluded’.

Furthermore, the views of this work are in line with Beane’s (1997, p.50) who believes that decisions around curriculum planning ‘must sooner or later involve direct participation by young people so that students have a genuine say in the curriculum and that their say count for something’.

Based on the ontological assumption of this study that people are inherently communicative beings, this study believes that the process in which students and teachers are involved in
curriculum planning and design should be centred on communication. By involving students and teachers more in decision-making roles, the communicative roles they assume could work towards challenging and achieving some of Habermas’ (1970, 1979) claims around power and communication. Communicative action could be achieved where students and teaches come to a mutual agreement through social and meaningful interactions. Discourse and dialogue would also be encouraged in these interactions where equal participation in learning environments could be afforded to all. Furthermore, a greater balance of power between teachers and students in an interactive, communicative classroom could help towards eradicating Habermas’ ‘systematically distorted communication’ theory which attributes the distortion of communication to an imbalance of power. Lastly, Habermas’ (1970a) ‘unrealisable’ theory of an ideal speech situation could be progressed in a classroom where student voice is welcomed and teachers and students alike are encouraged to express their opinions.

The ontological assumptions of this study fundamentally disagree with the exertion of unnecessary distortions of power by excluding people from decision-making arenas (Lukes 1968) and instead advocate a more democratic approach which would require students and teachers to collaborate with each other to make decisions around their learning. The assumptions of this study cohere with Freire (1970) who believes that the traditional teacher-student hierarchy needs to be replaced with more egalitarian interactions for a democratic classroom to be created. Moreover, in order to bring democracy to life in the classroom, it requires that students have a genuine say in the curriculum and that their say must count for something’ (Beane 1997, p50). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) have developed a pathway of educational change entitled ‘The Fourth Way’ which aims to bring about change through democracy. The fourth way envisions increased democratic partnership and collaboration between teachers, students and the community, the engagement and empowerment of teachers and students and more creativity and flexibility in teaching methodologies and student learning. Furthermore, the participation of students and teachers in decision making around curriculum at a classroom level also contributes to ‘curriculum as praxis’ (Grundy 1987) which attempts to redress power imbalance within curricula as often an underlying power relationship is inherent between those that design the curriculum and those who implement it (as well as the learners themselves).

**Processes of Learning**

The ontological and epistemological assumptions held by this study around the nature of learning believe that learning is socially and experientially based and should be meaningful to the learner.
This study’s core epistemological belief lies in the co-construction of knowledge through social interactions and interaction with the world. The resultant implications for this research are that students should be provided with the opportunity to: interact socially; collaborate with their teacher and peers; and work collaboratively in order to construct meaningful knowledge. An implication of this position is the desire for this study to provide a learning environment that engenders social and active learners.

This work is in agreement with Dewey’s (1938) view of school as a ‘community’ where learners come together to construct knowledge socially. Therefore, this work advocates teaching methodologies which allow students to work with their peers in a communicative setting. Students should be actively learning in a social environment. Students should be communicating through dialogue with their teacher and fellow students where all opinions are welcomed and acknowledged. This study believes that learning should be viewed as social interactions in the classroom as a ‘shared social activity, embedded in classroom interactions’ (Watsons 2001, p.140). The ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research also believe that people create knowledge through interaction with their world and learning should be meaningfully connected to this world. An implication of this is the view held by this research that education should consist of links with the students’ personal experiences and the known world. Teachers should facilitate opportunities for students to have first-hand access to knowledge instead of learning via compliant engagement where they are the recipients of transmitted knowledge. Learning should be an active process, grounded in experience and incorporate worthwhile, meaningful activities which are coherent with the epistemological beliefs of this study that learning should have meaning for students. Knowledge should be built around ideas from life itself which is more likely to have greater meaning in the lives of young people. Therefore a critical, social constructivist conceptual framework was deemed the most appropriate for the intended research. However, to develop on the aims and objectives of the type of learning that is promoted throughout this research, the socio-cultural process of learning that underpins this study will be discussed to align with the critical, social constructivist perspective.

**Socio-Cultural Learning Theory**

Such assumptions surrounding the social nature of learning, the meaning behind knowledge and how teachers can support this type of learning environment are harmonious with the very substance of socio-cultural theory. This theory views learning as a social endeavour which
occurs through social interactions among young people and adults as they engage in learning activities (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1995). Furthermore, the interactive nature of learning and the decision making processes taking place between, and being led by both young people and their teachers is described as ‘learning as a community’ (Brown et al. 1989; Rogoff, 1994; Cobb and Bowers 1999). Socio-cultural theory recognises that certain environments are stronger than others when it comes to supporting learning (Rogoff 1994) and some key features set forward as being conducive to achieving learning results are environments that: promote social interactions (Honig and McDonald 2005; Lave 1993); facilitate participation in genuine, meaningful work and; engage youths in ‘apprenticeship’ relationships (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Within these features, ‘participation’ is understood to mean a deep level of engagement in genuine and meaningful work which can be defined as that which is “valued, relevant, and authentic; involves joint enterprise; engages youth in central and valued decision making roles and; includes learners as co-constructors of knowledge by involving them in cycles of planning, performance, and assessment” (Honig and McDonald p.7). Furthermore, ‘apprenticeship’ relationships are understood as being environments where students are ‘supported to negotiate learning through different routes and at different rates, rather than having to conform to a particular pathway’ (Honig and McDonald 2005 p.8). This research will investigate whether the participating students found meaning in a curriculum that is founded on the expressed concerns of students and engages learners in decisions around learning content, learning activities and assessment.

A research project was conducted with 1064 schoolchildren from 27 schools in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (Kilkelly et al. 2005) to identify where children's rights were 'ignored or underplayed’ (Laura 2006, p.928). One of the primary findings of this research was that ‘not having a say in the decisions made about them was the single most important issue to children in Northern Ireland’ (Kilkelly et al. 2005, p. xxii cited by Laura 2006, p.929). Three learning perspectives set forward by Rogoff et al. (1996) to describe who is responsible for learning and the decisions involved in learning are; child-run’, ‘adult-run’ and ‘community of learners’. An ‘adult-run’ perspective aligns with Freire’s (1972) ‘banking model’ of education where the teacher is the expert who deposits knowledge to passive learners. ‘Child-run’ learning pertains to learning approaches where learners acquire knowledge themselves through ‘active exploration’ (Rogoff et al. 1996 p.388) whereas a ‘community of learners’ is where active, inquiring learners are guided by
skilled partners (teachers) and learning involves a ‘transformation of participation’ towards a more collaborative endeavour as people participate in socio-cultural activities whilst ‘transforming their understanding, roles and responsibilities as they participate (ibid p.390). The ‘negotiation’ element of NIC aspires and endeavours to represent learning as the latter, community process, where traditional roles are transformed as both teachers and students assume responsibility and control over their learning through a socio-cultural focus on participation, engagement, agency and identity.

The three perspectives of child-run, adult-run and community of learners will be used throughout this thesis and an extensive review of the literature will now be explored to examine curriculum approaches that are coherent with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this study. The literature review will also examine the potential of NIC as a curricular approach which is coherent with the aforementioned beliefs, assumptions and implications provided by this conceptual framework.
Chapter Three: Literature Review

This chapter is comprised of four main sections which explore some of the literature that is of relevance to this study. The first section explores the literature pertaining to ‘curriculum’ and the underlying philosophies, values, theories, and ideologies that underpin it. This is followed by an examination of the literature relating to curriculum intervention including how curriculum is traditionally selected, the different approaches to curricular reform, and reasons why reforms can succeed or fail. The third section will examine the literature on the Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) and its Integrated Curriculum (IC) historical origins. The existing body of literature will be addressed to identify and analyse where different models of IC lie on the integrated spectrum. As this study was carried out in Irish schools, the fourth and final section of this chapter will examine literature pertaining to the Irish educational context, particularly contemporary curricular reform attempts in Ireland. This section will end with the literature focussing on the Limerick regeneration context where the participating schools in this study were situated.

3.1 Curriculum

Deriving from the Latin verb ‘currere’ as ‘a course to be run’, a curriculum indicates a formal course of study followed by learners. The meaning of curriculum is not universally agreed upon and remains contentious in terms of definition (Schubert 1986; Fraser and Boasquet 2006). Stark and Lattuca (1997, p.8) believe that definitions of curriculum ‘have tended to evolve locally in the absence of any formal agreement’. Schiro (1978, p.56) highlights that in attempting to define the word curriculum, the end result of curriculum theorists’ endeavours seems to be ‘the addition of another new improved definition, more debate over the issue, and further criticism of other inadequate definitions’. This section does not attempt to redefine curriculum but to outline the broad range of different conceptions of curriculum and their relevance to this study.

Curriculum can be viewed as simply ‘content’. This narrow perspective is relayed in the New Oxford Dictionary of English which defines curriculum as ‘the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college’ and is echoed in Trant’s (1998) observations of curriculum as a table of contents and a course of study to be followed. Indeed Skilbeck (1984) describes this traditional view of curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted to and reproduced by
students while Cornbleth (1990) refers to the approach as viewing curriculum as a tangible product. Such understandings equate curriculum with syllabi where education is viewed as the process by which these syllabi are delivered to students. This content-focused conception of curriculum can be conceived of as ‘a specification’, ‘a written prescription’, ‘a book of instructions’ and ‘a statement of aims’ Stenhouse (1975, pp. 1-4). This viewpoint is also advanced by Johnson (1967, p.130) who believes that ‘curriculum prescribes (or at least anticipates) the results of instruction’ and refers to curriculum as a ‘structured series of intended learning outcomes’. This focus on objectives often reduces curriculum to being thought of as all of the planned experiences, provided by a school, to assist learners in attaining designated learning outcomes to the best of their abilities (Neagley and Evans 1967). This is referred to as the ‘explicit curriculum’ (Eisner 1994) where a focus on learning opportunities is visibly communicated through texts, procedures, and guiding principles such as the course syllabi. Such understandings of curriculum as a list of subjects, a book of instructions and a table of contents convey that curriculum is largely viewed as a body of knowledge communicated to people. This view of curriculum is the most commonly understood meaning; however, curriculum can be much more than this as curriculum theory is a highly contested space and thus, many alternative and more comprehensive understandings of how curriculum is conceived exist.

A broader perspective views curriculum as more than a unit outline to be studied or a list of objectives to achieve:

   Curriculum is more than content. The curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner

   (Department of Education and Science 1980, p.18)

Curriculum can be understood as the totality of learning experiences encountered by students from which learning is derived in the classroom and school (Strange 1992; Beane 1993a; Rogers 2010; Kern 1998; Marsh 2004). Curriculum can be viewed as more than a ‘tangible product’ and instead as ‘the actual, day-to-day interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu’ (Cornbleth 1990, p.24). Furthermore, curriculum has been described as dynamic and in flux, with aspects that cannot be anticipated or held in a template (Schön 1987). This holistic view of curriculum is believed to be grounded in practice, experiences and concerned with the processes that enables student learning (Stenhouse 1975; Fraser and Bosanquet 2006). Indeed, Eisner (1994) terms such a curricular approach as ‘implicit curriculum’ which represents the processes
of learning and incorporated into such processes are underlying values, social relations and contextual considerations.

It is widely believed that curriculum and learning cannot take place independent of context and curriculum is perceived as a social and cultural construction that is contextually shaped (Young 1971; Grundy 1987; Kemmis 1986; Cornbleth, 1990). This perspective is described with curriculum as ‘an interactive process involving values and ideas, people and material resources, occurring in some sort of context’ Johnston (1992, p.334). Through the social relations and interactions that take place in the school context, students acquire certain unstated values, norms, beliefs and patterns of behaviour, often incidentally, through this experience of attending school (Giroux and Penna 1979; Harden 2001). Such acquisitions are not made explicit in the curriculum and often perpetuate many of the hidden assumptions, values and paradigms by those who designed it.

3.1.1 Values and Paradigms in Curricula

The paradigms that perpetuate the curriculum and models of curriculum delivery will now be explored to gain an insight into the diverse infrastructure of curriculum theory and practice. Habermas (1972) asserts that knowledge is constructed according to values and assumptions and actions serve specific interests that facilitate the propagation of social values (Habermas 1970, 1972, 1974). He believes that the definition of worthwhile knowledge is constructed according to three cognitive interests: (i) prediction and control; (ii) understanding and interpretation; (iii) emancipation and freedom (Habermas 1972, p.301) and terms these the ‘technical’, ‘practical’ and ‘emancipatory’ interests of knowledge. These three ‘knowledge-constitutive interests’ (Habermas 1972) will be used as a framework to reflect the values, paradigms, teaching philosophies and curriculum models inherent in curriculum theory. An overview of each of these terms will now be presented.

Kuhn (1962) views paradigms as the internal logic of a belief system that conveys the nature of the world and the individuals place in it; a paradigm defines itself and validates its own position. Kuhn’s notion of paradigmatic thinking conveys the way the world is seen through our perceptions, understandings and interpretations (Leshem and Trafford 2007). Paradigms are ‘basic belief systems’ and ‘worldviews’ that can dictate a particular approach to curriculum (Lincoln and Guba 1994; McKenna 2003) and Guba (1990) believes that paradigms reflect our
basic epistemological assumptions. This section will examine how positivism, interpretivism, constructivism and critical theory paradigms are often discussed within curriculum discourse and will be reflected in this analysis of curricular paradigms.

These paradigms will be linked to ‘curriculum models’ which are defined by Page and Thomas (1977) as a means of transferring a relationship or process from its actual setting to one in which it can be more conveniently studied. Curriculum models help planners to systematically and transparently map out the rationale for the use of particular teaching, learning and assessment approaches (Ornstein and Hunkins 2009). The two polarised models of curriculum development; the ‘product’ and ‘process’ models will be examined with ‘curriculum as praxis’ (Grundy 1987) offered as an alternative model. Lastly, the two philosophies and social movements that have arguably had the greatest impact on contemporary education; the classical-humanist philosophy and the liberal-progressive philosophy (Skilbeck 1976; Dewey 1962) will be explored as to how they have shaped curricular practices. The connections between the underlying belief systems and the social movements behind them are being made in an effort to identify the practical implications for this thesis.

3.1.2.1 The Technical Interest and associated Curriculum Theories

Technical Interest

The Habermasian conception of the ‘technical interest’ of knowledge is coherent with constricted definitions of curricula that delineate curriculum as content to be delivered to students. Extending control over nature and society is what drives the technical interest of knowledge (Habermas 1972). Those currently in control of society and in positions of power over the curriculum often tend to have a broadly rationalistic agenda with vested interests and economic stability as examples that can often drive this technical interest (Gleeson 2010). This distortion of power to influence societal ends is reinforced by Habermas (1972) who states that ‘knowledge that makes possible the control of natural processes turns into knowledge that makes possible the control of social life processes’ (p.47).

In line with the techne (control) aspects of curriculum, Fraser (2006) asserts that a technical interest focuses on structuring and managing objects and the environment. Grundy’s (1987) encapsulates the control element of Habermas’ technical interest as ‘the “technical” interest
characterises the empirical analytic science and has a fundamental interest in controlling the environment through rule-following action based upon empirically grounded laws’ (p. 12). The purpose of curriculum from a technical interest is to define the content and control student learning accordingly. The technical interest adopts a ‘transactional view of teaching and ascribes meaning according to outcome, that is, an experience gains meaning through what it produces, rather than being intrinsically meaningful’ (Grundy 1987, p.102). The outline of a curriculum in this conception is viewed as separate from the learning experiences pupils encounter while undertaking a programme of learning, thus a “means-to-an-end” approach to curriculum is undertaken. Cornbleth (1990) observes that a technical approach to curriculum which assumes that

ends are set, that means are known or knowable and that the path between them is a direct one. One therefore follows step-by-step procedures to obtain the predetermined end state (i.e. the finished curriculum product).

(ibid, p.14)

The technical interest encompasses characteristics such as the mentality of control, generalizability and claims that knowledge is meaning and value-free which are exemplified in the positivistic philosophy.

**Positivism**

The technical interest is rooted in positivistic philosophy which seeks to predict and control natural environments (Habermas 1970; Pusey 1987; Grundy 1987). In this sense, technicism and positivism are linked to the behaviourist school of thought that believes student behaviour can be predicted and controlled (Skinner 1974). The term positivism denotes the received view’ that has dominated discourse in the social sciences for some 400 years (Guba and Lincoln 1994). In his critique of positivism, Habermas (1970) argued that the dominance of positivism in the social sciences was fostering controlled environments. The positivistic philosophy serves technical interests of knowledge in that it seeks instrumental knowledge which will ‘facilitate technical control over natural objects’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.135). Positivism is reductionist in nature where reductionism begins with knowledge and reduces it to a social base where it is revealed as the ‘standpoint’ of a particular social group representing its limited experience and partial interests (Hesse 1980; Moore, 2000). From a curricular standpoint, teachers and students have no
voice or control over the curriculum and reductionism conserves social order in education through hierarchical power dynamics, discipline, and respect for authority.

Positivistic approaches to curriculum and learning are usually technical in nature, concerned with prediction and control and view knowledge as a set of measureable skills to be transferred from the elite, educated practitioner to the uneducated student (McKenna 2003). The technical rationalist approach to teaching, derived from positivism, assumes a similar position in that it believes theory can and should be separated from practice. The teacher acquires the knowledge which is then handed down to the learner (Elliott 1979; Schön 1987). Habermas (1970) speaks to knowledge becoming more ‘rationalised’ with clear and precise boundaries and this is in line with the technical rationalist position in curriculum that subject domains should be separated and delineated rationally (Schön 1987). Positivism is associated with the belief that knowledge is scientific, and that all things are ultimately measurable (Bullock et al. 1999). This positivistic aspiration to measure human agency has been termed by Horkheimer (1982) as the 'mathematication of nature' where the ‘technical control mentality and the instrumentalist overtones of positivism render individuals more passive players than agents of their own future roles’ (p.229). The engendering of passivity in students through a lack of student voice is just one of the commonalities between the technical, positivistic approach to curriculum and the ‘classical humanism’ teaching ideology.

**Classical Humanism**

Classical humanism is a philosophy of education that developed out of the relationship between religion and education in the medieval era and favours a didactic, lecturing style of teaching that pays little attention to the question of educational equality (Skilbeck 1976). The classical humanist value system employs Freire’s (1972) ‘banking model’ of education where teachers are seen as purveyors of knowledge that reduces the student to a passive recipient of information, devoid of any agency. Grundy (1987) believes that Freire’s banking model is the technical interest of knowledge at work in the curriculum where students are referred to as ‘containers to be filled by the teacher’ (Freire 1975, p.45). Reductionism is evident in the classical humanism ideology where the primary function of education is cultural, that is, to ensure social stability and cultural continuity (Carr 1998). It is evident from the classical-humanistic ideology that students generally have no agency in their learning and education is focused on the acquisition of knowledge which often lacks any meaning for them. Classical humanism is an ideological
position where learning is controlled, measured, disciplined, and largely book-based which is consistent with the limited definitions of ‘curriculum as content’. This position also coheres with positivistic, scientific views of discrete bodies of knowledge that can be easily communicated which value authority, control, and measurability. Positivism and classical humanism are historically interrelated whereby positivistic views stemmed from classical humanism. Stenhouse (1975) comments on this content-focused conception of curriculum as a ‘product model’ where a focus on learning ‘objectives’ and a suitable plan to meet these objectives reduces curriculum to a technical exercise.

**The Product Model**

Elements of the technical interest of knowledge, positivistic philosophy, behaviourism, and the classical-humanism ideology (such as control, prediction, measurability and a means-end approach to curriculum) are in consonance with the ‘product’ approach to curriculum delivery. Curriculum as product is a theoretical approach with an emphasis on behavioural objectives which specify what a pupil should be able to do, think or feel as a result of a course of instruction (Smith 1996). Historically, this objectives approach has been argued as a rational approach to curriculum described by Tyler (1918, p.42) as follows:

> There will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite and particularized. The curriculum will then be that series of experiences which children and youth must have by way of obtaining those objectives.

This “means-ends” approach is reiterated by Hirst (1974) who believes that we must set particular achievements for pupils to reach in advance of the learning experiences. The product approach permeates curriculum practice where practitioners implicitly adopt this style. Often, the product approach is the dominant method influencing curriculum practice internationally (Ord 2008; OECD 2009). It is so prevalent that curriculum as product has been referred to as ‘the gospel according to curriculum’ (Grundy 1987, p.1). Advocates of the product approach state that it provides clear goals towards which pupils and teachers can work towards in order to facilitate the measurement and evaluation of the results of the curriculum (Hirst 1974).
Curriculum as product has been criticised for its over-emphasis on learning objectives which employ a technical, means-to-end reasoning expressed in terms of the student attainment of planned learning outcomes (O’Neill 2010; Stenhouse 1975). The product-orientated, behaviorist approach implies that student behavior can be objectively measured and the learning experiences offered to students come second to pre-specified objectives (Stenhouse 1975; Grundy 1987; Srivastava and Kumari 2005). Stenhouse (1975) critiques the product approach’s behaviorist outlook as he believes ‘important outcomes of education such as understanding, appreciation and knowledge cannot be fully translated into clear-cut, observable behaviors capable of measurement’ (p.77). Within the product approach, student input and voice are generally discounted (Stenhouse 1975) whereby the processes and experiences of learning are not recognized and the students are passive recipients of secondhand knowledge which is often lacking in meaning.

This section has attempted to establish connections between the technical interest of knowledge, positivistic and behaviourism philosophies, classical-humanism philosophy and the product orientation towards curriculum delivery as each of these associated-entities is dominant in their relative curriculum fields. That is, the current international education system appears to value: control; prediction; hierarchies; measurability; value-free knowledge and transactional teaching which engenders both passive students and facilitates power dynamics in education. From this analysis of current curriculum practices, a more holistic curriculum would encourage increased student voice and agency over student passiveness and a more balanced power differential throughout the education system as a substitute for the technical interests of those currently in power. The technical focus is not the only conception of curricular practice that exists by way of contrast, the Habermasian practical and emancipatory interests of knowledge (Habermas 1972) and their associated philosophies within curricular discourse will therefore be explored.
3.1.2.2 The Practical Interest and associated Curriculum Theories

**Practical Interest**

In contrast to the technical approach, Habermas’ (1972) conception of the practical interest of knowledge largely focuses on understanding and meaning making within a ‘historical-hermeneutic’ context. It is primarily concerned with the analysis of meaning in a social, relevant context (Held 1980) where the fundamental interest is in understanding the environment through interaction based upon a ‘consensual interpretation of meaning’ (Grundy 1987, p.14). Through interpersonal situations, participants engage in ‘action oriented to mutual understanding’ and strive for a consensus of meaning (Habermas 1972, pp.310-312). Communication is central to the practical interest of knowledge as we must communicate with each other to derive an understanding of meaning (Bullough and Goldstein 1984; Hoffman 1987). From the practical perspective, actions are also considered meaningful and Carr and Kemmis (1986) cite teaching as a meaningful action. Thus, the practical interest of knowledge recognises the role of the teacher and student in the learning process and promotes communication and a deliberate dialogue between participants (Habermas 1974; Gleeson 2010). The technical approach sees the teacher as the ‘knower’ and treats students as objects to be acted upon. Whereas in taking a practical approach the relationship is more of equal partners in communication. The focus shifts from the positivist view of prediction and control to a practical interest in interpretation, interactions and meaning making (Usher 1996). This shift of focus resonates with interpretivist and constructivist philosophies of education.

The interpretive philosophy is linked with the practical interest of knowledge through common themes of meaning-making, social interaction, and communication. The interpretive belief system was developed as a critique of positivism in the social sciences. In contrast to the positivistic philosophy which broadly seeks to predict and control the environment, an assumption that is linked with the interpretivist philosophy is that human beings strive to understand their environments and their place within it (Morrison 1995). From an interpretivist perspective knowledge is primarily constructed through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. The interpretivist approach of knowledge focuses on the development of ‘intersubjective meaning based on consensual norms and expectations’ (Ewert 1991, p.351). Meanings and common understandings are then derived through communication and social interactions. From this perspective education takes place in a social context where the
interactions of people cannot be planned for in advance or objectified as in the product approach to curriculum.

How Habermas conceived the practical interest of knowledge can also be associated with the constructivist perspective of meaning as it is interpreted, understood, and shared. There are several guiding principles of constructivism, one of which is the belief that learning is a search for meaning. Constructivism recognises the significance of individual meaning making and makes it a central aspect of pedagogic practice (Hein 1999). Furthermore, meaning is intimately connected with experience; both prior experiences that students bring to the classroom and the active, experiential learning which takes place in the classroom (Caprio 1994). In line with the practical interest of knowledge (which values social interaction and communication), another valued tenant of constructivist practice is collaborative learning through communication. Constructivist theorists such as Vygotsky (1962) and Dewey (1963) believe that the primary function of speech is communication and thus social interaction. Speech is the first tool that culture provides for the child to engage in collaborative thinking with others and the language used in communication is a mediating tool for learning (Ibid.). The constructivist understanding of the world and the practical interest of knowledge have roots in the liberal progressive philosophy which believes that human beings should understand the world around them in order to influence how it is shaped.

**Liberal Progressivism**

The liberal-progressive philosophy was developed after, and in response to, the classical-humanist ideology and is centred on individual autonomy and democracy as it originates from a person’s right to understand their world instead. Historically, liberalism rejected the control of the church, monarchy and governments and instead had early democratic tendencies (Russell 1945). The practical interest of knowledge focuses on human understanding and sees humans as having worth and merit and is rooted in the liberal progressive focus on individualism (which broadly states that the progression of society takes place when human beings have a greater voice in society).

Many of the most influential philosophers of education such as John Dewy, Paulo Freire and Rousseau are part of the liberal progressive tradition. The liberal-progressive belief is that
education and teaching should be concerned with developing the person, rather than with passing on subject knowledge. The tendency of liberalism is towards a democracy where an emphasis is placed on preparing young people, through education, to live in a democracy and the learners capacity to communicate and interact with others in order to engage in debate and critical thinking (Dewey 1962).

The liberal-progressive view of teaching argues that instead of learners acquiring knowledge from the educational elite, education should focus on developing the person, their abilities, and capacities (Scott 2003). Within the liberal-progressive ideology students are encouraged to develop their own meaning and understanding of knowledge through a process of learning that involves critical engagement with that knowledge. Rather than passing on subject knowledge, the teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding the individual student through active engagement with their own world. Dewey (1962) believes that the child brings a lot of personal and experiential knowledge to the learning context and students need to be autonomous in their learning. The liberal progressive value system incorporates elements of Habermas (1972) ‘practical interest’ of knowledge which encourages students to develop their own understanding of knowledge through communication and social interactions. This orientation also incorporates constructivist elements as there is a focus on active methods of learning and on engaging the interest of the learner. To summarise, within the liberal progress conception the passive transmission of society’s knowledge becomes secondary to the active development of pupils’ understanding. In looking to curriculum methods that could best facilitate learning that adheres to the beliefs of the practical interest, liberal-progressive teaching style interpretive-constructivist paradigms, the process approach is determined to be the most suitable (Stenhouse 1975).

*The Process Model*

Within a process approach, curriculum is not viewed as a pre-defined set of objectives to be delivered, rather it plans out the content and experiences of learners first and aims and objectives are written afterwards. Such content and methods should be grounded in practice and experiential learning according to Stenhouse (1975 p.54) who states that the aim of the process approach is:

> to arrive at a useful specification of curriculum and educational process without starting by pre-specifying the anticipated outcomes of that process in the form of objectives.
The process method represents the broader ‘curriculum as practice’ and ‘curriculum as a set of experiences’ definitions of curriculum. What matters in the process approach is getting the “ingredients” (the processes, messages and conditions) right as a mechanism for the appropriate learning will occur (Knight 2001). This approach does not consider learners as objects to be acted upon rather it focuses on interactions; the interaction between students, teachers, and knowledge (Posner 2004). Outcomes are no longer the central and defining feature, instead content and outcomes develop as teachers and students work collaboratively.

The process approach embodies the practical ‘knowledge-constitutive’ interest and constructivist school of thought that considers learning as a ‘search for meaning’ which values social interaction and is context-dependent. It makes the process of learning the central concern of the teacher where content is selected for the purpose of assisting ‘meaning making and interpretation, and it is likely to be holistically oriented and integrated’ (Grundy 1987, p.76). From the practical perspective, educational aims are not end states but criteria for the process of education as an interactive, social activity (Carr and Kemmis 1986). The process approach is contextual as Stenhouse (1975, p.143) recognises the ‘uniqueness of each classroom setting’ where curriculum is not a package that can be uniformly delivered; instead it needs to be tested and verified by the teacher their own classroom. Stenhouse (1975) also acknowledges that a process style is far more demanding on teachers and thus more difficult to implement in practice, but argues that when embraced by teachers, it offers a higher degree of personal and professional development.

**Conclusion**

The practical interest of knowledge has made much educational progress by placing an emphasis on young people having a greater understanding of their environments which is in line with the liberal progressive perspective (which believes that it is a human right for individuals to understand their world). A practical perspective promotes increased communication, dialogue and action within a learning environment (Carr and Kemmis 1986) and meaning is produced through such communicative interaction (Baldwin 1987). The practical interest is focussed on the increased understanding of information and knowledge for learners which is progressive but Habermas (1974) argues that the practical orientation lacks in social awareness and social vision. There is no explicit reference made to learner agency within the practical interest of knowledge where values and norms are simply reinforced through greater understanding of information and
knowledge. The practical focus on ‘understanding’ and ‘consensus’ means that students understand what they learn very well but they are not becoming citizens, democratic citizens (Benhabib 1986). The practical interest of knowledge lacks a critical outlook where people understand their world but do not have the social vision to critique their society (Habermas 1974; Horkheimer 1982). What is required is a critical approach that incorporates agency and social vision and evolves from the practical focus on understanding towards emancipation.

3.1.2.3 The Emancipatory Interest – Critical Theory - Curriculum as Praxis

The Emancipatory Interest

The emancipatory interest builds on much of the educational progress made within the practical interest but, additionally and significantly, it has a political agenda. Habermas (1974) intends for the emancipatory interest to go beyond the practical to eliminate repression and domination where the primary aim is to identify and eradicate unnecessary social confinements and constraints. An emancipated society is one:

(a) That is based on freedom, equality and democracy
(b) In which illegitimate repressive forces have been dissolved
(c) That promotes individual and social empowerment

(Habermas 1974, p.22)

The intended aim of the emancipatory interest is ‘a transformation of consciousness in the way one perceives and acts in the world’ (Grundy 1987, p.99). Where the practical interest seeks understanding of the social world, the emancipatory interest critiques the social world in an effort to make it more egalitarian (Tripp 1990).

Social systems that prevent a person from developing his or her full capacity for freedom and autonomy can be viewed as repressive systems and schools are examples of such systems (Habermas 1974; Ewert 1987). Carr and Kemmis (1986) applied Habermas’ emancipatory interest to education and identified education as a social activity that is ‘intrinsically political in that it affects the life chances of those involved in the process’ (p.39). As subsumed in the practical interest, the emancipatory interest acknowledges the significance of context and social interactions. When curriculum is seen as a contextual social process, the practical and
emancipatory interests prevail over the technical (Gleeson 2010). The emancipatory interests of knowledge are primarily concerned with the empowerment of individuals and agency. The key element is people's capacity to achieve freedom from self-imposed constraints and social forces and institutions (Roderick 1986). The emancipatory interest appoints the student, ‘not simply as an active rather than a passive ‘receiver’ of knowledge, but as an active creator of knowledge along with the teacher’ (Grundy 1987 p.101). The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but is himself taught in dialogue with the students (Freire 1972, p.53). Reflection is a key determinant in whether or not emancipation is realised. Habermas (1974) contends that the capacity to achieve freedom is based on a person's ability to be self-determining and self-reflective. It is in accomplishing this self-reflective knowledge, which involves both understanding and theoretical explanation, which reduces entrapment in systems of domination or dependence.

**Critical Theory**

The philosophical position underlying the emancipatory approach is critical theory. Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it - the latter being better suited to the practical interest. According to Horkheimer (1937) a theory is ‘critical’ to the extent that it not only seeks to explain, understand and interpret society, but also aims to ‘liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (p.242). Underlying the process of critical theory is the idea that existing social structures and beliefs are socially constructed and therefore can be transformed through social action (Ewert 1987). The principal aim of critical theory is directed at social and cultural change but it can also be applied to education where it is a movement toward increased emancipation and democratization of individuals and schools (McKernan 2013). Critical theory claims to have the capacity to ‘interrogate and transform the status quo in education’ (Gage 1989, p.140) and is in line with the emancipatory paradigm as it accredits self-reflection and a heightened awareness of institutional domination with assisting emancipation. Gleeson (2010) advocates that emancipation and critical engagement can be achieved through a process-orientated approach to curriculum but ‘curriculum as praxis’ has been argued by Grundy (1987) as an alternative approach.
Curriculum as Praxis

Critical theory and the emancipatory paradigm are intrinsically linked with praxis understood to mean ‘action informed by reflection with an emancipatory intent’ (Kincheloe 1991, p.177). Curriculum as praxis embodies the emancipatory interest with its focus on empowerment, interaction, critical engagement, and liberation. Grundy (1987), whose application of praxis to the curriculum was primarily informed by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972) clearly summarises the main agendas of curriculum as praxis as follows:

(i) Curriculum develops through the dynamic interaction of action and reflection.
(ii) Praxis operates in the world of interaction, the social and cultural world: Learning must be recognized as a social act.
(iii) Teaching and learning are seen as a dialogical relationship between teacher and learner, rather than as an authoritative one.
(iv) Knowledge is a social construction. Through the act of learning, groups of students become active participants in the construction of their own knowledge.
(v) Praxis assumes a process of meaning-making which recognizes meaning as a social construction.
(vi) Praxis means acting with, not upon, others.

(Grundy 1987, pp. 115-116)

In curriculum as praxis, the question of whether or not curriculum practices operate to emancipate the participants through the process of learning needs to be constantly asked (Smith 1996). The curriculum should also ask questions around embedded power dynamics and query ‘whose interests are served by the curriculum, what curriculum would promote greater equity emancipation and social justice, how is power distributed in the teaching and learning process and how can it be more equitably distributed?’ (Grundy 1987, p.122). Gleeson (2010) calls for techne to be replaced by praxis in education and argues that this can only be achieved by allowing for greater accountability, partnership, leadership, and awareness of the socio-cultural context that education takes place in.

Curriculum as praxis makes an explicit commitment to emancipation, thus action is not just informed, it is also committed: ‘at its centre is praxis: informed, committed action’ (Grundy 1987, p.115). The liberal-progressive approach to teaching largely coheres with curriculum as praxis. This is because it focuses on the role of the teacher as a facilitator in a democratic
classroom and where student voice can be welcomed as learners might be empowered to make decisions (Dewey 1981) and gain first hand access to knowledge that holds meaning for them (Habermas 1972). Furthermore, Grundy (1987) and Freire (1972) accredit ‘negotiation’ with students as best suited to a process of liberating education. Freire (1972) believes the substance of the educational experience is a matter of negotiation between teacher and students. This position is further advocated by Grundy (1987) who argues that learning is an interactive process that requires a dialogical relationship between the teacher and student as when the educational experience is negotiated, the curriculum ‘emerges from the systematic reflection of those engaged in the pedagogical act’ (p.103).

3.1.2 Conclusion

Despite calls for the advancement of liberal progressive and emancipatory approaches, classical humanism persists as the hegemonic curriculum ideology. Moreover, the product model and technical interest of knowledge heavily influence the formation of curriculum reinforcing the need to review power and control within curricular decision making. There is a lack of agency at a local level where educational decisions are made centrally and schools, teachers, and students lack any significant voice. Education as a social science is, therefore, inherently dependent on context. It was deemed an important task to conduct an examination of a range of existing ideologies and approaches to curriculum in order to learn from the criticisms of the dominant philosophies associated with the technical interest and borrow from the more contemporary, emerging philosophies associated with the practical and emancipatory interests. This work is informed by each of the philosophies explored but is aligned with the key discourses around: the practical and emancipatory paradigms; the approach of curriculum as process; the ideals of curriculum as praxis and; the liberal progressivism teaching styles. This research then attempts to: recognise the voice of the student; recognise the experiences and social interactions of student; redress the need for a more balanced power differential in the classroom and education as a whole; view teachers as facilitators of knowledge capable of professional judgements; and to encourage critical engagement with learning through both teacher and student reflection. A greater understanding of each of these standpoints will have significant implications for this research. This exploration of the literature has determined that curricular values, beliefs, assumptions and ideologies are highly influential in education but they also impact the curriculum selection process and curriculum reform efforts.
3.2: Curriculum Intervention

Having discussed the values and assumptions underlying curriculum, this section will examine who has the control to implement them. An overview of how curriculum is traditionally selected will be provided to determine what values and ideologies inform and influence curriculum selection. In keeping with previous deliberations on the philosophical and societal values underpinning curriculum discourse, a knowledge-base will be provided regarding who controls the curriculum, who drives curriculum reform efforts and what the usual mechanisms for curriculum change are. The theme of power and control will continue to permeate throughout this section where the topic of curriculum reform will be broached and discussed in terms of top-down, bottom-up, and partnership approaches to change. Lastly, an insight from the literature as to why previous reform efforts have failed and succeeded will be provided in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of prior attempts at curriculum intervention.

3.2.1 How is Curriculum Traditionally Selected?

Curriculum is commonly described in terms of the ‘passing on’ of content to future generations. Curriculum is viewed as ‘what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation’ (Pinar et al. 1995, p.847) and ‘the story we tell our children about the good life’ (Trant 1998, p.6). Such understandings of curriculum raise the questions: Who chooses what ‘the good life’ is? And what should be included in this ‘story’ to be passed on? The curriculum is not neutral nor is it apolitical (Gleeson 2010). Instead, it is part of a selective tradition, someone’s selection and some group’s vision of ‘legitimate knowledge’ (Apple 1992). It is held that ‘because a curriculum is a ‘selection’, it follows that whatever is selected would depend to a very large extent upon the experiences and ideologies of those involved in the selection’ (Thaman 1993, p.250).

Many debates have taken place as to why particular forms of curriculum content are selected over others. It was acknowledged that ‘a person’s upbringing, philosophy, political standing and values would influence and impact on what they deemed important and necessary to pass on to the next generation’ (McCormack 2010, p.104). The fact that the content in a traditional, technical rationalist approach to curriculum consisting of segregated subjects is defined by limited groups, usually representing the middle classes, means that the knowledge they ‘prize and endorse’ is of a particular kind, that is, it is selective (Bruner 1960, p.42). This knowledge
represents the values and cultural heritage of a particular group, and thus the cultures of ‘other’ people are being marginalised and the traditional, multidisciplinary curriculum has selective content (Beane 1995; Apple 1993) refers to the aforementioned legitimate knowledge as ‘official knowledge’ and highlights that the decision to select one group’s official knowledge as the most appropriate clearly articulates who has power in society.

The concept of power in the curriculum selection process is in line with the Habermasian (1974) technical conception of control where those who have the power to control the curriculum are those who have the power to make sure that their agendas and interests are largely accepted as worthy of transmission. In this conception, curriculum can be understood as:

> Certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance in our society but is entrusted to specially trained professionals.  

(Lawton 1975, p.6)

This emphasis on the transmission of knowledge is described by Habermas (1987) as ‘technical’ with a primary focus on the survival of a society and reproducing it; often towards controlling and managing learning environments. Young people, and adults, have been led to believe that the purpose of education is to master or ‘collect’ facts, principles, and skills that have been selected for inclusion by academics instead of learning how those might be used to inform larger real-life purposes (Bernstein 1975, p.41). Furthermore, such academics often believe that the ‘good life’ is the intellectual life that they themselves live (Beane 1997). It is presented here that curriculum is a selective process with underlying power dynamics embodied throughout, therefore, it is important to ascertain which group’s vested interests; philosophical, and societal values are being represented.

It is argued that it is the values and interests of limited groups whose welfares are currently represented in the curriculum selection process. Moreover, it is these groups’ specific interests that facilitate the propagation of social values in curriculum (Habermas 1970). It is held that the curriculum consists of ‘what curriculum committees, professors and state education officials believe young people ought to know before they graduate from school’ (Beane 1997, p.75). Furthermore, the knowledge and skills historically selected for inclusion in the curriculum are attached to the perceptions and values of the ‘gatekeepers of our society’ who are representative of the ‘dominant, high culture’ (Beane 1993b, p.42). The dominant social class is believed to be
the powerful middle classes who are ‘well positioned to have their interests defined as the public interest in education’ (Lynch 1989, p.124).

The dominant approach to the curriculum selection process is where curriculum control resides within central governments and policymakers enforce curriculum in a top-down approach (Skilbeck 1984; Apple 1993; Beane 1997). The technical interest of a government-mandated curriculum has a vested interest in economic stability, will always involve a focus on job attainment and the curriculum will be delivered with this in mind (Gleeson 2010). Governments control curriculum and schools deliver accordingly where teachers have relatively low autonomy and students have almost none (Trant 1998). Skilbeck (1984) frames this dominant approach as the ‘Centralist Model’ where curriculum is prescribed by central government in accordance with declared needs and priorities, structured by objectives, divided into subjects, supported by approved texts and assessed appropriately. Thus, the traditional, separate subject approach to curriculum suggests that the ‘good life’ is defined as an intellectual activity within narrowly defined areas (Bloom 1987) and grades received in centrally controlled assessments show how close the students have come to the teacher’s intentions (Boomer 1992). Consequently, Freire’s (1970) ‘banking theory’ prevails where teachers are seen as purveyors of knowledge which reduces the student to a passive recipient of information, devoid of any agency. Students are often learning via compliant engagement where their learning needs to be wholly stimulated by a teacher (Grundy 1987).

On the whole, it is a widely held view that the curriculum is seen as a selection process with curriculum selections being made on the basis of values and beliefs which are then passed down through generations (Young 1971). Curriculum is viewed as a selection of what young people ought to be able to do and value based on the beliefs and ideologies of the dominant social classes, curriculum controlling forces, and far-removed academics (Habermas 1970; Beane 1993, 1995, 1997; Gleeson 2010). Unequal representation in the curriculum selection process is epitomised by the technical dominance of centrally controlled, government mandated curriculum which prioritise economic interests. The lack of control and input afforded to the localised voices of the school, teachers, students and the wider community of educational stakeholders has resultant implications for the young people for whom the curriculum is intended. This understanding of how curriculum is traditionally selected and the key players in control provides a relevant foundation for broaching the topic of curriculum reform and who drives it.
3.2.2 Curriculum Reform

Reform is a highly contested area and it was decided that the literature around curriculum reform needed to be addressed to ascertain; who the major players in reform efforts are, how reform is often practiced, pitfalls to be avoided in reform approaches and some recommendations based on more successful curriculum reform efforts. Reform is mostly understood as the need to reshape, to reconfigure and to make different an institution or practice in order to improve it (Schubert 1993). Curriculum reform is a highly disputed area and ‘we are at the very early stages of appreciating the nature and complexity of educational reform on a large scale’ (Fullan 1999, p.66). Curriculum reform has been described as the process of modifying learning content so as to meet the needs of a society (Fullan 1994) and requires and embodies ‘a technology of intervention and change’ (Schubert 1993, p.93). Much of the contestation around curriculum reform lies in the premise that reform requires change but change does not always mean improvement. This section will provide a brief overview on three different approaches to curriculum reform; ‘top-down’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘partnership’ to ascertain who’s voice, agenda, values and ideologies are represented in each approach. An insight into why reforms often fail will be provided and will then draw on recommendations from the literature as to what can contribute to successful curriculum change. The primary aim of this investigation is to learn from previous reform attempts before proposing a curriculum initiative in the form of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC).

‘Top-Down’ Curriculum Reform

A top-down orientation to curriculum reform seeks to achieve change through the imposition of central policies (Miller 1995) and involves planning by ‘experts’ to be distributed to teachers and learners (Schubert 1993). It is the dominant approach to curriculum reform where political authorities typically drive the reform agenda (Kirk 1988; Fullan 1991, 1999; Gleeson 2010) and ‘experts’ are the policymakers and academics who determine the curriculum and specify the conditions for the administration of change (Donahoe 1997; Fullan 1999). The merits of top-down reform include: the availability of funding, resources and training; the widespread efficiency at which the reforms are introduced to schools and the support provided by large-scale bespoke research investigations (Goodlad 1992; Gleeson 2010; Fullan 1991). Yet, top-down reform is a technical, centralised approach which personifies positivism through government control and is classically represented by a standardised national curriculum (where content is
usually selected for economic purposes and is devoid of any context) and associated national testing agenda (Schubert 1993).

As to the reasons for why top-down reforms take place; they are largely reactive where educational reform is associated with a political timeline and political success (Fullan 1997) and reforms are enacted to respond to the agendas of politicians (Gleeson 2010). Furthermore, top-down reform tends to involve the introduction of ‘superficial solutions to curriculum problems which are introduced quickly in an atmosphere of crisis’ (Fullan and Miles 1997, p.747). Put simply, a top-down reform can often be largely reactive and a knee jerk policy move designed to give an allusion of action. The exclusion of school, teacher, and student voice in reform efforts is a primary characteristic of the top-down approach (Eisner 1992; MacDonald 1993) where power-coercive strategies are used to effect change (Miller 1995). A centralised approach to curriculum reform is suggestive of an imposed curriculum that limits learner autonomy (Barnett and Coate 2005) and reinforces the values of dominant, societal groups (MacDonald 1993).

Sarason (1990) documents the ‘predictable failure’ of top-down curriculum reform where billions of dollars have been spent with little to show for it. The local implementation of top-down strategies has consistently failed in the vast majority of cases (Fullan 1994) where ‘top-down, politically driven education reform movements are addressed primarily to restructuring. They have little to say about educating’ (Goodlad 1992, p.238). The top-down approach to curriculum reform involves policy makers changing what they see as being ineffective and tends to result in superficial change (Fullan 1993; Sarason 1990). Furthermore, change at a technical level is experienced where only text book and exam paper content is altered. In contrast, Fullan (1993) attributes deep, meaningful curriculum change to a requirement to alter curriculum content and practice, beliefs and values and assessment; and it is near-impossible to change the beliefs and values of an education system. Moreover, it is believed that the distance between top-down reformers and the teachers who are expected to implement the reforms continues to be too great for effective change to take place (Eisner 1992). Top-down reform has been referred to as a ‘teacher-proof curriculum package’ where the intent is to minimise the teacher’s influence on curriculum reform by developing a tight relationship among educational objectives, curriculum content, and assessment instruments all packaged into a curriculum which is produced by specialized curriculum writers removed from the school setting (Macdonald 2003). From the work of MacDonald (2003), it would seem that the deficiencies of a top-down orientation could be addressed by a more localised approach to reform that takes into account
teachers and schools as agents of change; this is often referred to as a ‘bottom-up’ style of curriculum reform.

‘Bottom-Up’ Curriculum Reform

Given the difficulties concerning power dynamics and the centralised approach associated with top-down reform, it is understandable that local participation and site-based management would appear to be a more appropriate solution (Fullan 1994). A bottom-up approach to curriculum reform involves organic change arising from the participation of teachers and schools in decision making at a local level (Fullan 1991). It has been referred to as a ‘grass roots’ approach to curriculum reform (Schubert 1993) whereby implementers such as schools become key decision makers rather than agents of others’ decisions; roles traditionally held by policy makers. Policy makers become supporters rather than directors of others’ decisions; roles traditionally held by the implementers of the curricula (Darling-Hammond 1998). In short, bottom-up reform aims to invert the traditional roles held by policymakers and schools (Honig 2005).

Allowing teachers and other school staff a voice in policy-making is not the usual course of action in schools (Donahoe 1997; Beane 1997; Gleeson 2010). However, Kretovics (1991) argues that if education reform is to succeed, it must be structured to enable teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to address collectively the problems that face their schools. It is argued that a bottom-up approach results in a more student-centred, relevant curriculum for students which also accounts for the representation of a wider range of ideologies, values and viewpoints with regard to change efforts (Fullan 1993; Gleeson 2010). The emergence of bottom-up approaches to curriculum reform frequently refer to School-Based Curriculum Development (SBCD), action research and school-based models of curriculum (Skilbeck 1984) which locate schools at the centre of curriculum reform efforts (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). There is a shift in power from the government to schools in a bottom-up approach to reform; a conception viewed by Goodson (2001) as central to deep, effective change. Of particular focus in the bottom-up approach is the recognition of teachers as key educational stakeholders and agents of change (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009).

Decentralised, local and democratic decision-making processes where teachers have greater power and control is aligned with Habermas’ (1972) emancipatory conception of change. It is a widely held premise that teachers should play an active role in the initiation and development of
curriculum change and be at the heart of the change process (Fullan 1993; Stenhouse 1979; Hughes 2006; Trant 1998). Schwab (1969) believes it impossible to consider curriculum reform in any meaningful sense without addressing the impact of teachers on change efforts. Teachers are viewed as vital allies if any reform is to go beyond surface change and bring long-term results (Hughes 2006). Furthermore, it is held that teachers are the ‘ultimate arbiters of educational change’ and no plan for sustainable educational change should ignore or bypass them (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p.88).

Fullan (2007) goes so far as to attribute the failure of top-down reform efforts to a lack of practitioner voice yet acknowledges that the bottom-up approach to reform is also fraught with fundamental deficiencies. There is ample evidence that schools are not likely to initiate change in the absence of external stimuli (Fullan 1994a) and the bottom-up, participative approach to change is often too slow due to lack of buy-in (Beer et al. 1990). Lastly, without the driving force of powerful centralised agencies, school-based reform efforts, even on a large scale, rarely bring about uniformity of reform across education systems (Cawelti 1993). As with top-down reform efforts, school-based curriculum change regularly results in superficial, structural changes where well-meaning initiatives fail to become standardised (Fullan 1994b). Evidently, neither state-driven nor teacher-driven reform contribute to lasting change (Elliott 1998) and so Fullan (1994b) called for a ‘more sophisticated blend of the two’ (ibid p.7) which could be realised through a partnership approach to curriculum reform.

*Partnership and Curriculum Reform*

The concept of partnership promises a union or integration of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ strategies for reform in education, as it brings together a range of stakeholders who each have an interest in the nature of change in schools (Kirk and MacDonald 2001). Trant (1998) argues that teachers lack ownership of the curriculum but the curriculum can only be ‘owned’ in partnership. A partnership approach to curriculum reform would involve the alliances of teachers, curriculum developers, administrators, teacher educators, local community, researchers and scholars, publishers, parents, and especially, learners themselves (Schubert 1993). Additionally, Trant (1998) advocates that the local community, teacher unions, employers and the general public should also be included in reform partnerships. The partnership approach acknowledges the value-laden nature of the curriculum and it is believed that the success or failure of curriculum change can be attributed to the involvement of representatives from all invested bodies in the
development of curriculum initiatives so that their values can be considered in the selection process (Fullan and Hargreaves 1992). The partnership approach also advocates for the social construction of knowledge. The realisation of a partnership approach relies on representatives of all the stakeholders in education at state level and local level and ‘appropriate levels of government’ to negotiate their respective visions of the curriculum selection process (Elliot 1998, p.68).

The adoption of a partnership approach to reform governance has the potential to bring about a more democratic approach to policy-making that promotes a greater social balance and empowers the non-traditional educational stakeholders (Trant 1998; Skilbeck 1984). This is coherent with the Habermasian conception of the emancipatory interest of knowledge that aims to eradicate social confinements, requires freedom and democracy, and promotes individual and social empowerment (Habermas 1974). Collaborative partnerships are forged through wide consultation processes that bring together the voices of all the stakeholders. Skilbeck’s (1984) partnership model provides a broad framework where the curriculum is common to all schools and is defined further through partnership by both central and local bodies and interpreted by the schools. The primary challenges with the partnership approach lie in its implementation. The political dimension to partnerships frequently remain (Sparkes and Bloomer 1993) where ‘the original and traditional partners still have a long way to go in relation to the discourse of partnership’ (Gleeson 2010 p.229) and they are, at best, a form of ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves 1991).

With regard to social partnerships, it has proved difficult to ascertain equal representation of the voice of parents and students from all social classes (Skilbeck 1984). The OECD (1991, p.75) documented that ‘one of the missing or under-developed links in the curriculum planning and decision making process is the participation of social partners’. Furthermore, despite the original intention of broadening the social base of decision-making, ‘there is often little sense of participation in curriculum decision-making on the part of the wider education community’ (Gleeson 2010, p.277). Crucially, it is the young people for whom the curriculum is intended who are often considered last in the partnership approach as observed by Granville (2004) who states that ‘one of the glaring weaknesses in current partnership structures is the lack of voice for the learners themselves’ (p.93). Despite the well-meaning intentions of the partnership approach with its aspirations of equal voice and collaborative representation, it does not include student voice and remains faced with difficulties as with the top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum change. It is difficulties such as a lack of student voice and the aforementioned
centralised approach to reform, power dynamics and unequal representation at a local level that contribute to the failure of curriculum reform efforts. Much has been learned from the different approaches to educational reform, however, this learning has most often emerged from the many stories of failure rather than success (Fullan 1983; Stenhouse 1980; Kirk and MacDonald 2001).

Why do Curriculum Reforms Fail?

Philosopher George Santayana (1905) cautions that if we do not learn from the past, we are condemned to repeat it. This is pertinent to learning from past reform failures where the ‘design, execution and failure of education reforms provide an opportunity for radical breakthroughs in understanding and giant leaps in learning’ (McGinn 1999, p.7). Whether we are on the receiving or initiating end of curriculum change, we need to understand why reforms fail before we can approach any new initiative. Organisational issues such as rushed timelines, a lack of organisational support and unconnected change initiatives are regularly cited as contributing to curriculum reform failure (Fullan 1991, 1997; Fullan and Miles 1992). However, outside of such organisational issues, some of the fundamental reasons as to why reforms fall are; the lack of consultation with key educational stakeholders, partnerships are not involved, the purpose of reform not being compelling enough and the low priority placed on learning and the voice of students (Fullan 1997; Schwahn and Spady 1998). Reactive, top-down reforms developed in response to a political and policymaker agenda are not concerned with learning and cited by Fullan (1991, 1997) as a key reason as to why reforms usually fail. In a reactive approach to reform, learning seems to be nethermost reason for curricular change and, therefore, everyone is not aligned with the vision or purpose of the reform initiative (Schwahn and Spady 1998). This is evidenced by claims that a lack of consultation and negotiation with the learners themselves is a key reason as to why reform often fails (Hull and Rudduck 1980, Beane 1997).

The neglect of student voice has been widely cited as a contributing factor to the failure of curriculum change efforts (Apple 1993; Lang 1999; Hull and Rudduck 1980). Curriculum reform, sponsored by well-meaning educational authorities, often fails to account for the voices of young people who should be central to the process (Brooker and Macdonald 1998). It is argued that ‘there is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve’ (Cook-Sather 2002, p.1). The exclusion of student voice was particularly apparent in the period of large scale curriculum reform in the 1970s and 1980s (Lang 1999) and in general, students are typically
omitted from discussions surrounding curriculum change; even when consultative processes are
in place (Levin 1995) where ‘students are usually the targets of educational change but rarely are
they change-partners’ (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p.82). The acknowledgment of the key role
that student voice needs to have in reform efforts is vital for the direction of this research and in
line with the aims of this work that seeks to embrace and elicit learner voice and agency
throughout the curriculum process. In taking the above cumulative reasons for the failure of
reforms into account, a logical progression is to propose key elements from the literature that
pertain to more successful curriculum change efforts.

**Requirements for Successful Curriculum Change**

As organisational issues are cited as contributing to failing reforms, they can also contribute to
successful curriculum change. Organisational matters such as the proper management of change,
capacity building, allowing sufficient time, and providing sufficient resources and training are
cited by Fullan and Miles (1992) as requirements for effective curriculum change. More
pertinent to this research are the localised factors cited by Fullan (1991) who believes that
change needs to be collaborative and deep systemic change requires local implementation by
everyday teachers, principals, parents, and students. This assertion that change cannot be
accomplished from afar is reiterated by Peterson *et al.* (1997) who attribute the success of past
reform efforts to the localised nature of reform approaches involving teachers who were afforded
opportunities to engage in meaningful discussion and mutual decision-making about proposed
changes. It is apparent from such recommendations that curriculum researchers are advocating
the central role of teachers as change agents in reform and the need for teachers to ‘own’ aspects
of changes that are sought (Kirk 1988). In addition to teachers, increased student involvement is
also named as contributing to past successful reforms where students were positioned in
discussions and debates concerning educational reform (Cook-Sather 2006; Frost and Holden
2008) where the underlying vision of change was related to students and student learning (Lodge
2005). It is believed that an essential caveat in bringing about change is to ‘listen to students
views about the proposed changes’ (Nieto 1994, p.395). This is coherent with the assertions of
Simmons *et al.* (2015) who highlight that when students get the opportunity to have a say in
change matters; it results in a more democratic, participatory and inclusive approach to change
and improvement in schools.
3.2.3 Curriculum Intervention Conclusion

As this research intends to propose a curriculum initiative that will require change and small scale reform to existing curricular practices, it must be conscious of how curriculum is selected, who controls the curriculum, various approaches to curriculum change and reasons why reform efforts fail or succeed. This research acknowledges that curriculum is selective and there are power dynamics inherent in the curriculum selection process. Curriculum control appears to be dominated by governments and policy-makers which is largely controlled by vested interests. With regard to reform, the hegemonic top-down approach is characterised by a technical, centralised approach. Habermas’ emancipatory interest is evident in bottom-up and partnership reform efforts which promote a localised approach to change and represent the interests of the wider educational community. Of particular focus in the literature is the strong advocacy towards teacher involvement in change efforts with Schubert (1993) arguing that reforms that seek to by-pass teachers or to be overly prescriptive will not succeed due to the lack of; negotiation, teacher buy-in, and teacher-decision making. Based on an analysis of the literature surrounding successful and unsuccessful reform efforts; equal representation, time, management, and a concentration on local resources are listed as key determinant factors to change. Following this analysis of literature surrounding curriculum intervention and building on the previously mentioned assumptions surrounding agency and the construction of knowledge; this research questions the space for deep systemic curriculum change at a hermeneutic and emancipatory level which values the involvement of students and teachers in change efforts. Students should have a say in curriculum change efforts and a very clear sense of agency about the curriculum itself. This research is conscious of the powers that control the curriculum and mindful of the influential impact local agents such as schools, teachers, and (most pertinently) students can have on any change process.
3.3: Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) and its Origins

Having examined the values underpinning curriculum, how curriculum is selected, who controls curriculum and approaches to curriculum reform, it has been suggested that student voice is integral in all educational processes. This section will briefly introduce NIC before clarifying the different terms associated with cross-curricular approaches, namely; integrated, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and trans-disciplinary in an effort to provide a clear distinction between the various cross-curricular approaches and identify the aspects of each style that NIC is borrowing from whilst clarifying how NIC is distinctive. NIC involves teachers inviting students to help construct and enact their learning journey by negotiating a curriculum built around their concerns. The negotiated aspect sees students involved in negotiating curriculum with teachers to address issues of concern to them. Subjects are then drawn upon as needed to address these concerns, which constitutes the integrated aspect. Before the process of NIC is explored, this section will clarify each of the curricular integration terms and look to the integration spectrum to support the distinctions made between each of the approaches.

3.3.1 Understandings of Integrated Curricula

Integration in its simplest conception denotes making connections; ranging from making connections across disciplines to making connections to real life (Drake 1998). There is an array of terms such as ‘integrated’, ‘multidisciplinary’, ‘interdisciplinary’, ‘transdisciplinary’ and ‘core’ which are often used interchangeably to describe a curriculum which exists to challenge the dominant, technical rationalist approach that advocates learning via discrete, segregated subjects (Dewey 1938; Vars 1991; Beane 1995; Drake 1998). Each term represents a different level of establishing commonalities across disciplines and indeed other variables. NIC is forefronted by many such conceptions. While there are commonalities between each approach such as the use of a central theme, there are also foundational differences. This section aims to clarify the different cross-curricular approaches that have influenced NIC and to establish where each conception lies on a wide-ranging integration spectrum.
Multidisciplinary Curriculum

The multidisciplinary curriculum is regularly defined as the ‘fusion’ or ‘overlap’ of two or more subjects (Dewey 1938; Dowden 2007; Beane 1995) or the establishment of relationships between existing disciplines through the medium of a theme (Jacobs 1989). A key observation made is that even though connections are made across subjects, usually through a theme, each subject retains its separate identity; ‘English is English and History is History’ (Drake 1998, p.43) (see Fig. 3.1). A multidisciplinary method involves the use of ‘parallel disciplines’ where related content is taught in two or more subjects during the same time period. Teachers sequence topics through a central theme which allows related ideas to be taught concurrently but within separate disciplines (Jacobs 1989; Drake 1998). This is challenging the traditional approach involving strictly isolated subjects, described by Rousseau (1972) as an ‘unnatural’ way of learning as it affords little agency to teachers and students and goes against the developmental interests of children (Roth 1994). In an interdisciplinary approach, more explicit connections are made across subject areas.

![Fig 3.1: Drake’s (1998) depiction of a Multidisciplinary Curriculum](image)

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

The interdisciplinary approach again sees the curriculum revolving around a common theme but interdisciplinary concepts or skills are emphasized across subjects rather than within them (Fogarty 1991). Interdisciplinary is defined as identifying specific skills, processes or ideas
which are common to all disciplines and addressing those through the disciplines (Kysilka 1998). The disciplines remain readily identifiable but have less importance than the multidisciplinary approach. Instead, common skills and learning methods across subjects such as numeracy, research, and critical thinking are used in creating interdisciplinary themes and concepts (Drake 2007) (See Fig. 3.2). The interdisciplinary approach to learning affords students the opportunity to understand concepts in a larger context by consciously applying methodology and content from more than one discipline to examine a central theme (Jacobs 1989). Units of study are selected and planned for by teachers such as in Fogarty’s (1991) ‘Webbed’ model (see Fig. 3.3) where teachers select a theme and construct the curriculum using this theme as a starting point. Through an interdisciplinary approach, a desirable theme (described by Perkins (1989) as a ‘fertile’ theme) should broadly apply to many subject areas to intrigue both the teacher and students do discover fundamental similarities and contrasts within, and across, disciplines (Perkins 1989). Interdisciplinary units aim to incorporate multiple subjects with a theme acting as the medium for integration, however, ‘the units do not supplant the existing disciplines, they are complementary to them’ (Kysilka 1998, p.202).

While both the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula approaches can be said to be integrated, there are important distinctions between them. A multidisciplinary approach sees several disciplines come together to speak to a theme but each subject does their work in isolation; that is, the maths doesn’t speak to the science and vice versa. By contrast, an interdisciplinary approach sees the subjects speak to the theme and to each other (Drake 1998, 2007). They are truly interdisciplinary. While both approaches are progressive in their foundation, neither places emphasis on real life connections, student experiential learning or dialogue with students around curricular decisions (Dewey 1902; Bernstein 1971). The transdisciplinary curriculum is a more student-centred, contextual approach to integration.
Transdisciplinary Curriculum

In contrast to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches which originate with common disciplines and skills accordingly, the transdisciplinary approach begins with a ‘life-
centered’ approach (Drake 1993, p.41) (Fig. 3.4). Transdisciplinary implies full interaction between disciplines, usually from a problem-based perspective, where teachers organize and select central themes based on and around students questions and concerns and subjects are not readily identifiable (Costanza 1990). Themes are a ‘topic, concept, problem, or issue providing both a focus and organizing framework that guide the development and implementation of a cohesive, interrelated series of lessons or activities’ (Lonning et al. 1998 p.312). Beane (1993, 1997) and Brown (2006) are influential educators in the transdisciplinary approach as both theorists advocate the creation of themes around student questions. Furthermore, Beane (1993) and Vars (1991) place a particular emphasis on student concerns as a starting point for curricular development through a transdisciplinary approach where learners develop life skills as they apply interdisciplinary skills in a real-life context (Drake 2007). Having explored the different levels of integration and made comparisons between different approaches, it is clear that a variance exists and the different integration positions can be clarified further by looking to the integration spectrum.

**Fig. 3.4 Drakes Transdisciplinary Curriculum (1998, p.39)**

*The Integration Spectrum*

Integration of curricula exists on a spectrum and the extent of integration varies from zero integration to maximum integration. In 1991, Robin Fogarty identified 10 wide-ranging models of curriculum integration representing a large continuum of integrated approaches (see Fig 3.5). This spectrum is book-ended by Fogarty’s (1991) ‘Cellular’ model which is representative of the
traditional curriculum where separate subjects are taught in isolation and is essentially a state of zero integration (see Fig 3.6). Towards the centre of this continuum is the multidisciplinary approach represented by Fogarty’s ‘Shared’ model where teachers collaborate to make connections between subjects through the use of a theme (see Fig 3.7). Progressing from the centre of the spectrum is the interdisciplinary approach represented by Fogarty’s ‘Threaded’ model, where skills such as thinking skills and social skills are threaded across the various content areas (see Fig 3.8).

At the end of this spectrum are transdisciplinary curricula represented by Fogarty’s ‘Immersed’ and ‘Networked’ models which involve variables such as student choices and real-life connections in addition to integration across several disciplines (see Fig 3.9). So it can be argued that this spectrum of integration accounts not only for cognitive elements such as efficacy of learning across disciplines but also for value-based aspects such as the level of student voice apparent in the process (Beane 1995). Integration exists across several variables such as the cognitive, democratic, agentic (both teacher and student), ownership, voice and teaching skills (Drake 1993; Beane 1993, 1995, 1997). All of these aspects vary according to the level of integration on this spectrum with the more extensive end of the continuum facilitating the integration of more value-based variables and are in line with Beane’s (1995) Integrated Curriculum (IC) approach.

Fig. 3.5: Fogarty’s 10 Models of Curriculum Integration (1991, p.11)
Fig. 3.6: Fogarty’s Cellular Model (1991, p.22)

The traditional model of separate and distinct disciplines, as depicted by student learning standards in each discipline.

Example
The teacher applies this view in mathematics, science, social studies, humanities, fine and practical arts.

Fig. 3.7 Fogarty’s Shared Model (1991, p.57)

Shared planning takes place in two disciplines in which overlapping concepts or ideas emerge as organizing elements.

Example
Science and mathematics teachers use data collection, charting, and graphing as shared concepts.
The Integrated Curriculum

An Integrated Curriculum (IC) is conceived as a curriculum that is wholly integrative and adopts the approaches of Vars (1987), Beane (1995) and Boomer (1982) where themes are ‘issue-based’ and students play a participative role in curricular planning and decision making. IC is more than just the dissolution of subject boundaries as it also considers the integration of a range of variables and is defined by Gehrke (1998) as:
A collective term for those forms of curriculum in which student learning activities are built, less with concern for delineating disciplinary boundaries around kinds of learning, and more with the notion of helping students recognize or create their own learning.

(p. 248)

Beane (1993) advances the issue of student involvement and believes that a truly integrated curriculum is designed only after asking students to identify concerns and questions they consider important and then refining those concerns and questions through dialogue among teachers and students. These concerns and questions are then clustered around themes, where teachers subsequently identify content knowledge and skills that students need to respond to the concerns raised. Therefore, IC would be located at the end of the integration spectrum associated with maximum integration and the integration of both cognitive and value-based variables.

Borrowing from the work of Dewey (1902) and Bernstein (1971), the philosophical approach behind curriculum integration is to make a positive difference in the growth and development of teachers and students by involving experiential and contextual learning, breaking down discipline barriers and advocating increased agency (Bergstrom 1998). The subject-centred curriculum tends to neglect natural and logical connections between and among the separate subjects and between the subjects and life outside school (Wraga 1993). Contrary to the traditional approach, the development of IC necessitates educators to pay attention to how young people approach tasks in real life (Morris 1996). Methods of curricular integration such as Jacobs (1989) ‘complete integration’, Drakes (2007) ‘transdisciplinary’ conception and Boomers (1982) ‘negotiated’ curriculum purposely involve students by generating a theme and integrating subjects accordingly based on the expressed interests of students. This research promotes approaches taken by Vars (1987) ‘core’ curriculum and Beane’s (2005) ‘integrative’ model which argue that the curriculum should focus on topics and issues that are of significant personal and social significance to young people; their concerns.

Wrigley et al. (2012, p.197) draw on 14 case studies which explored school change orientated towards social justice and democracy and accredited deep, systemic change to that which ‘goes beyond the progressive tenet that learners should have the opportunity to pursue their own interests and instead the focus is on student concerns’. James Beane (1990, 1993) developed the integrative model of curriculum and defined it as:
A curriculum design theory that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject area lines.

(Beane 1997, p.19)

This integrative model poses two questions to students; ‘What questions do you have about yourself?’ and ‘What questions do you have about your world?’ (Beane 2005). Teachers employ pedagogical strategies that facilitate the students answering these questions through group-work. Answers to these questions create a foundation that enables teachers and students to collaboratively plan the curriculum around the personal and world concerns of students. The integration of subjects is justified by Beane (2005, p.36) in stating that ‘no issue of concern to the student can be understood or resolved using one subject.’ Furthermore, Wrigley et al. (2012) accredit the building of an educational theme around student concerns with creating deeper student-connections with the learning content of a curriculum.

In addition to creating a greater focus on hermeneutic aspects, the social dynamics of the process cannot be ignored. Students thinking critically about their world in a social setting makes the assumption that meanings are constructed by humans through interaction and meanings are not inherently linked to inanimate objects or events (McGinnis et al. 2006). Furthermore, an integrative approach undertakes the stance that social reality is a social production (Denzin 1978) where the actual process of integration places an emphasis on the social construction of meaning through communication in a cooperative, democratic environment (Govender 2004). Integrative approaches which require such levels of student involvement are representative of Dewey’s democratic education which incorporates the Habermasian (1972) emancipatory knowledge interest due to the greater agency that is afforded to both teachers and students as they take greater control over decision-making around their learning.

Dewey (1916) relates democracy to collaborative participation in society. The involvement of young people in making decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to go about it is the very basis for a democratic classroom according to Boomer (1992). For the value of civic participation to be appreciated, Byrne (2014) believes it is necessary for schools to offer decision-making roles to everyone, including learners, and calls on practitioners to facilitate democracy by being ‘citizen-educators’. Moreover, models such as Beane’s integrative model involve teaching students how to be democratic citizens by mirroring a democratic society in the
classroom (Apple and Beane 1995) where students’ learning about problem-centred themes through the integration of different subjects is accredited by Santone (2004) with bringing democracy to life in the classroom. This is just one of the many cited benefits of an integrated curriculum, more of which will be explored later in juxtaposition with criticisms of such curricular approaches.

Synthesis of Integrated Curricula

This section has identified some of the key terms associated with curriculum integration and clarified the differences between each approach. The emerging themes of the different styles ranged from the teacher collaboration in the multidisciplinary approach to more explicit connections being made across subject areas and skills in the interdisciplinary approach. The transdisciplinary and IC approaches saw themes emerging such as the social construction of meaning and agentic approaches to integration which account for democracy, student voice, ownership, and making real-life, meaningful connections. The integration spectrum further clarified the differences between the various terms and identified the integration of variables other than subject disciplines such as the level of student voice apparent in the process, student experiential learning and dialogue with students around curricular decisions. Having clarified the different terms and levels of integration, it is necessary to explore the historical curriculum developments relevant to these considerations and the challenges they faced, and continue to face, in their implementation.

3.3.2 History of an Integrated Curriculum

The concepts of IC and cross curricular approaches to curricula are by no means modern or novel forms of curricular intervention. Indeed, such approaches have been researched heavily and advocated by notable theorists and unknown educational practitioners since the late 1800’s. Historically, curriculum developments have not occurred in a vacuum, instead they take place in the context of larger movements within and beyond education (Beane 1997). This section will speak to the history of IC to highlight how the understanding of it has progressed since the 1800s and to provide a social context for its evolution. Curricular developments pertaining to integrated approaches will be divided into three historical timeframes; from the late 1800s to the present day. This serves the purpose of chronologically mapping historical events whilst emphasising that the origins of IC have a social foundation.
Curriculum integration originated in the European schools of architecture in the 16th and 17th century, which were renowned for their project method approach to education involving a holistic, team oriented, problem solving approach to teaching and learning (O’ Grady et al. 2014). The origins of an integrated approach to curriculum in the US can be traced back to the end of the American Civil War in 1865. The period after the war saw an explosive expansion in industrial growth, urbanisation, transportation, and immigration. This industrialisation led to questions surrounding the type of schooling required to meet the needs of the emerging industrial society (Beane 1997). There was a strong liberal attitude towards education during this time, which challenged the economic focus of education inherent in the technical interest of schooling.

The discreet subject approach to education was called to question with some educators calling for the breakdown of subject boundaries and recommending multidisciplinary curricula (see Fig 3.1) as better suited to prepare young people for their role in the adult world (Kliebard 1986). Government corruption and social inequalities led to a strong spirit of reform sweeping through the US during the late 1800s and early 1900s. There was a strong movement to expand democracy with the argument that the average citizen should have more control over his Government and this mind-set also extended to education where responsibility and citizenship building were promoted. As industrialism expanded further there was another movement to challenge social inequalities, which led to calls for changes to the country’s social systems, including schooling. In 1870, curriculum integration was advocated by Herbert Spencer who called for an increase in ‘social integration’ in the curriculum and wanted to use social problems to help organise the curriculum, connect the school with community issues and take a macro approach to using democratic practices in school planning and governance (Vars 1991). The integration of curriculum around child centred values was promoted by social reformers in the early 1900s who believed that social integration, collaborative planning, and the use of integrated knowledge to approach social problems offered a practical agenda for democratic education (Beane 1997). The ‘multidisciplinary’ curriculum originated with the ‘Herbartians’, a group of late nineteenth century American educational reformers who questioned the rationality of the traditional single subject curriculum and started to consider how disparate subjects might be ‘correlated’ with each other in ways that might benefit students (Kliebard 1995). This was during a time that progressivism in education was beginning to gain merit.
The progressive era in education extended from the 1890s to the 1930s and placed an emphasis on collaborative project learning, experiential learning and education for social responsibility and democracy (Rohrs and Lenhart 1995). John Dewey was integral in the progressive movement which pushed for students personal experiences and social issues to be integrated into the curriculum. Dewey termed his approach ‘organic education’ which consisted of a radical student-centred design for curriculum integration involving a more hermeneutic approach to thinking and learning and the interaction between the student and their social environment (Dowden 2007). Dewey (1902 and 1910) believed that the child brought a lot of personal and experiential knowledge to the learning context and a transdisciplinary level of integration which emphasised real-life context and student questions (see Fig 3.4) could best facilitate this style of learning. In 1918, William Kilpatrick published a paper entitled 'The Project Method', which called for the curriculum to be designed and organised around life activities. This was in line with Dewey’s notion that learning and education should be contextual which this influenced how the different disciplines were mapped resulting in a more transdisciplinary approach to curriculum deemed suitable for making learning more contextual (Kilpatrick 1918). The theoretical foundation of the integrative model can be traced to Dewey’s experimental work during his tenure at the Chicago Experimental School from 1896-1904 and subsequent writing through to the 1930s.

The 1930s and 1940s saw a child-centred movement in the US involving a number of state and national curriculum reform efforts, calling for curriculum arrangements which represented Rousseau’s (1754) natural developmental interests of children, as opposed to the separate subject approach which represented the interests of adults. A multidisciplinary approach to curriculum was viewed as a way of breaking down the tension between seeing education as a purely economic function and being more student-centred, by facilitating an increase in personal integration for learners (Faunce and Bossing 1958). In the 1930s, Caswell designed the Virginia Plan, a state-wide curriculum revision program, which saw 10,000 teachers across the US empowered to prepare multidisciplinary units for their students. Caswell’s underlying motivation for this reform effort was his belief that teachers were best placed and best qualified to provide educational experiences suited to the individual child (Burlbaw 1991).

In the early 1940s, the student-centred approach to curriculum integration came of age through a grand-scale ‘Eight-Year Study’ carried out from 1933-1941, where the Progressive Education Association (PEA) tested the concept of integrating the curriculum (Aikin 1942). This study consisted of a longitudinal experiment involving the restructuring of 30 high schools across the
United States to adopt an integrated curriculum in what is described by Tyler (1987) as one of the five most significant curriculum events in the twentieth century. In nearly every instance, students in various types of integrative programmes performed as well or better on standardized achievement tests than students enrolled in the usual separate subjects (Aikin 1942). Additionally, graduates of the high schools who wholly adopted the integrative approach showed the largest advantages over graduates of separate-subject schools (Aikin 1942). What emerged from the Eight Year Study was a ‘core’ curriculum movement where curriculum design begins with the students and the society in which they live, and is collaboratively planned and implemented by students and teachers (Vars 1972). The 1940s saw these emergent core programs focus on the needs, problems, experiences and concerns of students, which are identified via pupil-teacher planning where subject matter from any relevant subject is brought in to help students (Vars 1991). In the United Kingdom (UK), this era was characterized by state support during a period where there were high levels of confidence in the state’s ability to solve social problems. Teachers had much more autonomy and were given opportunities to develop curricula leading to innovative curriculum styles such as the multidisciplinary approach (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009).

1950s to 1970s

Towards the late 1940s, the progressive movement lost much of its momentum and the 1950s and 1960s saw a demise of curriculum arrangements such as the integrated, core and multidisciplinary approaches in the US (Srivastava and Kumaril 2005; Vars 1991). This demise can be attributed to the launching of Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957, which symbolized a threat to America’s perceived superiority in economic terms as well as areas such as science and technology (Bybee 1997). As a result, Governments became heavily involved with educational reform and large amounts of funding were assigned to redirect focus to technical subjects with a strong concentration on science and mathematics programmes. After World War II, the progressive education movement came under fire by conservatives for being a form of communism, as their democratic approach to education was producing independent thinking graduates referred to as ‘juvenile delinquents’ (Brameld 1944, p.97). During the 1960s, despite progressive theories such as Piaget's ‘constructivist psychology’ and Bruner's ‘structural cognitivism’ emerging (Gozzer 1982) the technical rationalist approach to education began to take over once more. The liberal attitudes towards education in the 1920s to 1940s, which sought to differ from the purely economic focus of education through a more multidisciplinary approach was perceived in the 1960s as being too communist. This was supported by Bruner's (1960) ‘The
Process of Education', which sought to package curriculum into separate subjects and measureable performance objectives under the strict control of Governments and the educational elite.

This was reinforced further by studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s which found that the weight of empirical evidence measuring student achievement was in support of direct instruction through separate disciplines over integrated methods (Hinde 2005). Furthermore, critics such as Hirsch (1972) put forth an influential attack on progressive education and argued that few empirical studies exist to support the claims made by the advocates of an integrated curriculum.

In the UK, conservatism in the 1960s led to education becoming characterised by standardisation and performativity in the 1970s. The UK was going through a time of economic crisis in the late 1970s and the educational implication for this resulted in teachers’ professional autonomy being lost and innovation gave way to standardization and uniformity. A scripted, prescriptive national curricula was introduced with the methods of learning narrowly defined, leaving no space for integrated approaches to learning (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). In contrast to the 1930s when educational journals had a specific section allocated to curriculum integration, the very idea of curriculum integration disappeared from journal listings by the 1970s and it would seem that it was headed for a significant hiatus (Gehrke 1998).

In 1971, Basil Bernstein developed a set of concepts and criteria for understanding curriculum where ‘classification’ and ‘integrated’ educational codes were defined with reference to 'classification' and 'framing'. Classification referred to the ‘degree of boundary maintenance between subjects’ (Bernstein 1971, p.49) with strong classification signifying a curriculum which is highly differentiated and separated into traditional subjects and weak classification representing weaker boundaries between subjects. ‘Framing’ denotes ‘the degree of control teachers and pupils possess over the selection, organization and pacing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship’ (ibid, p.50). Strong framing is when a syllabus is controlled by the teacher, with rigid topics to be completed in a predetermined order within a specified timeframe. Pupils have little status and the teacher has possession of all knowledge. In contrast, weak framing involves more student involvement and consideration in the selection of topics, pace and learning activities. Thus, the stronger the classification and framing, the more hierarchical and ritualised educational relationships are (Dowden 2007).

Bernstein’s (1971) ‘collection’ code embodies the Habermasian technical interest of control as it is representative of a curriculum characterised by strong classification and strong framing, whereas the ‘integrated’ code is characterised by weak classification and framing and is more
representative of the Habermasian emancipatory interest, which values agency and autonomy for students and teachers.

Bernstein’s codes were more than just an aid to understanding varied curriculum approaches; there was a strong emphasis on power dynamics throughout each of the categorisations made. Throughout the US, the 1960s and 1970s were identified by the classification code where the educational knowledge selected and transmitted reflected ‘both the distribution of power and the principles of social control’ inherent in society at the time (Bernstein 1971, p.47). It would seem that the liberal educational changes made during the progressive era failed to have a lasting impact and were akin to punching a pillow where schools ‘absorbed innovative thrusts and soon resumed their original shape’ (Boyd 1987, p.175).

1980s to Present Day

Curriculum reform attempts in the US in the 1980s, stemming from the Civil Rights Movement, were criticised as being largely ineffective due to the focus on content, restricted pedagogical approaches and performativity (Morris 1996). This educational shift of focus led to many families seeking alternatives, including progressive schools (Miller 2002). Integrated approaches to curriculum flourished in the late 1980s and early 1990s as education critics argued that schools were not preparing students to be productive citizens of the twenty-first century and young people were not learning because they could not find personal meaning in their studies (Drake 2007). Since the late 1980s to date, there has been a fresh round of interest in curriculum integration and a stronger focus on student-centeredness from educational psychologists, science educators, constructivist theorists and most notably curriculum theorists such as Boomer (1982, 1992), Vars (1987, 1991), Gehrke (1991), and Beane (1990, 1995, 1997, 2007). IC regained momentum due to large-scale studies into the brain by Harte (1983) and Cain and Caine (1991) which established that the brain seeks patterns to integrate information and the curriculum should therefore be organized around integrative themes and projects (Beane 1997).

Furthermore, IC was featured in two widely distributed publications at this time by Jacobs (1989) and Shoemaker (1991), which advocated an integrated approach to curriculum. In 1982, Garth Boomer theorised teacher-student partnerships in terms of ‘negotiating’ a curriculum with students with the underlying intent of sharing power. Student involvement in the curriculum had been apparent in the 1940s and 1950s but Boomers (1982) writing made the purposeful negotiation of curriculum with students more explicit. In 1990, James Beane’s integrative model
and indeed all his writings on the integrated curriculum (1990, 1992, 1995, 1997) reasserted Dewey’s call for the curriculum to be more democratic and applicable to the lived experiences of students (Hinde 2005). His work advocated that curriculum should focus on topics and issues that are of significant personal and social significance to young people, and Beane’s (1995) integrative curriculum was organised around issues of personal and social concern to young people.

In the mid-1990s, the UK was in a state of economic stability and this period was characterised by professional freedom for teachers and a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to curricular reform (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). This contributed to the re-emerging popularity of the integrated curriculum and was coherent with Deal’s (1985) claims that, at times of economic stability, schools tend to be seen as ‘low risk industries’ and teachers are allowed considerable curricular autonomy. In 1997, the integration movement was spurred on further by Gordon Vars who reviewed more than 100 studies of curriculum integration over a seventy-year period and concluded that students in integrated programmes do ‘as well as, and often better than’ students in traditional, separate subject programmes (p.181). This defined research responded to many critics of the integrated approach, who argued that there was not enough evidence of the academic merits of IC. The democratic and student-centred focus of education continues to this day as Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) believe we are going through a ‘Fourth Way’ of educational change that values the democratic partnership among teacher, learner, and community. This fourth way views students as ‘partners in change’ and integral to decision making as ‘students are highly knowledgeable about the things that help them learn’ (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, p.82). This view of education and learner is compatible with Fogarty’s (1991) ‘Immersed’ model, which values student choices in integrated learning units and is at the interdisciplinary end of the aforementioned integration spectrum. The studies, research and publications from the 1980s to date represent significant curriculum initiatives that have regained purchase and added increased efficacy to IC reviving the liberal agendas that education held during the progressive era.

Conclusion

This research adopted a historical lens in an effort to examine the underlying social reasons for an integrated approach, ascertain who the key historical theorists and educators were and to study the political circumstances in which such curricular interventions took place in; all with the
underlying aim of informing the modern day approach this work will take. This work acknowledges the long standing history of curriculum integration and suggests that modern attempts at curriculum intervention cannot ignore the progressive past of student-centred, meaningful curricular integration upon which they are founded. Nor can it ignore the social and political contexts in which educational change takes place as the effects of historical events such as war and times of economic crisis/stability can have a profound impact on the curricular reform. Social themes emerging from the history of IC argue that; learning and education should be contextual, democratic, and experiential (Dewey 1902 – 1938); the breakdown of discipline barriers in education can facilitate a more differentiated and meaningful curriculum for students (Bernstein 1971); and educators should consider consulting students in decisions around their learning (Beane 20005, Boomer 1982). This documented history can only serve to inform contemporary integration approaches by learning from our educational predecessors. Given all the research and studies that have been conducted from the 1930s to the 1990s, certain advantages and disadvantages of an integrated curriculum have been identified.

3.3.3 Benefits and Criticisms of an Integrated Curricula

This section will consider the literature and defined studies that have taken place to present the benefits and efficacy of an integrated approach to curriculum and to acknowledge the valid critiques of the various curricular conceptions. This serves to provide further guidance and groundwork for the NIC approach this research will take and will be followed by a detailed explanation of what NIC is and how it is practiced in the classroom.

Benefits of an Integrated Curriculum

Student attainment and increases in student agency, engagement, meaningful learning, motivation and teacher collaboration are just some of the benefits highlighted from research into an integrated approach to curricula. In terms of student attainment, Vars (1997) conducted a review of more than 100 studies of curriculum integration over a seventy-year period on standardised test results. This review concluded that students in integrated programmes ‘do as well as, and often better than’ students in conventional single-subject programmes (ibid, p.181). Higher grades were reported on the California Achievement Test (CAT) in 1964 from eight and ninth grade students engaged in an integrative curriculum (Bjelke and Georgiadas 1964). Furthermore, in a study of 100 middle schools in the 1980’s, 62% reported consistent academic
improvement when curriculum moved further in the direction of integration (George and Oldaker 1985) with such claims are evidenced by the results of Iowa CAT scores. Moreover, a five year longitudinal study in New Zealand demonstrated that student-centred integrated programmes generated achievement effects in the order of one standard deviation above the norm in national School Certificate results for English, mathematics and science (Nolan and McKinnon 2003). The benefits and rewards of an integrated curriculum are not always academic in nature and are often related to the schooling experiences of students involved in the process of such a participatory approach to learning.

Direct associations have been made between: meaningful learning; agency; engagement; and intrinsic motivation with an integrated approach to curriculum. Among the findings in a study of 400 schools (ranging from middle to senior schools) were reported benefits that an integrated curriculum ‘added meaning’, ‘provided authentic learning experiences’ and ‘increased the relevance and cohesiveness of student learning’ (Arredondo and Rucinski 1998, p.293). The meaningfulness associated with integrative learning experiences are echoed by Beane (1995), Lake (2000), Wraga (1993) Boomer (1982), and Skehan (1998) who argue that the two most important features a learning task should comply with are meaningfulness and establishing a connection with real-world activities. When students make these connections between subject matter and life beyond school; this can increase student learning and make subject matter more meaningful (Drake 1998). The alignment towards student participation in decision-making in an integrative curriculum is shown to increase deeper student engagement and intrinsic motivation levels when a learning activity is directly linked to students’ own agency (Larson 2000; Lawson and Lawson 2013). McCoy and Byrne (2011) consider students as rational decision-makers in the context of their circumstances and recognise that students who enter higher education have generally positive orientations towards their initial education.

Additionally, enhancing learner participation in curricular decisions around their own learning is said to be central to the overall improvement of education systems (Hayward 2013). Furthermore, integrated curricular units are frequently designed to involve students in complex thinking processes such as problem solving, critical thinking, decision-making, investigation, experimental inquiry and invention (Bransford et al. 1990; Marzano 1992). The rewards of engaging in an integrated approach to curriculum are not felt by students in isolation.
In a study conducted by Stevenson and Carr (1993) which saw a group of middle level teachers collaborate to integrate a curriculum based around the interests of students, stronger engagement and investment in an integrative approach was developed in both teachers and students as they were empowered to take greater ownership of a curriculum that showed ‘faith in the capacity of young people to work out intelligent solutions to issues that face them’ (Stevenson and Carr 1993, p.24). An integrated curricula was accredited with promoting a collaborative culture amongst teachers after an integrated approach was used in all K-8 classrooms over a five year longitudinal study at the Aleknagik School in southwest Alaska (Peters et al. 1995). Increases in teacher interest in and excitement for teaching, decreased levels of boredom, the prevention of teacher burnout and a ‘rejuvenating effect on teacher learning’ were reported from teachers engaged in integrated curriculum approaches in a study of 400 schools conducted by Arredondo and Rucinski (1998, p.293). In 1993, the Ministry of Education and Training of Ontario released ‘The Common Curriculum’ which recommended that a number of curricular outcomes should be achieved through an integrated approach to learning.

Following this, Miller et al. (1997) conducted a three year survey from 1994 to 1997 with four boards of education governing a total of 191 elementary schools and 42 secondary schools to monitor how schools were engaging with integrative approaches. The study determined the following benefits associated with an integrated approach: increased teacher collaboration with colleagues and students, a high level of teacher satisfaction and motivation whilst working with an integrated curricula; and increased meaningful learning for students due to the connection of subject content to real-life experiences. The latter finding developed further by Bergstrom (1998) who asserted that a teacher’s professional development grows deeper as they experiment with alternative ways of organising knowledge to make it more meaningful for their students. Each of the evidence-based studies detailed give credibility to integrated approaches to curricula, however, valid criticisms remain in relation to each of the curricular approaches including the multidisciplinary, thematic and wholly integrated conceptions of curricula and these will be discussed in the following section.

**Criticisms of an Integrated Curricula**

IC is an alternative approach to traditional curriculum and schooling and so it has its critics who argue that that: the integrated approach results in a loss of subject identity; the merits of IC lack
empirical evidence; IC cannot transcend structural barriers; the underlying thematic approach lacks structure; and some cross-disciplinary approaches lack the student-centeredness upon which they were founded (Relan and Kimpton 1991; Lounsbury 1992; Roth 1994; Gatewood 1998; Leung 2006). Conceivably, the most contentious issue in current conversations about curriculum integration is surrounding the ability to break from traditional academic disciplines (Czerniak 1999) and the lack of clarity regarding the fate of subject content and identity which (Erb 1996) believes will inevitably lead to frustration amongst practitioners. Relan and Kimpston (1991, p.6) question: ‘How feasible is it to integrate separate structures, biases, conflicts and language of disciplines?’ while Werner (1991) argues that the fusion of subjects often conflicts with teachers' sense of professional identity as subject specialists, and with their personal efficacy and autonomy. Lederman and Niess (1997) welcome multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches where connections are made between subjects but make the argument that subject identity should be retained as each discipline possesses unique conceptual, procedural, and epistemological differences that cannot be addressed through a fully integrated approach. Brophy and Alleman (1991) argue that there is too much focus on the social studies aspect of learning through IC that often lacks educational value and as a result, some subject content is lost. Discipline content is also a concern of George (1996) who argues that when you have to adapt a subject to meet the needs of another, ‘important information may get left out’ (p.17). Roth (1994) encourages educators to urge caution when considering the removal of disciplinary boundaries as after a period of engagement with IC she commented that ‘it is very difficult to work within an integrated theme without in some way distorting or diminishing one or another of the disciplines involved. I felt like I was denying students access to the subject matter’ (1994, p.48).

A leading criticism of IC over the years is the lack of evidence-based research into IC approaches as advocated by St. Clair and Hough (1992) and Czerniak (1999) who points to a lack of empirical evidence surrounding IC where most of the literature could be characterized as ‘testimonials’ (p.423). Perhaps the most passionate criticism against integrated curriculum comes from George (1996, p.16) in his article Arguing Integrated Curriculum, in which he claimed that all the documented benefits of an integrated curriculum are ‘unfounded, unsubstantiated, or both’ and proceeds to provide a list of critiques. He argues, amongst other things, that there is little evidence that an integrated curriculum provides for more student-led learning, student involvement, depth of understanding, academic achievement, or citizenship. Furthermore, while he admits that the idea of IC may be attractive to teachers, it is not realistic due to a lack of proper planning time and resources.
Structural barriers to the successful implementation of IC are documented by others as Watanabe & Huntley (1998) and Lehman (1994) express concerns about the time it takes to incorporate IC into an already packed curriculum. In a study of the boards governing 233 schools, Miller et al. (1997) reported that teachers considered timetabling and a lack of planning time as barriers to integration. Furthermore, Jacobs (1989) argues that the structure of the school day does not cater for integration or the team teaching that would be required for integration to be successful. Teacher education is cited as an additional barrier to integration by Roebuck and Warden (1998) and Mason (1996) as pre-service teachers are not engaging with any integration classes during Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Instead, post-primary teacher candidates are certified as content specialists and so do not possess the skills or knowledge to integrate (Meier et al. 1998). A survey conducted by Lehman (1994) reported that less than 50% of 221 teachers (consisting of both pre-service and in-service qualified teachers) surveyed felt they possessed insufficient skills to integrate science and mathematics subjects. Standardised student assessment is also viewed as a barrier to the successful implementation of IC according to Berlin and White (1992) and Mason (1996) as tests continue to examine subject content separately. Arredondo and Rucinski (1995, p.288) argue that the type of integrated curriculum envisioned by theorists such as Beane is ‘overly optimistic’ in an educational era of accountability and standards-based assessment.

A further criticism of IC is concerned with the rigour of the thematic approach within IC. Jacobs (1989) titles her concern as a 'potpourri problem' where thematic units become a sampling of knowledge from each discipline without any overall, coherent structure or scope. Brophy and Alleman (1991) are critical of the level of rigor within the thematic selection process and argue that themes chosen may not address all subjects equally or in enough depth. Miller et al. (2007, p.9) reported on a selection of ‘artificial themes’ when IC was incorporated in 233 schools participating in their study. It was found that some schools were ‘forcing subjects into these themes in an unnatural way’. Further concerns are expressed by Tchudi (1991) and Ellis and Stuen (1998) around the teacher selection of ‘trivial’ and ‘contrived’ themes generated in accordance with obvious overlaps in subject disciplines. Furthermore, a common critique expressed is that a curriculum cannot be built around the ‘whimsical interests’ of young people (Brazee and Capelluti 1995).

Further criticisms of the multidisciplinary and thematic approaches surround the lack of student involvement in such methods. Concerns are expressed that these designs are typically teacher directed where the teacher decides on the content and presents a unified or integrated concept to
the student (Dressel 1958; Burns 1995; Mathison and Freeman 1998). Furthermore, criticisms have been voiced that the content, methods, processes and skills taught remain bound to the primary discipline from which they come (McDonald and Czerniak 1994). Bernstein (1971) believed that in curricular designs such as the interdisciplinary model, the organising theme is always subordinate to the established subject areas. Moreover, Dewey (1900) went as far as to call such approaches ‘artificial’, explaining that the process quickly becomes redundant as teachers ‘resort to all sorts of devices to weave a little arithmetic into the history lesson, and the like’ (p.91).

Conclusion

Several implications can be gleaned from this review of key contrary positions to IC. Integration at the cost of the disciplines, unsubstantiated claims, a lack of large scale research, ideological assumptions behind the move towards integration and structural barriers are just some of the voiced limitations of an integrated approach. In relation to concerns around subject content, it must be made clear that the concept of an integrated curriculum does not abandon subject content but rather repositions it in the context of meaningful personal and social themes. The content in the subject-segregated curriculum reflects the concerns and values of adults whereas an integrated approach attempts to rearrange this content around concerns from the students themselves. Bloom (1987) observes that when knowledge is confined to subject disciplines, two things happen: Firstly young people are led to believe that important knowledge is abstract from their lives and secondly, they are deprived of the possibility of learning to organise and use knowledge in relation to issues that concern them. In response to claims around the lack of empirical evidence surrounding the efficacy of IC, each of the benefits previously cited by this review are based on defined studies, that it, extensive, longitudinal studies with benefits such as the impact on measureable grades supported by standardised test scores.

Criticisms surrounding the lack of student input, structure and the ‘trivial’ and ‘artificial’ selection of thematic units for study based on student interests can be best offset by presenting Beane and Brodhagen’s NIC model where there is a highly structured 10 step process involved in thematic selection (which will be detailed in the ‘Process of NIC’ section of this writing) where every step is negotiated with students. This model along with Beane’s (1993, 1995) integrative model and Vars (1991) core curriculum generate themes from the concerns of learners thus making the process and theme more authentic. Such IC approaches transcend
discipline boundaries towards a more interconnected vision of the world and consider student involvement in the decision-making processes as a prerequisite. Beane (2005) acknowledges that such an inclusive approach to curriculum integration is ‘idealistic’ and can requires more work and buy-in from participating teachers but presents evidence from practicing IC teachers that the positive results far out way the struggles.

Lastly, obstacles to enacting an integrated curriculum including time, teacher education and standardised assessment need to be overcome before IC can become a more conventional feature in education. Integrated units need to contain more authentic forms of assessment according to Czerniak (1999) and Wiggins (1993) who recommend portfolio, project and presentation-based forms of assessment as opposed to standardised tests that examine subject content separately. Miller et al. (2007) argue that until such impediments become more integration-friendly, the movement towards integration will continue in ‘small pockets without any significant breakthroughs’ (p.9). The criticisms expressed in this section are indeed valid, however, the longstanding historical writings around the benefits of an integrated approach since the 1800’s such as the meaningful engagement it affords them and their teachers cannot be ignored. Theorists such as Beane (1997, 1993), Dewey (1932), and Boomer (1982) also believe that young people have the right to be consulted, to search for meaning in their world, to think critically and to be engaged with significant issues. This section has looked to the literature to respond to some of the limitations of IC but will further address these shortcomings in the discussion chapter of this thesis based on the first-hand NIC research conducted. Each of the studies consulted in this section will shape this research and influence the approach this work takes in the crafting of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum.
3.4: Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC)

This section will introduce NIC in terms of how it can address the aforementioned limitations of IC, where it derived from, theoretical influences, and what makes it distinctive from existing cross-curricular approaches. A stand-alone explanation and definition of NIC will be provided in an effort to clarify what NIC means and how it is envisaged by different theorists. Its location along the continuum of integration will be pinpointed and its philosophical stance will be communicated to better-assist with understanding the origins of an NIC approach. A practical lens will then be appointed to examine the process of NIC by looking at the various models used to implement NIC and the roles assumed by students and teachers as NIC is practiced. A theoretical insight into what negotiation with students actually looks like will be provided before a synthesis is provided to conclude on the meaning of NIC.

3.4.1 What is NIC?

NIC is highly influenced by the works of Garth Boomer (1982, 1992) who ascertains that:

Negotiating the curriculum means deliberately planning to invite students to contribute to, and to modify the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes. (1992, p.14)

NIC is also based largely around work of James Beane (1995, 1997, 2005, 2007) who designed an integrative curriculum approach which is developed from the questions and concerns of learners. NIC involves the integration of subjects but also of viewpoints and decisions and is an authentic way of exploring student concerns; coherent with Hoy and Hoy’s (2006) assertion that students tend to learn better when they perceive a connection between their concerns and what they are asked to learn. NIC has its roots in multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary curriculum approaches in that it utilises central themes as organising units and these themes are built around the concerns of students similar to the transdisciplinary curriculum, Beane’s (1995) integrative curriculum, and Vars’ (1991) core curriculum.

What distinguishes NIC from previous approaches is the continuous negotiation and social construction of knowledge between the stakeholders. A central premise is that communication and dialogue between the teacher and learners and amongst the learners themselves is required to facilitate the social construction of meaning. NIC is centred on group-work amongst students and
constant negotiation and open communication between the teacher and students from the initial planning stages through to evaluation stages (Boomer 1992). The epistemological functions of social constructivism that people create knowledge through social interaction with others are central to the experience of teachers and students as negotiation takes place through the social dynamics of working through groups. NIC does not view disciplines as discrete bodies of knowledge but encourages students to see interconnectedness and interrelationships among disciplines (Boomer 1982). In relation to the integration spectrum, NIC aspires to be placed at the extensive end of the continuum along with Fogarty’s (1991) ‘Immersed’ and ‘Networked’ (see Fig. 3.9) models which involve student choices and real-life connections in addition to integration across several disciplines. In Bernsteinian (1971) terms, NIC has weak classification as there is a low degree of boundary maintenance between subjects and weak framing as teachers and students have a high degree of autonomy over the content and learning processes in a negotiated classroom. NIC can not only facilitate integration across subject disciplines, the negotiated aspect might also enables integration across many value-based variables.

NIC has a spectrum across multiple variables such as cognitive activity, social skills, student voice, ownership, agency, and teaching skills and has different educations for each of these variables. NIC is predominantly integrated but with the constant flow of negotiation with students throughout, thus extending approaches like the multidisciplinary and integrated curriculum to be more empowering for students. Subject identity remains in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, resulting in learners being disempowered by the discrete bodies of knowledge that are communicated to them without any context as to their relevance (Beane 1997). NIC begins with concerns that are negotiated with students, thus giving them greater ownership over the curriculum. Negotiating the curriculum is a process in which students have an active voice in the design and content of both the learning journey itself and its outcomes (Onore 1992). It aims to alleviate the power relations between student and teacher and thereby creating a student-centred environment (Boomer 1992). Onore (1992 p.195) defines NIC as:

> a theory of teaching, learning and curriculum composing. It emanates from questions about authority, power and knowledge, from inquiries into the nature of democratic schooling and the kinds of students we want schools to launch into the world.

NIC promotes agentic engagement as learners are making curricular decisions around curriculum content, how it is assessed, how they want to be taught, and how they want to learn (Beane 1995; Boomer 1992). This ‘agentic’ engagement occurs when students direct their own learning,
actively express their thoughts, opinions, and interests during a learning activity and when they engage communally, collectively, and critically with others (Lawson and Lawson 2013). The process to achieve this is articulated through the negotiation of student agency namely through a diminished power differential between teachers and students as well as the effective promotion of teacher agency.

NIC is a curriculum strategy that is developed by students and teachers in the classroom in order to provide conditions in which learning can best occur (Hyde 1992). Collective student engagement, especially in areas of concern to young people, may allow for ‘cultural congruence’ where students experience support for their socio-cultural and personal identities while participating in engaged activity (Oyserman et al. 2011). This supportive environment is established by teachers who exercise greater agency by making the decision to involve student voice in curricular design and create a supportive learning environment to enable this. While a more balanced power differential is facilitated by NIC, the teacher retains the agency to determine how much control they wish to exert over the process and to incorporate certain ‘non-negotiables’ into the process such as areas of the curriculum that must be addressed (Drake 1998; Cook 1992). The negotiation is the core element of how this work differs from previous approaches to integration. Boomer (1992) sets forward two models of curriculum, the motivational model that represents traditional curricula and the negotiation model that provides the foundations for the negotiation aspect of NIC.

Boomer’s (1992) ‘motivational model’ (see Fig. 3.10) is representative of the traditional curricula within which there is little to no integration and students have to be motivated to learn by their teachers because the curriculum does not speak to them or hold meaning for them. This model sees students being extrinsically motivated by the teacher where there is no intent from the student to learn or participate in learning. There is very little opportunity for student voice or space for a student’s core interests or concerns in the motivational model where ‘grades received show how close the students have come to the teachers’ intentions’ (Boomer 1992, p.9). Boomer created the ‘negotiated model’ (see Fig. 3.11) to introduce a place for ‘talk’ in the curriculum. ‘Talk’ is proposed as a measure to redress the lack of intrinsic motivation that is felt by students within the curriculum (Beane 2007) and involves the continuous consultation with students to establish shared intent and negotiate the curriculum accordingly (Boomer 1992). The introduction of negotiation to the curriculum is in line with the core ontological beliefs of this work that human beings are fundamentally social creatures. Boomer (1992) views learners as
educational decision makers and believes this negotiation element to be the interlocking of teacher and learner intentions. Boomer went on to present 11 case studies of this negotiation in practice where there was great deal of variability as to how ‘talk’ was introduced and there was little that was systematic about it. This research advocates that Beane and Brodhagens’ (1999) 10 step NIC model provides a concrete, systematic approach to make this ‘talk’ viable through a focus on concerns.

Fig 3.10: Boomer’s Motivation Model (1992, p.10)
3.4.2 NIC in Practice

The Beane and Brodhagen NIC model offers a clear methodology to operationalize the aspirations of Boomer’s negotiated model, Beane’s (1993) integrative model, and Vars’ (1991) core curriculum in a structured way. The NIC model has two important curriculum characteristics; coherence and permeability. It is permeable since it is based on students’ own questions about themselves and the world, which are negotiated with teachers and it is coherent since subjects do not act as boundaries, but are instead investigated for the natural relationship that exists among them (Beane 2005). This model is structured into 10 steps which is significant as it initiates a complex process in a manageable way. The 10 stages which facilitate the negotiation of a new curriculum with students from start to finish along with this author’s interpretation of the underlying reasons for each step are as follows:

Stage One: ‘Personal Concerns’ - students individually list personal concerns they have about themselves to personally engage with the process.

Stage Two: Students share personal concerns in small groups to establish commonalities and facilitate the social construction of knowledge.
Stage Three: ‘World Concerns’ - students list concerns they have about the world around them to facilitate real-life connections with their learning.

Stage Four: Students share world concerns in small groups to further facilitate the social construction of knowledge and to provide personal and social significance for the integration of knowledge.

Stage Five: ‘Finding Themes’ – themes are established to connect common personal and world concerns.

Stage Six: ‘Sharing Themes’ - Themes are presented and rationalised to remove repetition and overlap.

Stage Seven: ‘Student Vote’ - students vote on themes for curriculum development to engage with the democratic process of this work where students have a choice over their learning. A schedule is negotiated with teachers rather than dictated by students voting to allow for dialogue in the process.

Stage Eight: ‘Connecting Questions to Themes’ – students connect their own questions to the chosen theme to facilitate the ownership and hermeneutic aspect of this work.

Stage Nine: ‘Selecting Activities’ - students suggest learning activities to find out the answers to the questions they raised allowing for a sense of learner agency and decision making.

Stage Ten: ‘Unit Planning’ – Students’ questions and activities are used as the basis for curriculum planning by the teacher(s) separate to the students to allow for teacher agency, decision making and the introduction of some non-negotiables.

These 10 stages facilitate a bottom-up approach to creating a curriculum unit from the lived concerns of students through continuous negotiation with their teacher in an environment where teacher agency is retained. This is a concrete, structured way to initialise the NIC process and so other models and guidelines should be consulted to ensure that negotiation with students continues throughout the learning process.

Boomer’s (1992) ‘Four Questions for Curriculum Negotiation’ outlines a method where at the beginning of each unit, teachers and students ascertain what students already know about the topic, what they want to find out, how they will go about finding out and how they will assess their accomplishments. This again sees students involved in collaborative planning with their teachers in a negotiated environment where they have the opportunity to voice learning and assessment activities. Beane’s (1997) curriculum integration model (see Fig. 3.12) is based on themes that are found at the intersection of the personal concerns and larger word concerns of young people. After a theme is selected, four types of knowledge must be integrated into each theme:
1. **Personal Knowledge** - addressing self-concerns and ways of knowing about self

2. **Social Knowledge** - addressing social and world issues, from peer to global relationships and ways of critically examining these

3. **Explanatory Knowledge** - content that names, describes, explains and interprets including that involved in disciplines of knowledge

4. **Technical Knowledge** - ways of investigating, communicating, analysing and expressing, including many of the skills already promoted in schools.

   (Beane 1997, p.49)

---

**Fig. 3.12: Beane’s (1997) Design for Curriculum Integration**

NIC in practice will see active pedagogical approaches being employed in order to ensure that the learning experiences of the students are coherent with the aspirations of the curriculum designed (Beane 1995). Cooperative learning pedagogies that focus on social, inquiry-based, critical and collaborative skills in a social environment are central to realising the aspirations of NIC (Beane 2007; Boomer 1992). NIC will require child-centred teaching methods where, in an environment where teacher agency remains, teachers play a facilitative role and students direct their own learning. This research is based on the premise that teacher-student negotiation is an important first step towards introducing and implementing an integrative unit (Dowden 2007), so what does negotiation with students actually look like?
3.4.3 Teacher-Student Negotiation

Negotiating with students is the core element of how this work differs from previous approaches to integration. Negotiation in this educational context involves the negotiation of what the students are learning about, learning outcomes, learning content, learning experiences, and assessment structures (Boomer 1982). A central premise of NIC is that constant dialogue between the teacher and learners, as well as amongst the learners themselves, is required to facilitate the social construction of meaning as students and teachers work together. Dialogue in education encompasses a wide range of social practices from ‘all verbal exchanges’ to ‘exchanges that occur face-to-face’ as far as ‘address–reply interaction around curricular material’ (Howe and Abedin 2013, pp.1-3). Essentially dialogue involves ‘not a one-way linear communication but a reciprocal process in which ideas are bounced back and forth and on that basis take children’s thinking forward’ (Alexander 2004, p.48). In education, participants in dialogue should be equal partners striving to reach an agreed outcome through the joint construction of knowledge or becoming involved in a process of ‘inter thinking’ (Mercer 2000, p.247).

This ‘agreed outcome’ is typically reached through a consensus, that is, where both teachers and students have to concede and this capacity to concede is a necessity for dialogue (Prakken 2005). As most of the learning activities employed through NIC should be cooperative in nature, the nature of concession in dialogue is especially relevant to the pedagogical strategies of NIC. The social dynamics of working through groups requires dialogue amongst students as they navigate their way through the learning process. Furthermore, the collaborative planning aspect of NIC requires dialogue and open communication between the teacher and students. Negotiation with students has a strong focus on open communication, that is, communication about the topic to be covered, why it is important and any constraints that prevail (Boomer 1992). As to why we should negotiate with students, after two years of engaging with NIC with her students, Cook (1992) reported that learners worked harder, learnt better, and what they learned meant more to them when they were discovering their own ideas, asking their own questions and fighting hard to answer them for themselves. These findings resonate with Bernstein’s (1975), Heath’s (1983) and Wells’ (1978) findings that the nature and quality of children’s involvement in spoken dialogue could have an important effect on their educational achievement, participation, and engagement. Negotiation lies in agency (Cook 1992) and through the negotiation process; agency is afforded to learners as they become educational decision makers.
At the level of the institution and at the level of the classroom the aim of NIC is to increase students’ representation at, and participation in curricular processes and practices around decision making from which they have historically been excluded (Taylor and Robinson 2009). A negotiated learning environment sees an active learner voice in deciding what questions should drive the curriculum and collaborative decision making around curriculum content, identification of themes, and evaluation of the learning (Beane 2005). This leads to a wholly integrated view of knowledge in the context of questions and concerns that are identified in collaboration with young people (Beane 1992). In the traditional curriculum, these decisions are ‘typically made by teachers that cannot imagine how young people can be involved in planning’ (Beane 2005, p.20). Collaborative planning is about the ‘right of young people to participate in decision making and the obligation of the teacher to help them do so’ (Beane 2005, p.29). Aspects of the negotiation process such as collaborative planning and student decision making contribute to a strong sense of learner agency but this is not intended to be at the cost of teacher agency.

Teacher agency can be understood as ‘the active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions for the overall quality of education’ (Biesta et al. 2015). NIC aims to provide teachers with a process to implement a wider range of professional decision-making about their curriculum and how it is taught (Boomer 1992). Current curricular structures largely disenfranchise the role of teachers who have relatively little autonomy in the content they have to teach. Through the NIC process, teachers will have the capacity to enact a more professional bridging between subject content and the learners’ concerns (Beane 1995). Teacher agency in the classroom still has its place and the teacher is playing a role to hold students accountable for their learning, assessment, and curricular choices (Boomer 1992). This type of open, inclusive, and collaborative negotiation only takes place for the negotiable aspects of a thematic unit. Non-negotiables such as aspects of the curriculum that must be addressed will always exist in NIC and it is the teacher’s place to make the final decisions on such matters which is coherent with the concession aspect of dialogue. Additionally, structural challenges to putting NIC into practice must be considered as time, scheduling, planning, core subjects, resistance, structural barriers and integrity of disciplines are just some of the challenges faced by teachers when implementing NIC in their classroom (Drake 1998). Having examined what NIC is, how it is practiced, and what negotiation might look like, it must be acknowledged that the practical implications of this work cannot be divorced from the philosophy underpinning it.
3.4.4 Philosophy underpinning NIC

NIC is in line with the liberal progressivism approach to education as it involves students and teachers working collaboratively which is the essence of power sharing. Additionally, through the selection and organisation of themes from lived concerns, students are afforded the opportunity to inquire critically into real life issues and to pursue social action where needed. The meaning associated with connecting learning to the personal and world concerns of students has deep hermeneutic implications. Indeed, NIC is grounded in progressive roots which value depth of knowledge, experiential learning, and planning with students in delivering a curriculum via constructivist teaching methodologies such as interactive and cooperative learning (Dewey 1903; Beane 1997). NIC’s intent is shared power, the demystification of the hidden curriculum, and empowering roles for teachers and students alike (Drake 1998; Boomer 1992). This is the quintessence of the Habermasian (1972) emancipatory interest of knowledge which is primarily concerned with the empowerment of individuals and agency. This emancipatory view has been described as ‘curriculum as praxis’ (Grundy 1987) which attempts to redress power imbalance within curricula as often an underlying power relationship is inherent between those that design the curriculum and those who implement it. The philosophical rationale underlying the NIC approach should be evident in each aspect of the process from the fundamental reasons for introducing NIC to a classroom to the process of enacting NIC. Each of these aspects has been detailed in Section 3 which will now be concluded.

3.4.5 Conclusion

The aim of this section was to provide a clear understanding of the key terminology in relation to integration, consult the history and larger social context behind the development of such curricular ideas, and adopt a critical lens to examine the benefits and criticisms surrounding the concept of an integrated curriculum all in an effort to provide context for the introduction of NIC and how it is practiced. This research explores existing curricular structures that make explicit connections across subject areas and skills where the social construction of meaning, student voice, agency, democracy, and making real-life, meaningful connections are central to their practices. Beyond education, the historical social context that impacted on the development of IC determined that: education should be more contextual, democratic, and experiential (Dewey 1902 – 1938); the breakdown of discipline barriers in education can facilitate a more
differentiated and meaningful curriculum for students (Bernstein 1971); and educators should consider consulting students in decisions around their learning (Beane 2005; Boomer 1982).

Existing integrative approaches and the social background of their developments have set a context for the particular type of integration this research is advocating and the structure it takes. Also influential in shaping and driving this work are the empirically reported benefits such as meaningful learning, student voice, and learner and teacher agency that are associated with integrative approaches to learning. Valid concerns surrounding subject identity, rigour, and a lack of empirical evidence supporting integrative approaches will also have implications in crafting the NIC approach this work will take. This research will endeavour to be structured in its practice; report only evidence-based findings not abandon subject content but rather reposition it in the context of meaningful themes where negotiation with students as they work together in a social setting is the central and distinctive aspect of this integrative approach. It is widely held that curriculum and learning cannot take place independent of context (Young 1971; Dewey 1938; Bernstein 1975) and so this research cannot ignore the contextualised nature of an NIC approach that has been introduced to the Irish educational context.

3.5: The Irish Educational Context

Given the conceptual viewpoint taken by this research that ‘curriculum is contextually shaped’ (Cornbleth 1990, p.6), it is imperative that the Irish educational context and the local regional context that situates this study is considered to examine the factors that will inform this research initiative. Contextual factors such as economic and religious influences, high stakes assessment, and the compliant nature of stakeholders in Irish education will be addressed. These issues are often discussed by educational theorists as the predominant influences on Irish educational change. The knowledge constructed within a curriculum often has a value-based foundation (Habermas 1972) and the values inherent in Irish society will be explicated to explore their possible impact on this study. Given that values underpin so much of the curriculum, the values that underpin curriculum reform in Ireland will be explored to consider the factors which have led to the success and failure of previous educational reforms. In addition to the national context overriding this work, an overview of the Limerick Regeneration area will be conducted to provide an insight into the local region that this research is taking place in. The overriding aim of this section is to determine the contextual factors present in the macro and micro contexts of
Irish education and to elicit implications for the approach this research will take in its attempt at curricular intervention.

3.5.1 Contextual Factors and Values inherent in Irish Education

The Irish educational context has not emerged within a vacuum; rather it has been contextually shaped. It is beyond the scope of this research to provide the historical development of the Irish educational system, instead, the primary factors which have influenced Irish educational change will be focused on; namely Ireland’s economic structure and the Irish Catholic Church (Atkinson 1969; Coolahan 1981). The values and paradigms evident in Irish society and education will be examined from a social context in order to determine how the Irish education system is dominated by a system of compliance and characterised by; authoritarianism, conservatism, high stakes assessment, and transmission styles of teaching that often result in passive learners.

Authoritarianism and Centralised Control

The historical culture within the Irish education system has been labelled as ‘traditional and authoritarian’ (Schmitt 1973, p.50) where an authoritarian disposition traditionally dominates schooling where it was largely felt to be ‘the only way in which order within the learning environment could be secured for all’ (Downes and Gilligan 2007, p.16). Irish society has influenced and shaped the Irish education system. Social reproduction is evident in Ireland where institutions such as schools reflect the society they are in and mirror the dominant social vision of that society (. Riagáin 1997). Contextual factors such Ireland’s economic structure, the conservative nature of Irish society as a whole, the historical significance of the Irish Catholic Church, and the fact that Ireland is a post-colonial society are key factors that have contributed to the authoritarian nature within Irish society (Coolahan 1981; Lee 1989; Gleeson 2010). While the societal influence makes the Irish education system distinctive, like many other countries, the Irish system is largely centralised and predominantly funded by the state. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) exercise a great deal of direct and indirect control over most aspects of the system (Atkinson 1969; Coolahan 1981).

The state, through the DES, exercises a powerful role in many areas of Irish education such as; determining educational policy, appointing the educational inspectorate, payment of teachers, payment of building and operating costs for schools, setting syllabi for public exams, and the
operation and correction of public exams (Gleeson 2010). Irish schools have been described as ‘rigid and controlled’ learning environments where government appointed inspectors often assume a primarily bureaucratic function as ‘internal policemen’ rather than people who care about learning environments (Strain 1994, p.184). Society often selects, classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public which, in turn, ‘reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control’ (Bernstein 1971, p.47). Social control is exercised by the Irish Government in communicating their priorities with regard to education. The Irish Government place a strong value on ‘control, structures, buildings, interests, pension’s rights and the actual things that happen in schools rather than the curriculum’ (Callan 2006, p.29). Extending control over nature and society results in a culture of compliance and drives the technical interest of knowledge (Habermas 1972). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the technical paradigm is inherent in Irish education. Those currently in positions of power over the curriculum in Ireland are conservative in their approach and tend to have a rationalistic agenda and vested interests, for instance, economic stability, which drives the technical interest of the Irish society (Gleeson 2010).

The Economic Context

The understanding of curriculum as ‘the story we tell our children about the good life’ (Trant 1998) has been distorted, in large part, by Irish economic agenda (Gleeson 2010). The anti-intellectual mind set of successive ministers of education, who saw the economy as the key context for education (Lee 1989) is evident of how economics has dominated the latter part of the 20th century in Irish education. The influence of the economy on Irish education is concerned with the production of human capital where ‘economists have played a dominant role in the formulation of Irish educational policy’ (O’Sullivan 1991, p.35). Since the 1960’s, education is seen as central to economic development in Ireland with a heightened policy and state focus on the role of education in building a ‘knowledge economy’ (Drudy 2009). The Investment in Education (IIE) report (DoE 1965) linked education to economic performance and from the late 1960’s onwards, there was an increased focus on ‘human capital theory’ which asserts that by investment in people through education is key to participation in the new global economy (Becker 1994).

Following the publication of the IIE in 1965, free second-level education was introduced in 1967 and the school leaving age was raised to 15. During the 1980’s, Ireland went through an
economic crisis caused by industrial failure leading to high unemployment levels. This decade was characterised by high levels of state involvement in the economy and dependency on the state (Coolahan 1981). During this time, education was canvassed as ‘the most important factor in economic recovery’ (O’Connor 1986, p.62). The DoE published the *White Paper* in 1980 which has a strong economic focus advocating a more relevant curriculum and investment in education was seen as an investment in human resource development (O’ Sullivan 1992). The focus of education on learners and their learning can often become lost in the emphasis on economic agendas and accountability (Hayward 2013). The economic influence on Irish education contributed to a culture of compliance in Irish society and the poverty of Ireland’s economic performance in the twentieth century reflected ‘the mentality of a dependent people engaged in permanent mimicking of their presumed betters’ (Lee 1989, p.627). This is in addition to an already dependent nature stemming from Ireland’s colonial past where a ‘dependency syndrome’ permeated into the Irish psyche during the long centuries of foreign dominance (Lee 1989, p.627). This inherent culture of compliance also extends to teachers and students in Irish education.

*The Traditional Roles of Teachers and Students in Ireland*

Habermas (1987) describes a focus on knowledge as ‘technical’ if it has a primary emphasis on the survival of a society and reproducing it often towards controlling and managing learning environments. This technical conception is hegemonic, both in Ireland and internationally, with decision-making concerning what is taught and how, largely residing with state control and policymakers. This decision making pertains to the selection of curriculum as discreet subjects and high stakes assessment which dictate learning. Consequently, teachers are viewed as transmitters of content and reproduction of knowledge is key (Carr and Kemmis 1986). Each of these aspects has had a profound effect on the traditional role of the teacher and students in Ireland.

Irish teachers are considered to be largely conservative in the practice of their teaching methodologies (Carr 1998). A recent report from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Study (2009) compared 6 OECD countries beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning. The report found that, of the 6 countries studied, teachers in Ireland held the strongest direct transmission beliefs *and* were the least supportive of constructivist beliefs. Furthermore, Irish teachers support for professional collaboration with teaching colleagues was behind each of the
other OECD countries (TALIS 2009). Irish teachers often employ didactic methods of teaching and frequently see their role as ‘transmitting knowledge and providing correct solutions’ (Gleeson 2010, p.96). Furthermore, Irish teachers lack the employment of social constructivist methods of teaching where not enough emphasis is given to the important social role that curriculum plays in initiating pupils into the culture, practices, and social relationships of their society (Carr 1998).

This is grounded in the dominance of the classical humanist teaching ideology in Ireland. In a review of Irish national policy in education undertaken in 1989, the OECD determined that ‘the weight of the classical humanist tradition in Ireland is enormous (p.69). The prevalence of classical humanism is described by Carr (1998, p.327) as ‘an education ruled by an elite group acting as custodians of traditional values’ which resonates with the conservative nature of the Irish state’s role in education. Ireland’s political framework has largely been characterised as conservative in nature (Akenson 1970). This is due to its orientation towards opposing radical changes to education and maintaining traditional schooling structures in order to popularise educational initiatives for the Government and/or to facilitate the agenda of a particular political party at any given time (Akenson 1970; Breen 1990; Gleeson 2010). The historical, conservative relationship between religion and education in Ireland also played a role in helping to embed elements of a classical-humanist philosophy into modern Irish education.

The prevalence of conservatism and classical humanism in Ireland is also supported by the dominant catholic ethos in the country. The conservative nature of religious orders in Ireland was highlighted by Akenson (1970) who describes the historical role of priests as teachers in Irish education as 'specially serious obstacles' (p.163) to the modern development of Irish education due to their reluctance to join teachers' unions or to agitate publicly for educational reform (p.206). Historically, although the Government paid for much of the Irish education schooling at primary and secondary level, powerful church figures such as Archbishop McQuaid did not wish to cede control and therefore the Catholic Church have maintained a dominant voice in school curriculum and ethos (Coolahan 1981). An appraisal of secondary school curriculum undertaken by the Council for Education in 1954 returned the finding that the ‘dominant purpose of schools was the inculcation of religious ideas and values’ (Coolahan 1981, p.80). Furthermore, the influence of the church on education in Ireland is reflected in the 1960 Report of the Council of Education. This report found that Irish schools were centred on ‘cultural transmission’ and the ultimate purpose of education was the ‘religious, moral, intellectual and physical development of the whole person’ (Gleeson 2010, p.24). The OECD (1991, p.38) cites the presence of powerful
interest groups outside the government, such as the Catholic Church, as one of the main barriers to education reform in Ireland. Even though Irish schools are publicly funded, the Catholic Church still control the decisions being made in schools through powerful positions held on school Boards of Management (Drudy 2009). The control of the church also had an impact on Irish teachers and teaching methodologies.

The instincts of the medieval era are still present in the Irish Catholic Church’s attitude to education, consequently, Irish teachers often used didactic-style methods in order to teach a curriculum which is based around the ‘great books’ of religion (Coolahan 1981). While Irish teachers were seen as purveyors of knowledge, the role of the lay-teacher in church-owned schools was that of the ‘hired man’ (O’Connor 1968). This was due to the fact that the Catholic Church maintained control and authority through school governance positions held. Teacher compliance often prevails to this day within Irish education as educators remain subject to control by external bodies such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and school leaders. Therefore, Irish teachers are simultaneously both powerful and powerless (Davies 1996). They are powerful as they are viewed as being in positions of control (Young 1971) and their definitions of worthwhile knowledge are given high status (Apple 1993). However, they are powerless due to the lack of agency they have over how they convey their knowledge (Davies 1996). O’ Flaherty (1992) supports this view in stating that ‘schools have remained unchanged and teachers have taught what they have always taught, until told by the Department of Education to teach something else’ (p.114). The complexity of the traditional role of the teacher is explained as follows:

Many of the discourses of modern schooling appear to be mishmash of competing and vague ideas – personalisation, choice, learning, subjects, etc. – and, in the absence of opportunities for systematic sense-making in schools, teachers are regularly left confused about their role. Arguably, much of the blame for this situation lies in externally imposed systems which alter the dynamics of schooling, leading to incremental change without the development of a clear philosophy of education to underpin the changes in question, and a professional collegiality that enables its development. (Biesta et al. 2015, p.636)

In an educational context where teachers are seen as purveyors of knowledge, this restricts students to passive recipients of information, devoid of any agency (Freire 1970). In Ireland, students are compliant to the dominant transmission style of teaching largely employed by Irish teachers where their learning needs to be wholly stimulated by a teacher (Lawson and Lawson
We are teaching docile minds on a daily basis, are training our young people to ask for
the answer to every question and richly reward the passive acceptance of knowledge (Cosgrave
and Hanrahan 2008 cited in Gleeson 2010). This culture of passivity has led to student
disengagement as highlighted by the ESRI who have published significant work indicating
student disengagement from lower secondary schooling (ESRI 2006). In an extensive and
detailed review of the literature on student engagement in schooling, Lawson and Lawson (2013)
argue that ‘transmission teaching’ represents industrial age pedagogical approaches that are
conducive to the development of passive and compliant-oriented forms of engagement from
students. Research shows that rigid, top-down teaching practices historically and currently
employed by Irish teachers are often alienating for students (Pope 2001). Consequently, this can
often constrain student engagement and may lead to students experiencing disaffection with their
schooling (Eckert 1989; Willis 1977; Pope 2001).

This is further evidenced in research conducted by McCoy and Byrne (2011) based on 10 years
of Irish school leavers’ survey data which highlights the disaffection, disinterest and
disengagement Irish students feel towards their schooling. Many of the school leaver’s expressed
a desire for varied teaching techniques and not just copying notes from the board or reading from
a book (ibid. 2011). The teaching practices employed by teachers and the subjects on offer in the
Irish curriculum often result in ‘the people who the system is supposed to be serving becoming
increasingly alienated from it’ (Trant 1998, p.31). Lastly, the way the curriculum is being
thought is disenfranchising and disinteresting to students where students are somewhat
dissatisfied with the discreet focus of subjects on offer to them and would prefer a wider variety
and more hands-on, practical subjects (McCoy and Byrne 2011). The technical focus (Habermas
1972) of the Irish curriculum and teaching methodologies which centres on control of the
learning environment and the end product is synonymous with a product approach to education.

Irelands ‘Product’ Approach to Education and High Stakes Examinations

The technical knowledge-constitutive interest takes a ‘product' view of the curriculum where
education is seen as a technical exercise, that is, objectives are set, a plan of delivery is applied
and the outcomes (products) are measured accordingly (Tyler 1949; Habermas 1972). The
dominance of the product model internationally is equally applicable in Ireland. In the Irish
context, curriculum is ‘all of the planned experiences provided by the school to assist he pupils
in attaining designated learning outcomes to the best of their abilities’ (Neagley and Evans 1967,
This is relayed in the Irish Education Act’s (1998, Section 30) definition of curriculum as ‘the subjects to be offered, the syllabus of each subject and the amount of instruction time to be allotted to each subject’. Consequently, the Irish curriculum has become a ‘delivery system’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.15) for pre-packaged knowledge that focuses on content (Beane 1997). This curriculum perspective is described as a ‘specification’ (Stenhouse 1970, p.76) and no more than a ‘book of instructions for teachers’ (Stenhouse 1987, p.1f) where the end products in sight here are typically state exams, college entry and vocation.

In Ireland, high stakes assessment drives the product approach to curriculum further by directly influencing teaching styles. Didactic teaching styles are common where rote-learning is a constant feature in Irish schooling because teachers are forced to teach to the test (Flynn 2012). The nature and purpose of assessment within a curriculum is to raise the standards of learning and achievement (Black and Wiliam 1998). A review of over 20 research studies on the effects of assessment on learning and achievement conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998) found that innovations introduced to schools that strengthened the practice of formative assessment produced ‘significant and often substantial learning gains’ (p.3). It is documented that assessment can influence curricular practices where the testing of students can encourage rote and superficial learning (Fuchs and Fuchs 1986). Furthermore, there are many difficulties associated with assessment such as its encouragement of unhealthy competition in a classroom and grades given can limit feedback and guidance on how work can be improved (OFSTED 1996; Black and William 1998). In the Irish educational context, the Leaving Certificate (LC) exam is in place instead of the A-Levels and SAT’s. The grades received in the LC are converted to points and specific college courses are ranked in terms of points with the highest ranking candidates offered a college place without interview. Essentially, five to six years of post-primary schooling is geared towards the successful completion of this terminal, high stakes LC exam described as the ‘Sacred Cow of the Irish Educational System’. The current Irish senior cycle is said to hold teachers more accountable and encourage and legitimise competition by using the LC as a sorting mechanism for success and failure (Lynch 1989). This approach resonates with Boomers (1992) ‘motivated curriculum’ where competiveness is inherent in

---

22 To provide the structural context, students enter post-primary education at approximately 12 years of age and participation in full-time secondary education is compulsory until the age of 16 or until three years of lower secondary education have been completed. The Irish secondary system is comprised of a three-year lower secondary programme, at the end of which, students currently take a nationally standardised examination, the Junior Certificate. Students then progress to upper secondary education at the end of which the majority of students take the traditional Leaving Certificate (LC) exam which determines if students are eligible for entry into third level education.

23 By members of the Swan Group cited in Gleeson 2010
graded assessment and dominance of a final exam can reduce education to a ‘technical art with exam papers to be proofread and marked’ (p.71).

Conclusion

Compliance often dominated the Irish education system impacting on teachers and students alike. Compliance amongst teachers can be due to; the historical context of the Catholic Church in Irish education, the economic factors that dictate Irish schooling, societal influences, the Irish political framework that shapes curricular approaches, and high stakes assessment which demands accountability and directs many teaching practices. This compliance is also echoed in student practices in the classroom. The technical focus of the Irish Educational system which is largely dominated by transmission styles of teaching and directed by the Leaving Certificate examination has led to the disaffection and disengagement of Irish school leavers (McCoy and Byrne 2011). A further contextual consideration that could have implications for this research is the nature of previous and contemporary educational reforms in Ireland.

3.5.2 Curriculum Intervention in Irish Education

There have been widely agreed successes and failures in Irish curriculum interventions at both primary and post-primary (secondary) level. This section will firstly explore some of the positive changes made to Irish curriculum. Following this, the themes that have consistently applied to previous unsuccessful reform attempts in Ireland will be explored, namely; a centralised approach, a focus on high stakes assessment, a lack of policy review and the lack of consideration of educational values. Most pertinent to this study is educational reform that has taken place in the last five years, therefore, an emphasis will be placed on contemporary reform attempts in Irish Education.

24 Insufficient space is given in this research to discuss the history of all Irish educational reforms but highlight those that best illustrate the Irish context
Positive aspects of Irish Educational Change

There have been widely agreed achievements of Irish educational change with some of the virtues being: successful curriculum reforms, curriculum revision at subject levels, and active parent and teacher organisations. Curriculum at primary level has seen two major reforms; ‘Curaclam na Bunscoile’, in 1971 and the new Primary School Curriculum (PSC) in 1999. The child-centred principles of Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971) were maintained in the new 1999 curriculum which also incorporated new content and embraced new pedagogical approaches and methodologies. The PSC was developed through a partnership process involving teachers, parents, school management, and the Department of Education and Science. This was a marked departure from previous practice, whereby curriculum and policy was largely determined by the Department of Education (INTO 2006). A key concern of this curriculum was the importance of literacy and numeracy to personal fulfilment. The 1999 primary curriculum revision was largely seen to be effective with over 75% of teachers reporting that it was a successful revision (INTO 2006). A detailed evaluation of the new curriculum was carried out by the INTO in 2005 who reported significant increases in standards of oral, written, and reading literacy (DES 2005). It was found that teachers embraced the revised curriculum and adapted to new methodologies (INTO 2006). Moreover, the evaluation detailed how parents became involved in shared reading schemes in disadvantaged schools which resulted in enormous benefits for the students (DES 2005; INTO 2006). There were some challenges experienced such as teachers requiring additional support and resources in the implementation and planning of the new curriculum. However, analysis of teacher responses to the new curriculum ‘indicate overwhelming support, on the whole, for the revised curriculum’ (INTO 2006, p.62).

At post-primary level, the replacement of the Intermediate Certificate with the Junior Certificate in 1989 worked to an extent in that a broader range of 11 subjects became available to students and the Junior Certificate exam provided better grounding for the Leaving Certificate exam. The NCCA’s Junior Cycle Review Committee (1999) reported that many of the aspirations associated with the introduction of the Junior Certificate programme in 1989 were realised such as the wider range of subjects at two, and in some cases, three levels, the availability of a unified certificate to students at the end of junior cycle and retention within the school system improved since its introduction (NCCA 1999). Further successful curriculum interventions at post-primary level occurred on a smaller scale which resulted in the acknowledgment of the key area of ‘experience’ in education and subject level changes.
An example of one positive curricular advancement at post-primary level was the ‘curriculum wheel’ as detailed in the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) paper entitled *Issues and Structures* (1984) which described a core and options curriculum model for junior cycle where the inner core of the wheel contained a range of experiences that would comprise the content of the educational core and the outer ring of the wheel contained the additional contributions (Granville 2010). The curriculum wheel did not receive the policymaker support for widespread implementation but the recognition of the importance of experience and skills as well as knowledge represented a significant shift in Irish educational thinking and a radical re-conceptualising of the junior cycle away from classical humanist, subject-based thinking (Gleeson 2010; Granville 2010). The incorporation of experiences would go on to be influential in the new Junior Cycle Framework (2012). Some successful curriculum changes that took place were isolated changes at subject level such as a revised Leaving Certificate English syllabus in 1999, which promoted the development of students’ ability to interpret, discriminate and compose in relation to a wide range of texts, including film (DES 2001). Furthermore, up until 2006, Technology was only available at Junior Certificate level but the NCCA developed a new Leaving Certificate syllabus for technology including the provision of four technology-based subjects at Leaving Certificate level (NCCA 2006). Such subject interventions did not require teacher collaboration and were viewed as successful if they took place within their subjects, however, the involvement of organisations such as teachers unions and parental organisations are also held as positive aspects of Irish educational culture.

In the spirit of consultation and negotiation, the Irish parent and teacher organisations hold a strong voice in educational matters and have received state backing. The National Parents Council (NPC) at both primary (P) and post-primary (PP) level are representative of five national parent bodies and received statutory recognition in the Irish Education Act 1998. The vision statement of the NPC (P) is surrounding the education, development and general wellbeing of young people within Irish Education while the NPC (PP) ‘exists to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children’s education’ (NPC 2015). The OECD reports that Ireland allows parents, by law, to sit on key policymaking committees and the involvement of Irish parent organisations contributes to a more democratic and accountable education system (Kelley-Laine 1998).

---

25 Detailed later in the ‘Contemporary Curricular Reforms’ section of this chapter
26 http://www.npc.ie/about.aspx?contentid=63
27 http://www.npc.ie/about.aspx?contentid=63
While it is acknowledged that the NPC have an influential role in Irish Education, their focus is largely on managerial issues such as resources and staffing as well as other practical issues such as school transport and anti-bullying initiatives; they have yet to adopt strong positions in relation to curriculum (Gleeson 2010, p.260). Perhaps a more powerful force in Irish education is the strong influence of teachers unions which have been described as ‘a cohesive and powerful group who have used their influence well to ensure that education is kept on the agenda’ by Donohoe 200728 (cited in Gleeson 2010, p.72). Irish teachers unions concentrate on pay and conditions but are also actively involved in curriculum change. At primary level, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) welcomed and contributed to previous curriculum reforms such as the new curriculum, ‘Curriculum na Bunscoile’, in 1971 (INTO 1996) and the Primary School Curriculum (1999). The post-primary teachers unions (ASTI and TUI) have, at times, been more resistant to curriculum change, especially any changes involving in-house assessment (Trant 1998). Nonetheless, the level of input, influence and vested interest that post-primary teachers unions have over the curriculum is undeniable (Gleeson 2010). From a partnership and consultative viewpoint, it is a positive aspect of Irish Education that Teacher Unions and parent organisations are advocating for more consultation and looking to be invited to share their voice.

It is widely agreed that some curricular interventions at primary school level have been positive but at post-primary level they have been largely small scale and subject-based. There have been very few large scale curricular initiatives to take hold which is akin to Boyd’s (1987) likening changing educational systems to punching a pillow: They absorb innovative thrusts and soon resume their original shape. While the new Junior Certificate in 1989 resulted in modicums of success, the history of educational intervention at post-primary level in Ireland has largely been a failure in terms of wide scale curricular initiatives.

**Unsuccessful Reform Attempts**

In spite of successful reforms at subject level, the history of Irish educational change at post-primary level has been characterised by; authoritarianism and a lack of consultation with various educational stakeholders. In short, previous curriculum reform efforts have largely assumed top down-approaches. Skilbeck’s (1984) ‘Centralist Model’ has been most prominent in previous reform attempts in Ireland where curriculum is prescribed by central government, divided into

28 The Irish Times, Saturday 14 July 2007
subjects, and assessed in an appropriate manner (McCormack 2010; Trant 1998). The lack of success of curricular initiatives has largely been due to an absence of dialogue between educational policy makers and the practitioners who are expected to implement curricular changes (Eisner 1992; Trant 1998). Within this centralised context the needs of teachers, schools, and students are being pre-empted by external forces and teachers become responders to, rather than initiators of, change (Goodson 2001 cited by McCormack 2010).

One example of a centralised reform approach in Ireland was at lower post-primary level where the Intermediate Certificate was replaced by the Junior Certificate in 1989. This represented one of the most significant curricular reforms in Ireland and was wholly implemented by the Government where there was no consultation process with relevant interest groups during the development process. The new Junior Certificate culminated in one final exam at the end of the first three years of post-primary schooling to examine subjects and syllabi. Its central aim was ‘to ensure that the full range of pupil ability and aptitude is catered for and this consideration is reflected in a revised syllabus’ (DoE 1989, p.1). The reform resulted in only minor changes to the syllabi and quickly became a mirror image of the Leaving Certificate with similar failings of superficial engagement with knowledge, a reproduction of knowledge, and a focus on high stakes assessment which forced teachers to teach to the test (Flynn 2012). The Junior Certificate failed to deliver on its promises and the change simply resulted in one set of syllabi being replaced by another as espoused by Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn who stated that ‘the current Junior Cert curriculum has been in place for 24 years with only minor changes to syllabuses’ (Brophy 2014, p.1). This is resonant with a ‘surface’ level of change which represents an objective, physical change in the curriculum (Fullan 1991).

In order for deep curricular change\(^\text{29}\) to occur, Fullan (1991) argues that there needs to be a change in three areas; content, pedagogy and, belief and values. Gleeson (2010) accredits the lack of deep, educational reform in Ireland to a lack of policy review. The failed Junior Certificate reform was never investigated or evaluated by any governing bodies as their main focus was often on maintaining status quo instead of reviewing and evaluating (McCormack 2010; Gleeson 2010). Lynch (1987) associates a lack of deep change in Ireland with ‘consensualism’, that is, the agreeable nature of relevant interest groups in preventing critical, open debate around curriculum design. Furthermore, there has been little emphasis placed on values in the Irish Education system where students should be taught about the meaning and

\(^{29}\) ‘Deep change’ is understood by the author as change that has long-lasting, educative curriculum benefits to teachers and students as opposed to superficial changes to subject content etc.
purpose of life and not drip-fed knowledge (Gleeson 2010). It is argued that the ‘Centralist model’ associated with Ireland’s previous reform efforts would be better replaced with an inclusive, partnership approach to curriculum change (Trant 1998; Gleeson 2010). Such an approach would focus on a curriculum that is defined in partnership by both central and local bodies and would be broad in its outline to allow for interpretation by individual schools (Skilbeck 1984). This localised approach is supported by Martin (2006) who credits deep educational change to a productive collaboration with all of the stakeholders of a school. Additionally, McCormack (2010) believes that teachers, external agencies and all others who have a vested interest in the curriculum should be consulted. Although there have been some positive changes to Irish curriculum, they have been largely superficial and subject-based. However, this research believes that the NCCA have taken a partnership approach via consultation in its proposals to radically reform the Junior Cycle.

Contemporary Reform Developments in Ireland

This section will explore contemporary educational changes occurring at both primary and secondary level in Ireland in order to:

- Gauge the initiatives currently taking place;
- Serve as a comparison with past reforms in Ireland and;
- Identify the space within which NIC would be best suited at primary and secondary level schooling.

Primary Level

Contemporary reform developments at primary level have been largely low-scale in comparison to the introduction of the new Primary Curriculum in 1991. Most changes have been at subject level, largely centred on the current literacy and numeracy drive taking place in Irish Education which were largely driven by various PISA and OECD reports. A 2009 PISA report ranked Ireland 17th out of 34 OECD countries in literacy and 26th out of 34 OECD countries in numeracy (PISA 2009). A World Development Report in 1999 reported that 23 per cent of the adult population are functionally illiterate leading to criticisms of the Irish educational system for failing to equip individuals with a basic level of literacy (Denny 1999). Furthermore, a 2013 OECD report ranked Ireland 15th out of 24 countries on the literacy table and 18th in international numeracy rankings (OECD 2013).
In 2011, the DES implemented a national literacy and numeracy strategy which represented a national effort to improve literacy and numeracy standards among young people in Ireland. The strategy listed several areas for immediate action, for example, increasing the time by one hour per week for English and 70 minutes per week for Mathematics in primary schools (DES 2011). Literacy and numeracy initiatives such as ‘First Steps’, were chosen by the DES to be implemented into schools to monitor and increase standards in children’s literacy and numeracy competencies (DES 2005). The literacy and numeracy strategy was met with resistance from primary teachers due to the largely bureaucratic, top-down nature of how it was introduced. Schools were instructed to set up literacy and numeracy committees as opposed to teachers initiating the process. Furthermore, the primary teachers union, INTO, responded to the strategy by voicing concerns over its ‘simplistic and technical view of education…….. which treated literacy and numeracy in a reductive and aggressive manner’ (INTO 2011, p.2). This study has identified potential for subject integration through literacy and numeracy initiatives. National organisations such as the NCCA and DES recommend an interdisciplinary approach where these strategies are introduced across all subjects and not left as ‘the sole responsibility of teachers of English, Irish and Mathematics’ (DES 2011, p.10). Although there is some measure of curriculum revision and integration at primary level, this study considers the greatest scope for curriculum integration, curricular alignment and radical reform to be within the current Junior Cycle Framework at post-primary level.

Secondary Level: The Junior Cycle Framework

It is widely recognised now that second level education in Ireland is in need of significant reform as both external and internal evaluations highlight decreases in standards and engagement (PISA 2009; OECD 2009, 2010; O’Grady et al. 2014). The NCCA announced in 2009 that the Junior Cycle was under an extensive review and the proposals to reform the Junior Cycle centred around two publications, the ‘Innovation and Identity’ (I&I) document in 2010 and the Junior Cycle Framework in 2012.


The NCCA published a tentative document in 2010 entitled ‘Innovation and Identity’ (I&I) which put forward a set of proposed changes to the current junior cycle and was designed to
generate discussion and debate amongst education partners and the wider public. This document espoused a student-centred approach in its vision and values. Its vision was to place students at the centre of the educational experience, enabling them to actively participate in their communities and in society and to be resourceful and confident learners in all aspects and stages of their lives (NCCA 2010). The values of equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy, and respect for human dignity and identity were listed as fundamental to the new vision of junior cycle education (NCCA 2010). Research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) for the NCCA wholly determined that the current junior cycle was in need of reform and identified the following reasons for reform:

- The dominating effect of the Junior Certificate examination on teaching and learning practice and on school organisation and structures;
- The absence of any significant curriculum flexibility which would allow for engagement with other areas of interest to teachers and students and areas of local interest or need;
- The current curriculum is inflexible and overcrowded;
- The disengagement of many students at an early stage in the Junior Cycle;
- The inadequate time available for learners to engage with deeper learning;
- The narrow range of assessment activity, both in terms of examinations and in general teaching and learning. (NCCA 2010, pp.13-14)

The I&I proposal focused on changing the culture of schooling, the roles of teachers and students and redefining the purpose of the junior cycle away from a practice run at the Leaving Certificate examination (NCCA 2010). The NCCA aimed to adopt a partnership approach to reform by recognising teachers, schools, students, and parents as key agents of change and consulting them regarding the proposed changes via an online questionnaire. In contrast to the previous Junior Cycle reform which was never reviewed, the NCCA released an evaluation report summarising the findings of the consultation process and subsequent reviews in 2011. The summary of findings from this consultation led to the subsequent publication of ‘A Framework for Junior Cycle’ by the NCCA in 2012.

The Junior Cycle Framework (2012)

---

30 An online questionnaire was the principal forum for the consultation and in total 445 online questionnaires were completed with only 178 questionnaires (40% of the total response) completed by post-primary teachers, 19% were completed by parents and post-primary students made up 12% of the total responses (NCCA 2011).
31 NCCA (2011) Summary of Consultation Findings
The 2012 release of the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) detailed the Minister for Education’s plan to reform the junior cycle. This is the conclusion of a consultation process that suggested radical changes to lower secondary school including the introduction of continuous assessment for certification and the introduction of short courses which could potentially replace up to two traditional subjects. The JCF built upon the visions and values outlined in the I&I document and is underpinned by the following eight principles: high quality education, student wellbeing, experiential learning, choice and flexibility, engagement and participation, learning to learn, continuity and development creativity and innovation and inclusive education (NCCA 2011).

The potential student-centred approach is a marked difference from previous Junior Cycle reform attempts that simply introduced a revised syllabi and subject list.

The learning at the core of the proposed new junior cycle is described in twenty-four statements of learning and provides the basis for schools to plan for, design and evaluate their junior cycle programmes. Schools must also ensure that key skills such as literacy and numeracy along with six others including ‘communication’ and ‘working with others’ will be incorporated into each subject (NCCA 2012). Where the previous junior cycle was criticised for overcrowding, under the new JCF there will be a limit to the number of subjects and short courses that will be included for certification purposes with most students taking no fewer than 8 subjects and no more than 10 full subjects for certification purposes (NCCA 2011). ‘Flexibility’ and ‘choice’ for schools, teachers and students are cited as central to the new JCF. The vision of the JCF is for teachers and students to play an active role in redefining the purpose of the Junior Cycle is particularly evident in the short courses aspect of the JCF which anticipates schools designing their own short courses (in accordance to specifications from the NCCA) which is a marked departure from traditional practice. Schools will have the flexibility to decide what combination of subjects and short courses they will pursue where students have the choice to substitute two short courses for one full subject, allowing short courses such as Programming and Digital Media Literacy to be taken. While the most contentious issue for teachers when exposed to curriculum integration has been the fate of their subject matter (Czerniak 1999). In-house designed short courses can facilitate the implementation of integration in a meaningful way while students can simultaneously study 8-10 discreet subjects. According to Chief Inspector Harold Hislop:
A clear implication of the choice and flexibility offered by the JCF must be that we will simply have to give individual schools and teachers much greater curricular autonomy (DES 2013, p.1)

Perhaps the most controversial feature of the new JCF lies in its assessment proposals. The Junior Certificate Examination intends to be replaced with a new school-based model of assessment which will see students rather than examinations at the centre of the new approach to assessment (NCCA 2010). It is proposed that every subject will have a portfolio component that accounts for 40% of the overall marks and teachers will be responsible for assessing their own pupil’s portfolios (NCCA 2011). Additionally, short courses will be assessed in-house by schools. Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn supported the developments by stating that:

> there is compelling evidence from many countries that shows more students will perform better by moving away from such terminal exams. The Junior Certificate is not a high stakes exam, yet we continue to treat it as if it were a ‘dry run’ for the Leaving Cert – to the detriment of many of our students.

(DES 2011, p.1)

However, the JCF is not being met with a mutual level of enthusiasm by Irish teachers. The proposed changes outlined in the JCF have been met with criticism from the Irish post-primary Teaching Unions. Teacher Union representatives released a statement in 2014 threatening industrial action and one of the reasons cited was that the new junior cycle was announced unilaterally without consultation with anyone (Barry 2014). Yet, the NCCA opened up an 8 month long consultation process in 2010 to each of the key agents of change (including teachers) with an aim to gather responses to the proposed changes published in the I&I document. Leading the arguments are concerns about the requirement of teachers to assess their own students work for certification purposes. Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) president Gerry Quinn believes this aspect of the reform ‘will significantly change the relationship between the teacher and student’ (Rogers 2014). Trant (1998) believes the debate around school-based assessment is really a debate about teacher professionalism and ‘teachers cannot claim the status of professionalism until they assume full responsibility towards all aspects of the curriculum, and this includes assessment’ (p.28). Additionally, arguments have been set forward by unions regarding: a lack of training, resource levels; the protection of subjects; extra demands on teacher’s time and workload; and a lack of consultation with teachers in the initial development of the JCF (ASTI 2015). To date there have been two lunch time protests and one full strike-day by union teachers.
Union members but negotiation talks between the Unions and the current Minister for Education Jan O’Sullivan are currently underway. However, Industrial Relations (IR) issues remain the main obstacle to the realization of the aspirations of the JCF.

There have been widely agreed accomplishments and failures in Irish curriculum interventions at both primary and secondary level. The new Primary School Curriculum (PSC) introduced in 1991 and minor scale curriculum revisions at subject level in secondary schools were viewed as successful. Previous reforms have been dominated by a centralised approach, a focus on high stakes assessment and a lack of policy review which have resulted in largely superficial change. With the exception of the consultative intentions of the new Junior Cycle Framework, a bureaucratic, top-down approach has dominated both previous and contemporary reform initiatives across the primary and post-primary sectors, which has been met with resistance from teachers organisations.

This resistance largely concerns consultation methods or a lack thereof, in addition to apprehensions expressed by teachers around in-house assessment and practical considerations such as time, planning and resources required to implement proposed educational changes. Given the active nature and powerful influence of parent and teacher organisations in Ireland, any resistance to change expressed by such organisations will have a determining impact on the realisation of reform efforts as demonstrated by the teachers strikes in relation to the new JCF. What remains constant is the child-centred intentions of all reforms and initiatives which seek to increase standards for the young people of Ireland. From an interdisciplinary lens, the scope for greatest curricular alignment, radical reform, and negotiation with all educational stakeholders has been identified as within the current Junior Cycle Framework at post-primary level. Having looked at the national context of the Irish Education System and educational change efforts, this research must address the micro context that this curricular intervention is actively taking place in; the Limerick regeneration context.
3.5.3 The Limerick Regeneration Context

The Limerick regional context will refract the wider, national educational context within which this research is set but will also acknowledge local social issues that impact upon education in this region. This initiative took place in three designated disadvantaged DEIS\textsuperscript{32} schools in the Southill area of the Regeneration Communities of Limerick City. IN this area, schools have continuously decreasing enrolments, staff morale is low and students are becoming increasingly disengaged from their learning (Fitzgerald 2007). Student engagement levels need to be addressed across all school sectors in Ireland at a national level as expressed by The National Educational Welfare Board (2008) who encouraged the introduction of national strategies to address low levels of national student engagement. This work will not be engaging in an extensive review of the literature surrounding urban regeneration; however, it is necessary to describe the social context where this work is situated.

Limerick City has ranked as the second most disadvantaged local authority area in Ireland since 1991 and is strongly entrenched in a geographical pattern of social exclusion with regard to variables such as unemployment, lone parenthood and economic dependency (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009). In 2012, Minister for State with responsibility for Housing and Planning, Jan O’ Sullivan, launched the report of a major study concerning the experiences and needs of children and families in Limerick City, with a particular focus on Limerick’s Regeneration areas. The ‘How are our Kids’ report presents a stark picture of the lives of children in Limerick’s Regeneration areas, concluding that children and families in the most deprived neighbourhoods of Limerick experience much poorer quality of life, poorer experiences of childhood and much worse outcomes on a range of indicators, including educational, when compared with children in areas of average socio-economic status (Humphreys et al. 2011). Furthermore, the Fitzgerald Report (2007, p.6) refers to the ‘serious problem of educational disadvantage in the Limerick Regeneration Communities’ and reports on the low educational attainment in the city represented by enrolment numbers in regeneration secondary schools being approximately 25\% of the levels of 10 years ago. The 2006 Census provides a number of measures of educational attainment and reported that the early school leaver’s rate for Limerick constituted of 21\% of all Irish students those whose education has ceased. Furthermore, the regeneration area of Limerick, which has the highest levels of early school leaving consequently, has the lowest rates of third-level education.

\textsuperscript{32} Designated as DEIS under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme
attendance. Where the state average for third level attendance is 32%, the regeneration area of Limerick falls under 10% (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 2009, p.68).

Based on 10 years of Irish school leavers’ survey data, McCoy and Byrne (2011) determined that students’ attending DEIS schools are less likely to: make the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle in post-primary education; complete secondary education; or achieve a high performance in the Leaving Certificate examination when compared to students attending non-DEIS (non-disadvantaged) schools. It was also determined that parental education impacts upon students’ educational attainment, with students whose parents have degree-level education being five times more likely to complete secondary education (McCoy and Byrne 2011). This finding is likely to be impactful for the Southill area of the Limerick regeneration community as the 2006 Census figures showed that the number of parents who were early school leavers below 15 years was 42.6%. It is recognised that education must play a key role in effecting sustainable social regeneration but to date few practical steps have been proposed to realise a vision of meaningful education that people are increasingly calling for (Fitzgerald 2007).
3.5.4 Conclusion

The Irish education system has been heavily influenced by Irish society and factors in Ireland’s history such as its colonial past, economic structure, and the religious affiliations of the majority of the population have shaped the present-day Irish education system (Coolahan 1981). Irish education is largely politically motivated with an economic focus representing the idea that investment in people through education for economic gain. Ireland’s political framework has largely been characterized as conservative in nature and an authoritarian disposition traditionally dominates Irish education with top-down, centrally controlling Governments, policymakers and the Catholic Church largely directing high-level educational decision making and reform efforts. This lends itself to compliant teachers who are often conservative in the practice of their teaching methodologies (Carr 1998). Furthermore, the dominance of the classical humanist teaching ideology in Ireland paired with the prevalence of high stakes assessment, in turn, fosters compliant and dependant Irish students. The theme of compliance has permeated throughout Irish society and education. The disaffection communicated by Irish school leaver’s in McCoy and Byrne’s (2011) research is representative of an education system that does not hold meaning for its students, and indeed teachers.

These issues have strong implications for this research which is centred on a move away from traditional subjects and didactic teaching methods towards integration as well as social constructivist methods of teaching and learning for increasing student engagement by promoting a curriculum that holds greater meaning for them. This research calls for a move from a compliance to an action oriented, ‘agentic’ engagement which occurs when students actively express their thoughts, opinions, and concerns in a social learning environment where they direct their own learning. The curriculum at primary level in Ireland has levels of natural integration so there is scope for the introduction of NIC. The space for NIC in Irish post-primary education is within the new JCF. The current Junior Cycle reform delivers perhaps the biggest implication for this research from an Irish context as it provides the space within policy where integration and traditional learning can take place side by side through short courses. Furthermore, NIC is coherent with the underlying student-centered visions and values of the JCF such as democracy, experiential learning engagement and participation. Moreover, previous and contemporary reforms identify a focus on traditional subjects with no evidence of integration taking place showing that the proposed NIC intervention proposed is novel. Although NIC is not a curriculum

33 This research initiative has received support from the NCCA who have requested that NIC be submitted as a short course proposal.
for deficit, the benefits it can bring to disadvantaged schools in Limericks regeneration areas cannot be ignored. NIC represents a structured approach for excellence learning with a central aim to empower the voice of teachers and learners as co-constructors of curriculum.

3.5 Conclusion of Literature Review Chapter

This examination of the literature has studied: the values underpinning curriculum; who controls and selects curriculum; and the different approaches to curriculum reform. This curricular background was explored to rigorously present why everything is the way it is in the context of education. Ultimately, there has been a history of control over the curriculum by the state, and in the Irish context, the church, whereas in NIC, the control is more localised to the schools and indeed classrooms. A need has been identified for greater curriculum alignment; alignment with the students, with the teachers and alignment between subject areas. NIC represents a practical structure that can build on the core of a democratic curriculum focused on agentic engagement and excellence in learning to give a powerful voice to the most marginalised in the education system; students and teachers. In the Irish context, NIC is strongly coherent with the reforms of the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) in realising the visions, principles and key skills of the Framework. Both the underlying values and timing of the new JCF is synonymous with the vision of NIC this research is proposing.

The short course aspect of the JCF provides the space in which NIC can be introduced to the traditional curriculum. Short courses will give schools the flexibility to tailor the programme to the themes arising from the NIC process. The level of choice and flexibility offered in the new JCF in addition to the encouragement of bottom-up curricular design processes involved afforded by short courses will have strong implications for this work. Such curricular autonomy is central to the NIC process where greater teacher agency is one of its central requirements and attributes (Beane 1995). Student voice and increased student agency are the driving factors of the NIC approach and the new JCF provides the space for student’s choice and involvement in curricular decisions. At a local level, negotiating the curriculum is a powerful way of engaging students in learning and it is anticipated that this kind of curriculum will be more responsive to student needs and concerns in the Limerick Regeneration area. However, NIC will not adopt a deficit mentality that might be prevalent in the Limerick context within which this work is situated. Fundamentally, this work represents a curricular development piece of research. It is not designed to address deficit, it is designed as a curriculum for excellence.
Chapter Four: Methodology

Within this chapter, the methodological conceptual framework will build on the literature review and conceptual framework chapters to explore their methodological implications for this study. A justification for the use of a qualitative approach will then be provided followed by a methodology section which will remind the reader of the research questions guiding this study and detail the participant selection process. Following this, a detailed outline of the methods of data collection and a description of how the data was analysed will be provided before exploring the validity and ethical measures employed by this study and finishing with a look at the methodological limitations of this work.

4.1 Methodological Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this section is to show how the theoretical perspective of a critical, social constructivist adopted by this research has influenced the ways in which this research has been conducted. The ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this study have methodological implications for how the research was designed, conducted, and analysed. The existing conceptual framework of this research will be re-examined to ensure methodological rigour and internal consistency, before the ontological and epistemological assumptions are translated into methodological strategies.

4.1.1 Critical Social Constructivist Conceptual Framework

In an effort to facilitate coherence, this section will remind the reader of the philosophies underpinning this research in an effort to frame the methodological implications for this study. The purpose of this section is to facilitate the clear and conscious articulation of ontological, epistemological and theoretical commitments taken during this project (Puig et al. 2008). These commitments contributed to the critical, social constructivist theoretical perspective which reflects the researcher’s beliefs about the world we live in and the power dynamics prevalent in this world (Lather 1986; Habermas 1971). This research acknowledges that the values held by the researcher will unavoidably influence an inquiry (Guba and Lincoln 1994) and by examining

---

34 These assumptions have already been distilled and argued in the original Conceptual Framework Chapter (Chapter Two)
35 Many of the issues of critical theory and critical methodologies were decided by the researcher not to be used due to the explorative nature of this study
our pre-conceived assumptions, this can help us to understand the lenses through which we perceive the world and evaluate different aspects of it (Creswell 1998). The ontological assumptions about the nature of being and the philosophy of reality (Krauss 2005) and the epistemological assumptions around the philosophy of knowledge or how we come to know (Trochim 2000) will now be reiterated to frame the key themes of the methodological implications section to follow.

Developing on chapter two\textsuperscript{36}, to briefly summarise, the guiding ontological values of this research assume that human beings are fundamentally social creatures who are innately communicative beings and reliant on language. Therefore, this research places a strong focus on the importance of social environments and power. This researcher believes that the existence of power differentials can compromise the agency, voice and contributions individuals and social groups can make to this world. Furthermore, that social discourse is a useful way of using language and communication to perpetuate power structures. Each of these ontological aspects has an epistemological influence on the nature of knowledge and how we acquire it.

In summary, the epistemological values held by this study believe that knowledge is co-constructed through shared interactions with others in social situations and learning is a social construction of meaning (Vygotsky 1972). People create knowledge and meaning through interaction with their world and others. Because of this, it is argued that for collaborative learning to be successful, it requires effective communication. Language is central to communication and the primary function of language is to establish social relationships with others where they can then be in a position to create knowledge collaboratively. The philosophical assumptions inherent in this work cannot be divorced from the methodological implications assumed during the inquiry stages.

There should be a direct connection between our ontological and epistemological assumptions and the methods chosen in research approaches which serves to increase the theoretical consistency of research studies (Puig \textit{et al.} 2008). This also assists the researcher when making methodological decisions (Quantz 1992) and the aforementioned assumptions will now be addressed to ascertain how these central elements have guided the methodology of this research.

\textsuperscript{36} Conceptual Framework Chapter
4.1.2 Methodological Implications of Conceptual Framework

The theoretical perspective and underlying assumptions of this research will serve as more than a theoretical prelude; they are akin to a set of principles that will guide the methodology of this research. The primary aspects that were identified as the implications of this conceptual framework have been the power and social dynamics inherent in conducting social science research.

Power Dynamics

This research takes an ontological stance that power relations are inherent throughout all societies and the existence of such power differentials can compromise the agency, voice, and contributions individuals and social groups can make to this world (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Habermas 1970a; Lukes 1974). This work recognises that power relations will always be an issue within social science research as it is human beings who are being studied. Resultantly, this research holds a heightened sense of awareness of existent power differentials in research processes. This awareness was informed by the conceptual framework assumptions as guiding principles and theorists such as Wolf (1996) who argues that in order to diminish power differentials when carrying out research, researchers need to be cognisant of three contexts in which power dynamics arise in fieldwork. Firstly, research must recognise the level of social power both the researcher and researched bring to a situation and take into account the hierarchies, authority and positions of the both parties. Secondly, the actual practice of conducting the research in a social context can produce power differences in terms of relations between the researcher and the researched during, for example, interviews. Thirdly, the researcher could use their authority, agendas, biases, and knowledge of the literature to influence the way in which they write up data. Therefore there is a need to understand the context of power dynamics of social science research and minimise it to promote the agency of the research participants.

The awareness of power dynamics in social science research was ever-present during this study. The primary methodological implication of the assumptions underlying this work is evident in the efforts made towards minimising power differentials. In line with the ontological assumption that people need to have a sense of control and an element of power in what they do, the impact
of this was to employ methodologies that try to minimise the power differences between the researcher and the researched (Harding and Norberg 2005) by attempting to promote agency in the participants. This research was designed around an attempt to minimise power differentials when deciding on methods and methodological practices and in conducting all aspects of the research process. The study was also mindful of power dynamics when representing the researched in the write-up phase to sufficiently ensure that the voice of participants was meaningfully represented. The critical traits of this research and their associated assumptions will also serve to inform the social dynamics of this work.

Social Dynamics

The ontological assumptions which portray human beings as fundamentally social beings who participate in social environments have been realised through the methodology of this research as each method employed involves human interaction. The researcher was not a detached observer but was a participant with the subject in the search for meaning (Toma 2010). It was decided that each method employed would enable the researcher to socially engage with participants in an effort to elicit the meaning behind what they were saying and doing. This study views research as a transaction between two people and as a result, there was a transactional nature to the data-gathering process (Toma 2010). This is in line with Rogoff’s (1995) central idea that a learner’s cognitive development is inseparable from their social environment. The ontological assumption that humans are innately social beings is intimately linked to the researcher’s epistemological assumption that all knowledge is rooted in social practices and is co-constructed with others in social situations.

This research views knowledge as a social construct that can be empowering when produced collaboratively. This positionality exerted a strong influence over the methods chosen to ensure that collaborative learning environments that enhanced reflexive awareness and facilitated knowledge construction (Jonassen 1995) were selected. The most fundamental aspect of a human social setting is that of meanings (Krauss 2005) and this research assumes that people make meaning from their experiences and generate knowledge and meaning through interaction with each other. Consequently, the methods employed in this research highlighted the social dimension of the co-construction of meaning. This is in line with the Vygotskian stance that places a strong emphasis on the role of shared meaning-making processes. This is also coherent with the theoretical perspective held by this research that the individual's participation in socio-
cultural interactivities and shared meaning-making practices is crucial to the social constructivist movement (Stetsenko and Arievitch 1997). This research holds the epistemological assumption that knowledge is established through the meanings attached to the phenomena studied (Coll and Chapman 2000) and therefore, all methods employed will attempt to articulate meaning for participants and capture the social construction of knowledge. The critical and social aspects of this work are inextricably linked throughout and are highlighted further by underlying assumptions surrounding language and power.

This research holds the epistemological assumption that the function of language is to establish social relationships with others through communication (Vygotsky 1986). Consequently, this inquiry utilised methods that were discursive in nature in line with social constructivist assumptions around the centrality of language in human development where all social interactions are, at base, conversational (Stetsenko and Arievitch 1997). In line with the ontological assumption of this research that discourse is a way of language and communication used to perpetuate power structures, the methodology of this research utilized methods which ‘promoted discourse as a social process carried out by self-directing agents’ (Gergen 1994, p.70). This research places an epistemological emphasis on the role of communication. Thus, the means of communication chosen were critical in that they treated participants as agentic, active subjects and utilised methods that created social enactments providing participants with an invitation to dialogue (Fouché and Light 2010). Lastly, methods chosen allowed for conversational dialogue with subjects rather than the experimental manipulation of people (Comstock 1982).

4.1.3 Conclusion

The aim of this section was to translate the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research into methodological strategies. Direct links made between assumptions and their methodological implications have attempted to provide justification for the methodology of this research which centres on creating social and collaborative environments that promote voice and agency for participants. In such environments, the minimisation of power differentials between the researcher and the researched were a central premise. The critical, social constructivist perspective taken by this research will go on to influence the decision to employ methods that place an emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge, the importance of meaning-making and the role that communication and language plays in social discourse with participants. Social
contexts and interactions along with critical voice and agency are paramount to this research and the meaning-making associated with it. This study sought to select an overriding research paradigm that allowed the researcher to elicit meaning and interact with participants while becoming immersed in the lived experience of a study which centres on agency. The paradigm that reflects these requirements is qualitative research.
4.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meanings, purposes, and intentions people give to their own actions and interactions with others (Smith 2008). The aim of this section is to provide a deep, theoretical justification for the suitability of the qualitative approach as the sole guiding paradigm for this study. Efforts will be made to realise this justification by establishing links between the historical development and underlying assumptions of qualitative research as well as the underlying assumptions detailed in the conceptual framework of this research. The historical evolution of qualitative research helps to fully understand the assumptions of the qualitative research paradigm.

4.2.1 Brief Overview: History of Qualitative Research

This research recognises that ‘all futures come out of pasts; and there is a sense in which all pasts imply futures’ (Hammersley 2004, p.19) and aims to investigate the research heritage of qualitative approaches in order to ascertain how and why this social research methodology came about. As a form of social inquiry, qualitative research is rooted in the competing traditions of sociology, psychology, ethnography, and anthropology due to its similarities in terms of meaning and scope and its strong focus on understanding human behaviour and society (Mey and Mruck 2007; Morrow 2007; Burawoy 2000; Hammersley 1989, 2004). Early social research studies involved lived experiences with isolated cultures and studies were conducted from the 1900’s to post-World War Two where sociological and ethnographic studies into field experiences, prisons, asylums, hospitals, and factories were carried out from the points of view of soldiers, workers, inmates, and patients (Denzin and Lincoln 1995; Burawoy 2000). Although positivistic methods dominated research investigations until the 1970’s and 1980’s, qualitative methods became more formalised and rigorous from the 1940’s onwards.

During the 1940’s, critical research approaches such as feminism and critical theory advocated that a more qualitative approach would facilitate giving ‘a voice to societies underclass (Denzin and Lincoln 1995, p.7). Furthermore, theorists such as Geertz (1973) called for a more ‘thick description’ of events and cultures previously documented in anthropological studies to fully ascertain the meaning behind reported experiences. During the 1980’s, the use of quantifiable methods to study meaningful and interactive activities such as teaching were falling short and coming under criticism that human affairs cannot be accurately studied through scientific
methods which led to a ‘paradigm war’ between quantitative and qualitative theories during this period (Gage 1990). The late 1980’s saw qualitative research assume a more radical and sophisticated focus as theorists such as Marcus and Fischer (1986) voiced concerns that the rich, cultural description of anthropology and ethnography studies were not delivering enough cultural critique.

In the 1990’s qualitative research expanded to include critical issues of gender and race in social studies, especially in relation to oppressive social practices (Lincoln 2010). The role of the qualitative researcher moved away from that of an objective observer towards a more activist-oriented role (Denzin and Lincoln 1995) and findings from qualitative research studies were given greater authority as researchers exposed cases of racism, sexism and homophobia amongst others (Lincoln 2010). Each of these historical factors has informed the current principles underpinning qualitative research namely: the study of human beings as they make meaning of the world; investigating how humans interact socially (Morrow 2007) and; the ability of qualitative research to capture the critical nature of power dynamics prevalent in societies (Denzin and Lincoln 1995). These principles are the essence of the critical, social constructivist standpoint taken by this research and this historical lens also serves as a foundation for examining the key underlying assumptions of qualitative inquiry pertinent to this research.

4.2.2 The Underpinning Assumptions of Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry is a heavily contested area of social science research. The interpretation of qualitative research can have a wide variety of implications and the critical social constructivist assumptions guiding this research has methodological implications. The underpinning assumptions that define qualitative research and make it distinctive need to be clarified in order to establish links with the conceptual framework of this research. Each of the assumptions underpinning the qualitative approach will not mirror the conceptual position of this research and, therefore, a focus will be placed on the underlying social, meaning-making, and critical assumptions of qualitative research.

A fundamental assumption of qualitative research is that it allows for the study of social processes and human interaction (Burawoy 2000; Hammersley 1989). Quantitative approaches simply do not lend themselves to two-way interaction between researchers and subjects (Toma 2010). Thus, qualitative research is typically embedded in social contexts and views research as
a social act (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Wolcott 2002). The phenomenological stance of qualitative studies emphasizes ‘verstehen’, which is the interpretive understanding of human interaction (Douglas, 1976). Furthermore, qualitative research holds the natural setting as the direct source of data (Bogdan and Biklen 1992) and therefore should be appreciated. By conducting research in naturalistic settings, it allows the researcher to best gauge the context with the least amount of distortion. Furthermore, face-to-face interaction is considered the fullest condition for participating in the mind of another human being and one must participate in the mind of another human being in order to acquire social knowledge (Lofland and Lofland 1996). Through qualitative research, social interaction, and meaning making are inextricably linked. Meaning is of essential concern to the qualitative paradigm which is social in its orientation and stems from interacting with a human community (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Crotty 1998).

A central assumption of qualitative research is that it has the unique goal of facilitating the meaning-making process (Chen 2001; Krauss 2005). Positivism relates to the viewpoint that the researcher needs to concentrate on facts, whereas phenomenology concentrates on meaning and has provision for human interest (May 2011). Through a qualitative approach, this researcher was not a detached observer but was a participant with the subject in the search for meaning (Toma 2010). Within a critical, social constructivist conceptual framework, meaning can be viewed as ‘the underlying motivation behind thoughts, actions, and even the interpretation and application of knowledge’ (Krauss 2005, p.762). Moreover, human affairs are inextricably involved with the intentions, goals, and purposes that give them meaning (Gage 1989). Qualitative methods assume a phenomenological approach in attempting to understand the lived experience of the research environment, which is attempting to understand the meaning of events and interactions with ordinary people (Lincoln 2010).

A key assumption of phenomenological inquiry is that qualitative researchers can directly capture the lived experience of phenomena being studied and cannot separate themselves from the phenomena and people they study (Toma 2010). Qualitative research attempts to answer the “why”, it does not appeal to pure reason or statistical logic but rather findings are derived from pure lived experience (Lincoln 2010 p. 6). Qualitative theories acknowledge that we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the culture or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally (Crotty 1998). It is extremely time-consuming to ascertain this level of detail and so qualitative research is open to criticisms surrounding its dependence on small
samples which leads to problems with generalisation from a sample to a finite population where the research findings are difficult to replicate (Hammersley 2010). The aim of this research is to get to the lived experience of the phenomena being studied, this phenomena being NIC. The goal of this inquiry is to ascertain a deep understanding of the phenomena which can be facilitated by ‘thick description’, which is a description that is replete with multiple levels of understanding (Lincoln 2010). The data captured in this research is descriptive in that it is collected in the form of words, pictures and recordings as opposed to numbers. Qualitative research also allows for critical engagement with the phenomena being studied.

A central purpose of qualitative research is to understand the complex world of human experience and behaviour from the point of view of those involved in the situation of interest (Krauss 2005). This research is based around affording its respondents a critical voice throughout the research process that is focused on social interactions and meaning making. Thus, the qualitative approach allows the researcher to comprehend individual meaning (Geertz 1973) and capture the insider’s point of view (Denison 1996) which are necessary components when employing research methods that aim to promote agency and reduce power dynamics in the research setting. Qualitative research can help to diminish the power differentials between the researcher and the researched as the researcher no longer assumes the role of the ‘expert’ imposing pre-determined criteria on the participants (Lather 1986). Rather, the critical aspect of this research requires interaction between and among the investigator and respondents (Guba and Lincoln 1998) as theories emerge from the researcher’s interaction with the research context. This level of interaction also leaves the research open to the qualitative criticism of ‘reactivity’ where the researcher’s presence can have a reactive effect on the participants (Hammersley 1990). Furthermore, qualitative research can be subjective where researcher bias may be subconsciously transferred to the participants in such a way that their behaviours, attitudes, or experiences are influenced. This could then lead to a lack of reliability and validity of findings (Onwuegbuzie 2003).

4.2.3 Conclusion

This research believes that the curriculum is contextually shaped and the capacity in which research is conducted is also contextual. Therefore, a research paradigm was required that could be flexible and respond to a context which involves social interactions, meaning making, critical voice and a diminished power differential. Upon examining the phenomenological, social, and critical nature from whence qualitative methods evolved and are now built upon, it was
determined by the researcher that the qualitative research paradigm most suitably satisfied the requirements of this research. The distinctive nature of qualitative research is that it gets to the habits of meaning making by allowing the researcher to immerse themselves in the lived experience of the participants in the study of a phenomenon. Qualitative research allows a researcher to tap into the richness of individual and collaborative experiences in the classroom and has the capacity to provide a broader understanding of power dynamics, meaning making and social interactions which could not be easily quantified. With regard to the criticisms of qualitative research, data, and methodological triangulation can attempt to ensure greater validity and reliability of the research findings\(^{37}\). Furthermore, attention to rigor may serve to offset some of the criticisms of qualitative research as a 'soft approach' (Morse 1989). Further justifications for the use of the qualitative paradigm in guiding this research will develop naturally throughout this chapter in examining the methodology of this research.

\(^{37}\) This will be detailed further in section 4.6: Validity
4.3 Methodology of Research

The methodology of research will frame the remainder of this chapter by detailing the contextual setting wherein this research took place and providing clarification around why this particular educational context was selected. A comprehensive account of the participant selection process will be provided to communicate to the reader the sampling process and rationale behind why each respondent was selected to become involved in this study. Prior to exploring the context of this study, the reader will be provided with a reminder of the research question(s) guiding this study. The primary research questions that directed this thesis are:

1. How does inviting students to co-construct a curriculum with their teachers through a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum impact on student learning, engagement, and agency?

2. How can a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum impact on the professional agency of teachers?

4.3.1 Context for study

The site and timeline for this study was pre-determined as the researcher was approached by the St. Kieran’s initiative who provided funding for the design and implementation of a curriculum initiative to enhance the educational outcomes for young people in the regeneration communities of Limerick. The Social Inclusion and Regeneration in Limerick (SSIRL) have been strongly involved in a partnership with the School Patron, the Limerick Regeneration Agency, and Atlantic Philanthropies to support urban renewal through social regeneration, which led to the development of the St. Kieran’s initiative. The St. Kieráns initiative has supported this project financially and also assisted with practical matters such as gaining access to the schools involved.

Qualitative research lends itself well to a small sample population (Patton 1990) as it allows the researcher to engage in on-going meaningful dialogue, reflexive critique and interpretation with respondents (Yates 2003). This research took place in the context of significant curriculum
change at secondary school level in Ireland. As detailed in chapter three\(^\text{38}\), the timing of this initiative is propitious; coinciding as it does with significant proposed changes for a new Junior Cycle Framework at secondary level schooling in Ireland\(^\text{39}\). Irish education is also going through a time of change in relation to school inspections and evaluations where Irish schools must now conduct a School Self Evaluation (SSE) and can be subject to a Whole School Evaluation (WSE) or subject inspection.

This inquiry was an exploratory study as this type of initiative has never been conducted before in an Irish context. As funding for this research was provided by the St. Kieráns initiative, this wholly determined the methodological decision to select participating schools from the Regeneration Communities of Limerick. This research is therefore mindful of the implications of carrying out research in schools in the regeneration context. Furthermore, this inquiry had to take place within the timeframe allocated to the funding of this initiative which was a period of three years. Details of these considerations were taken into account when making the methodological decisions surrounding the participants in this study will be developed further in by examining the participation selection process.

### 4.3.2 Participant Selection

A purposive convenient sampling strategy for the participant selection process was employed by this study. For the purpose of this research, sampling was done to reflect an accurate representation of the intended participants for this study and is not intended to be statistically representative. Sampling can also be random but due to the constraints of resources and time, a purposive and convenient sample of participants, who would best-engage and benefit from the process, were selected for inquiry. Failing to provide a detailed account of the sampling process can lead to difficulties for the reader in interpreting the findings and can also affect the replication of the study in question (Kitson et al. 1982). Therefore, a detailed rationale for this strategy will be communicated to the reader in order to provide a justification for why each of the participants in this research were selected to take part.

\(^{38}\) Chapter Three, section 3.5.2: Curriculum Intervention in Irish Education  

\(^{39}\) During the course of the research, the NCCA came on board and requested to help fund the initiative due to their interest in the project. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) also hold a direct interest in this research and play a supportive role to enhance educational outcomes for both the young people in the regeneration communities of Limerick and nationally. This research will build on the ambitions of the short courses of the new Junior Cycle Framework which are to be designed by schools to address local community concerns by supporting teachers in a curriculum development role to negotiate meaningful learning with their students.
Different understandings of purposive sampling exist and numerous theorists claim that all types of sampling in qualitative research are ‘purposive’ (Patton 1990; Sandelowski 1995). However, for the purpose of this research, it is understood to be the selection of ‘information-rich cases’ from which one can learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research (Patton 1990, p.169). Furthermore, this research understands convenient sampling to be the selection of a sample where the phenomena of interest exists (Glaser 1978) and where the selection of subjects more readily accessible to the researcher are more likely to be included (Marshall 1996). This research used a purposive, convenient sample in that the involved schools must be in the Limerick Regeneration area but it is convenient in that the teachers and students within those schools were given the option to be involved in the study.

In an effort to explore the power differentials between all stakeholders, an attempt was made to secure a representation from all stakeholders involved in the implementation of curriculum. This research collected data from a full range of participants taking into account all levels of hierarchy. Participants chosen to take part in this educational work were policymakers, the inspectorate, principals (school leaders), teachers, parents, and students. It was felt that the inclusion of these participants would provide an accurate representation of people who would be able to meaningfully answer the research question(s) of this inquiry. A detailed rationale for their selection will now be provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>No. of Students Involved</th>
<th>No. of Teachers Involved</th>
<th>No. of School Leaders Involved</th>
<th>No. of Parents Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School A</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School B</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.1: Breakdown of all participants involved in the NIC study

---

40 One policymaker from the NCCA and one person from the Irish Inspectorate were interviewed to inform this research also.
School Selection

As stated previously, the researcher was approached to implement a curriculum initiative to enhance meaningful learning and student engagement in Limerick Regeneration schools and therefore, the location of the schools selected was purposive. Because this work has a vision of curricular transition, the selection of both primary and secondary schools (and their principals) was also purposive due to the potential role of NIC as a bridging curriculum between primary and secondary school. Due to the funding provided by St. Kierans and the pre-determined timeframe, it was decided by the researcher that only three schools could participate in the study in order to facilitate a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of the research. Initial meetings were set up with the principals of three primary schools and two secondary schools in the area and they were given the choice as to whether or not they wanted to become involved. Following these meetings, two primary schools and one feeder secondary school volunteered to take part in the study.

Apart from the ethical considerations of carrying out research in schools, the educational research should take the specific context into consideration (Springer 2009; Anderson 2002), aim to increase our knowledge about what happens in schools (Jackson 1968), and contribute to the improvement of educational practice (Gall et al. 2007). This research was always cognisant of local contextual concerns (Haggis 2013) in the participating schools. A combination of the DEIS status of each school and their close proximity to two third level educational Universities meant that some schools in the area were suffering from ‘initiavitis’ which is the implementation of numerous change initiatives which are disconnected and often lead to confusion and disaffection with future change efforts (Hargreaves 2008; Fullan 2008). The aims of this research and its methodological design were openly communicated to the principals of each participating school, who were informed of the naturalistic design (Hutchinson 1999) of this study.

Teacher Selection

The selection of teachers to take part in this process was purposive to an extent as they had to be teachers in the participating schools but they were a convenient sample as they were accessible

---

41 This will be detailed in section 4.7 of this chapter: Ethics
42 Designated as DEIS under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme. The DEIS programme provides an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which brings together, and builds upon a range of interventions for schools with concentrated levels of educational disadvantage.
to the researcher and had to volunteer to become involved. The researcher made presentations to school staff detailing the NIC initiative during whole-staff meetings in each participating school. Following these presentations, an invitation was extended to teachers to voluntarily sign up to become involved with the project\textsuperscript{43}. Purposeful sampling facilitates a researcher that is looking for participants who possess certain traits or qualities (Koerber and McMichael 2008) and a callout was made in the three participating schools for teachers who were innovative, valued student voice and professional development and were interested in the co-construction of a curriculum with students.

The sampling technique was also purposeful to address the transition for students between the primary and post-primary schools as the teachers of the final year of primary school and the 1\textsuperscript{st} year of secondary school were prioritised for their involvement but were not deemed to be a necessity. A closely related sampling technique to convenience sampling is ‘snowball sampling’ where the number of participants expands as existing respondents recruit more participants (Higginbottom 2004). In the participating secondary school, an element of snowball sampling developed naturally whereby, over time, the two teachers that initially signed up recruited a further six teachers to become involved in the project.

\textit{Student and Parent Selection}

The selection of students and parents to take part in this process was also purposeful and convenient as once the participating teachers were identified, all of their associated classes were put forward as options. One class of students in each of the three schools\textsuperscript{44} was selected to be tracked over a period of time. While the classes were determined by the school and the participating teachers (with timetabling factors determining which class was finally selected), the students were given the choice not to come on board before the research commenced and the option to withdraw from the research at any stage thereafter\textsuperscript{45}. Parents play a pivotal role in their children’s education and it was felt that the voice of parents should be included as they were well-placed to comment on whether the implicit aspects of the NIC process such as social skills, communication skill, confidence etc. were evident in life outside of school. In the participating secondary school, letters inviting parents to be interviewed about their child’s engagement with

\textsuperscript{43} See Fig. 4.1 for a breakdown of the teachers-per-school that signed up to the project.

\textsuperscript{44} See Fig. 4.1 for a breakdown of the amount of student’s per-class that participated in the research.

\textsuperscript{45} See Section 4.7 for the ethical steps taken in the involvement of students in the process.
NIC were sent home with each participating student. This sampling was purposive in that they had to be parents of participating children but convenient in that they had to volunteer to become involved. Parents had the choice whether or not they wanted to submit their contact details on the letter sent out with the students.\(^{46}\)

**Policymakers and Inspectorate**

Policymakers and the inspectorate are complex organisations who are largely trying to implement policy and change for the better of Irish education. Therefore, their voice was included within this research around how curriculum should be shaped and what aspects of teaching and learning should be evaluated. Their voice was also included in acknowledgement of the current context of curricular reform and school inspection in the Irish education. Purposive sampling was used to access ‘knowledgeable people’, i.e., those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues due to their profession (Ball 1990). A senior policymaker from the NCCA’s voice was included in this study as this research recognises the significant role played by policymakers in curriculum design and that they exert a certain level of the influence and control over education and schools in Ireland (Gleeson 2010). Furthermore, this research is taking place in the context of curriculum change to the lower level of secondary schools and it was envisaged that this educational reform could significantly enhance the opportunities of this work. The Assistant Director of the Irish Inspectorate was also interviewed in recognition of the current changes to inspections and evaluations in Irish schools. It was deemed important to include the Irish Inspectorate voice in this research to establish where aspects of NIC such as student voice, student engagement, and teachers as curriculum makers could be included in school and subject inspections. Having provided a justification for the use of purposive convenient sampling in the selection of each group of participants for this study this research recognises some of the risks surrounding the rigour and validity of such approaches.

**Questions of rigour surrounding a purposive, convenient sampling approach**

One of the central guiding principles of purposive sampling is maximum variation; that researchers should seek to include people who represent the widest variety of perspectives possible within the range specified by their purpose (Higginbottom 2004, p. 17). Purposive sampling is often critiqued for its inability to generalize findings to the wider population (Lucas

\(^{46}\) See Fig. 4.1 for the number of parents in the Secondary School that participated in the research.
and this research acknowledges that by targeting particular schools, there is a loss of rigour as the data collected from each participant is only representative of educational experiences in the Limerick regeneration area. The voluntary aspect of the convenience sampling used in this study also undermines the validity of this work as if teachers volunteered, they won’t necessarily be indicative of the views and insights of all teachers. This research does not claim to be representing all teachers within the regeneration region, it is trying to represent teachers that volunteered to take part and were committed to this kind of work in line with their values and interests. The purposive aspect of teacher, student and parent selection was employed as this research believed that each participant would provide a unique insight and rich information of significant value to this study (Suen et al. 2014). There are some questions around the rigour of convenient sampling which claim that it simply involves the selection of the most accessible subjects (Marshall 1996) and those who are ‘readily available and easy to contact’ (Higginbottom 2004, p.15). This research argues that the alternative; random sampling, in a qualitative study could violate the qualitative principal of the appropriateness of a respondent (Morse 1991) that can provide an insight of central importance to the study.

4.3.3 Conclusion

A central aim of this research is to answer the research questions posed in the most meaningful way and with the involvement of the most suitable participants. In helping to answer these questions, the national and local context of where this research is being carried out must be recognised. By acknowledging the current Irish educational context of reform and school inspection, this led to the inclusion of the policymaker and inspectorate voice in this study. Furthermore, the inclusion of schools, participating teachers, students and parents was determined by the local, Limerick regeneration context. This study fully acknowledges that the central determining factor for the selection of a purposive, convenient sampling process was due to the researcher receiving funding to dedicate a curriculum initiative to schools in the regeneration area of Limerick. While there are some critiques surrounding the generalizability of the findings from this study, this research is representative of the experiences of teachers and students co-constructing a meaningful curriculum in a regeneration area. This study justifies the selection of this sampling method which has afforded this work access to participants who provided a unique insight and data of central importance to this research. This data was captured by using a range of qualitative methods to acquire and articulate this insight.
4.4 Methods used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Longitudinal Study</th>
<th>Video Recording</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Journaling</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary, Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate, Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle, Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah, Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>✓&lt;sup&gt;47&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Halbert,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Inspectorate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Deirdre Matthews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.2: Breakdown of Methods Used

In aspiring to answer the research questions of this study and maintain coherence with the underlying critical, social constructivist perspective of this research, the employment of a range of diverse methods to capture the social construction of knowledge and meaning was required (Figure 4.2). All participants were observed in their natural, social settings and this inquiry created social, collaborative contexts for data collection. A longitudinal study involving participant observation, interviews, journaling, and focus groups was deemed to be the most suitable method to cater for social and meaningful interactions with respondents, articulate the voice of respondents and make every effort to maintain a research environment where power dynamics are minimised. The components of this research design will now be explicated in further depth to provide a rationale for the use of each method and detail how each was utilised. The primary methodology employed in this research was participant observation.

<sup>47</sup> 12 Students from the Secondary School were interviewed.
<sup>48</sup> 9 parents from the Secondary School were interviewed.
4.4.1 Participant Observation

This work relied heavily on participant observation, defined as when the researcher is playing an established participant role in the scene studied for data collection purposes (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). The researcher adopted a participatory teacher-researcher role throughout all NIC engagement in the schools in order to experience and participate in the learning environment from the perspective of an ‘insider’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996). The researcher interacted with the subjects of inquiry when gathering data to facilitate the negotiation of meaning with participants. Participant observation afforded the researcher the opportunity to understand participant’s perspectives and look at the character of human social life and how it was understood (Hammersley 2006; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). Participant observation did not take place solely in the classroom; it also took place at a school level. As outlined in Fig 4.3 the researcher spent one day a week in the participating secondary school for a full school year from September 2013 to May 2014 before beginning the work with NIC in this school in September 2014. The researcher spent this year conducting staffroom observations and volunteering in the breakfast and homework club one day a week. Furthermore, the researcher volunteered to assist in a number of resource classes, yard supervision and school trip supervision. As a result of this, the researcher was known to the school and built up numerous relationships with the staff and students. This year also gave the researcher an invaluable insight into the cultural context of the school.

Participant observation is a methodological orientation that is closely associated with ethnography. Ethnography is a form of social and educational research that emphasises the importance of studying first-hand what people do and say in particular contexts (Hammersley 2006). There is an ethnographic element to this research not only due to the extended length of time spent in each school but it also satisfies the ethnographic requirements that there must be a focus on a discrete location and the researcher is concerned with the full range of social behaviour within that location (Pole and Morrison 2003). Both participant observation and ethnography belong to the tradition of naturalism as they centralise the importance of understanding the meanings and interactions of people within the everyday settings in which they take place (Layder et al. 1994). All data for this thesis was collected from the natural setting of the learners and teachers existing classroom. In an attempt to accurately capture the voice and interactions of the participants, video and audio recordings were utilised and the researcher maintained a picture log and research observation diary.
Video and audio recordings were used at significant events of the research such as the initial NIC day devoted to discussing students’ concerns and presentations conducted by students as part of their assessments. Video recording offers the participant observer a more detailed and precise account of the behaviours and processes they are observing (Botorff 1994). Without videotaping, participant observation is said to be limited as the observer can never capture the entirety of an observed situation (Polit and Hungler 1999). Students were audio-recorded to capture the conversations occurring in all groups that might not fully be captured in tasks assigned to students such as the creation of a mind map reflecting a group of students concerns. The students in both primary schools were video, and audio, recorded on two occasions while the students in secondary school were video, and audio, recorded during three NIC sessions. Pictures of the students were taken by the researcher during every NIC session which resulted in a comprehensive picture log being maintained by the researcher in addition to the maintenance of a detailed observer diary. This range of methods were employed to accurately capture the social construction of meaning taking place in the classroom while the critical dimension of this work was captured through video and audio recordings of student and teacher voice. The overall aim was to provide the researcher, and ultimately the reader, with a holistic picture of what took place in the reported activity or event. It is argued that such research accounts and their conclusions are more credible if they are the result of repeated observations over an extended period of time (Denzin 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Thus, this research adopted a longitudinal study approach to data collection.
4.4.2 Longitudinal Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Period of NIC Engagement</th>
<th>Total No. of NIC Interaction Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School A</td>
<td>February 2014 – June 2014 (4 Months)</td>
<td>61 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School B</td>
<td>April 2014 – June 2014 (2 Months)</td>
<td>21 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Secondary School        | September 2013 – May 2014 (9 Months) | 0
g| Secondary School        | September 2014 – May 2015 (9 Months) | 66 hours                          |
| **Total length of longitudinal study/NIC Interaction Hours** | **September 2013 – May 2015 (24 months)** | **148 Hours**                     |

This research employed a longitudinal study approach\(^{51}\), defined as the collection of data from respondents at different points, over a prolonged period of time, in order to study changes, continuity, or both in the participants’ behaviour (Gall *et al.* 2007). This intervention took place over a total of two years and involved three separate schools. Four months, consisting of 61 NIC contact hours, was spent in Primary School A and the intervention took place in Primary School B for two months consisting of 20 NIC contact hours (Figure 4.3). Prolonged engagement includes understanding the culture and building trust with participants (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Glesne and Peshkin 1992). The researcher was placed in the secondary school for one full academic year prior to implementing NIC in the school in order to gain an understanding of the cultural context of that school and to build relationships and trust with staff. In the following school year, nine months, consisting of 58 NIC contact hours, was spent with one class of 1st year students in the secondary school. Prolonged engagement in a research environment involves conducting a study for a sufficient period of time to obtain an adequate representation of the voice under study (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). The longitudinal interest of this work was to explore the role of NIC in supporting student transition, voice, engagement, learning, and professional agency for teachers. Furthermore, the longitudinal approach enabled the development of a professional learning relationship with the teachers and the appreciation of

---

\(^{49}\) The researcher spent one day a week in the Secondary School for a full school year to gauge the culture of the school through various volunteering efforts (Homework Club, Special Needs assistant duties etc.)

\(^{50}\) This timeframe does not include the summer months of July and August when schools are closed in Ireland.

\(^{51}\) This research started out with the aim of using a case study approach but there was not enough context in the end to provide a sufficient case study.
individual student trajectories to track individual learners’ development throughout the NIC process.

Weaknesses of the participant observation method include: one is never sure of ‘naturalness’ of the setting with the observer present (Long 1980, p.27) and what is observed is always open to interpretation by the researcher (Wilson 1977). Therefore, interviews were used to further elicit whether the researchers interpretation of the data matched that of the respondents and to reach out to a wider range of contributors to this research.

4.4.3 Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Location of Interview</th>
<th>Length of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>5-10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>30-40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>30-35 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Phone Interviews</td>
<td>5-10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NCCA:</strong> John Halbert, Director of Curriculum and Assessment</td>
<td>NCCA Head Office, Dublin</td>
<td>1 hour 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Irish Inspectorate:</strong> Dr Deirdre Matthews, Assistant Chief Inspector</td>
<td>Via Email Correspondence</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 4.4: Breakdown of interviewees, location and length of interviews

Ethnography and participant observation are concerned with capturing participant perspectives and attempting to promote voice to the people studied. Interviews are a particularly effective means of realising these principles (Hammersley 2006). Interviewing has been defined as an interactive, data gathering practice in which knowledge and meanings can be cooperatively produced by the interviewer and interviewee (Potter 1996; Vahasanatanen and Saarinen 2013; Riessman, 2008). Qualitative interviews are an act of communication (Dilley 2010) and a data collection strategy that enables interviewees to provide a rich and inclusive first-person account of an experience (Polkinghorne 2005). For the purpose of this research, interviews were used as a way to elicit participant voice, socially engage with participants, and to try to understand the meaning behind what they were saying. Conducting qualitative interviews gave a voice to the people being studied and captured participant perspectives where interviewees could express their own understandings in their own terms (Patton 1987). Qualitative interviews are suited to
research that seeks to explore meaning (Appleton 1995) and can empower participants to contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). This research chose to employ semi-structured interviews as its interviewing technique to allow for flexibility of response from participants and to gain an appropriate depth of exploration of the topic (Karner 2005).

Each semi-structured interview consisted of a set of predetermined open-ended questions with further questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell 1998). An attraction of this less-structured approach to interviewing is that the person being interviewed is a participant in meaning-making and not simply a source from which information is retrieved (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). Semi-structured interviews are also advantageous in terms of allowing for a more balanced power differential between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviews have been described as sites of powered social practice (Vahasantanen and Saarinen 2013, p.494) where interviewers are typically in a position of power in terms of generating questions and conducting the interview in accordance with their research interests (Kvale 2006). In less-structured interview formats, interviewees have more control over the course of the interview, how much they want to reveal and the interview process itself (Corbin and Morse 2003). The semi-structured approach allowed the interviewees, through dialogue with the researcher, to open up avenues of conversation not already catered for in the original schedule, thus requiring the researcher to deviate from the planned schedule accordingly. The researcher was mindful of power dynamics and the social construction of meaning when conducting interviews with each interviewee.

The researcher chose to interview students, teachers, and principals at the end of their engagement with the NIC process to explore their experiences of NIC. Power dynamics in an interview can be influenced by the interview setting (Manderson et al. 2006). To combat this, each interview with students and teachers took place in their own classrooms and the principals were always interviewed in their own offices. When interviewing participants, it was ensured that participant voice was promoted at all times and if participants were ever unsure about something, it was clarified further by altering the language of the question and providing further explanation. The initial phases of each interview involved some general discussion about the interview topic and the participants negotiated practical matters such as the recording of the interview (Corbin and Morse 2003).
The semi-structured approach gave interviewees the opportunity to direct the conversation due to the nature of the questions which sought to elicit their voice and opinions. In particular, every effort was made to put the participating students at ease (Dilley 2010), where the interview was informal, conversational and the questions used were phrased similar to the guiding questions the students had been answering in their student reflections each week. The length of interviews varied with student interviews often kept relatively short (5-10 minutes) as the researcher did not want to impose too much time on students or push them for answers. Teacher and principal interviews were longer as they engaged in more of a dialogical fashion than the students. Also, the questions prepared required in-depth answers and in all instances, teachers and principals directed additional avenues for exploration. Teachers in the secondary school who gradually came on board with the process (but had a limited involvement in the research) were also interviewed using the same semi-structured approach but the interviews were shorter. These interviews, however, did not capture the extent of how the skills acquired by students through NIC transferred outside of school.

Parents of participating students were interviewed to gauge their interpretation of their child’s experience with NIC and what meaning they elicited from the process. When given the option of coming to the school or being interviewed over the phone, all parents chose to be interviewed over the phone due to time restrictions on their part. Telephone interviews are considered to be a time-efficient, flexible and researcher and participant-friendly tool for conducting interviews (Trier-Bieniek 2012). Nevertheless, they are also considered as a low-effective interview method (Shuy 2002; Weiss 1994) that are mostly useful for asking participants a large number of close-ended questions in rapid succession (Chang and Krosnick 2010). However, in the context of this study, parents participated in a semi-structured interview over the phone where every question was open-ended. A further criticism of phone interviews is the claim that it is difficult to build a rapport with a participant prior to and during the interview when there is no face-to-face interaction (Shuy 2002). This risk was offset somewhat during this research as the primary researcher had met most of the parents at a presentation evening prior to the phone interviews taking place. A study conducted by Trier-Bieniek (2012) revealed that being interviewed over the phone may result in more honest data due to the absence of the interviewer, the security felt by interviewees being in their natural setting and the anonymity phone interviews can afford to interviewees. The phone interviews conducted by this study were very relaxed and conversational lasting 10-15 minutes each and while there are concerns relating to this method, phone-interviews were not the primary method for data collection within this study.
Interviewing local educational stakeholders such as students, teachers, principals, and parents helped to capture the micro perspective of student’s engagement with NIC but could not place the concept of NIC in the wider Irish educational context. John Halbert, Director of Curriculum and Assessment in the NCCA and Dr Deirdre Matthews, Assistant Chief Inspector were also interviewed in order to gain a holistic insight into Irish curriculum, with particular reference to the new Junior Cycle. For the interview with John Halbert, the researcher travelled to NCCA head office in Dublin. The merits of a semi-structured interview were particularly relevant in this interview as Mr. Halbert had allocated 30minutes of his time to the interview which he then chose to extend to 1 hour and 20minutes due to the dialogical nature of the interview and time it took to explore additional questions from Mr. Halbert about the research. Power dynamics in interviews work both ways and Neal (1995) draws attention to the case of the ‘low-status research student’ interviewing powerful people and the resultant feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability this can have on the interviewer. This researcher took on board the recommendations of Walford (1994) and was well prepared and well researched so that confidence might better diminish the power dynamics. Although social dynamics were prioritised and attempts were made to meet each participant, email correspondence was the preferred choice of the assistant chief inspector Dr Deirdre Matthews. To facilitate this, an email conversation was developed consisting of interview questions which were answered thoroughly.

In each interview, every effort was made to ensure that participants felt comfortable. The researcher went to specific lengths to meet participants in a comfortable and familiar space to them and gave interviewees sufficient time to articulate their answers. The researcher took care to ensure that she was facilitative in their discussions and that each interview was interactive and social in nature. Although every effort was made to elicit participant voice, interviews can sometimes restrict the voice of participants (Vahasantanen and Saarinen 2013). Therefore, methods employed to help articulate voice further were journaling and reflections.

4.4.4 Journaling and Reflections

The decision to employ journaling and reflections was twofold; it was felt that journaling could firstly promote agency and dialogue between the researcher and participants and secondly, the reflections completed via the journaling process could stimulate internal dialogue in participants.
Journaling and reflections were a large part of this research process in order to promote participant agency. Reflection was encouraged for teachers, the primary researcher, and the students throughout the data collection phase by encouraging participants to reflect on their actions. Students and teachers were encouraged, supported, and given the space to reflect on their actions which can lead to self-improvement and empowerment as it stimulates critical thinking (Shiel and Jones 2005; Baker 1996). To support agency, steps were taken to encourage students and teachers to be critical of the research. Reflection questions such as ‘What did you dislike about the NIC class today?’ or ‘What would you change about the NIC class today?’ were included in every teacher and student reflection template to promote honesty and critical outlook. The researcher maintained a diary which consisted of researcher-reflections in addition to observation notes. Researcher reflections were completed after every NIC session and were integral for the researcher in adopting a critical outlook on the development of the research. Journaling was also included as an outlet to give students and teachers a voice to communicate their responses to the research in progress (Janesick 1999).

Journaling can promote dialogue between people as shown in a study of 22 teachers engaging in journaling with their students where Roderick (1986) found that journaling promoted written dialogue between teachers and students by enabling students to reflect on themselves and to share their reflections with a significant other. For the purpose of this research, journaling allowed teachers and students to express their uninfluenced opinions of the NIC process by completing individual reflections in their own time, when the researcher was not present. This research is based around negotiation and, therefore, dialogue with students and teachers is a central tenet to its success. Students were requested to complete reflections at the end of each NIC session and teachers were asked to complete reflections at various points throughout the research. Due to their regular completion, reflections were used to ascertain the longitudinal aspect of this research as students completed weekly reflections beginning after the initial NIC day and continuing right up until their last NIC session. The regular completion of reflections allowed the researcher to engage in written dialogue with the students and teachers where the NIC process was adapted in response to feedback and suggested changes from the students and teachers reflections. Journaling and reflections also facilitated a level of internal dialogue and meaning-making. Journaling can promote dialogue with one’s self (Progov 1992) and has been proven to facilitate a personal process of reflection and enable a synthesis of knowledge construction and revision in learning (Harasim 1990; Andrusyszyn 1996). Students benefited from sharing ideas, feelings, and self-perceptions as they engaged with individual reflections (Roderick 1986). Journal writing is a way of eliciting feedback from ourselves by reflecting on
our lives and meaning follows such a level of reflection (Progoff 1992). Reflection can assist in
the development of personal meaning-making, personal self-worth (Progoff 1975) and can enable students to make sense of themselves and the world around them (Graybeal 1987).
Reflections provided opportunities for students to make meaning from their experiences by reflecting upon them in writing, helping them to draw linkages between their thoughts, actions, behaviors, beliefs, and values (Berthoff 1987). This process of meaning-making through reflection was a constant feature throughout the NIC process. It is reflective merits such as these that prompted this research to include journaling as a chosen method.

While journaling satisfies many of the underlying assumptions of this research such as empowerment, internal dialogue and critical thinking it does not enable interactive dialogue. Instead, a person can only develop their own thoughts through journaling thus reinforcing their own assumptions (Brown 1983). The individual nature of journaling does not satisfy the social constructivist perspective of this work which sees knowledge as best-constructed in social, interactive environments; therefore, focus groups were also utilized.

4.4.5 Focus Groups

Focus groups were not a dominant methodology in this research and were conducted before data collection commenced to help situate the research. They played an important role in the initial stages of this study when an ‘investigation day’ was held during which the teachers and principals from four participating primary and secondary schools came together to discuss concerns they had about their students, the community and the research itself. Focus groups provide a socially orientated setting and a ‘World Café’ focus group design was employed primarily due to its ability to facilitate dialogue in a natural, conversational setting (Brown and Isaacs 2005). Dialogue is said to be the most powerful vehicle for changing social order (Cooperrider et al. 2003). The world café approach promotes dialogue by providing a group setting which helped groups to engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions in a relaxed ‘café-style’ social setting that enables the sharing and cross-pollination of information (Fouché and Light 2010). The idea of a ‘café’ style approach is that people are in a relaxed environment and so the investigation day was held in a local hotel, on neutral ground to all participating schools. The focus group session took up 3 hours of the day and the groups were structured to ensure that there was a representative from each school in all groups. A principal was never placed in a group with teachers from his/her school in order to offset any power
dynamics. Lastly, each focus group was facilitated by a UL member at all times to ensure equal speaking time for all members, to encourage shared listening (Brown and Isaacs 2005) and to ensure that all groups stayed on task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School A</td>
<td>1 Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School B</td>
<td>2 Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>2 Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School B(^{53})</td>
<td>2 Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.5: Schools and participants for the focus group day

Focus groups involve data emerging inductively from the interaction of a group who are discussing a topic supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1988). All of the question’s provided by the UL research team were in line with world café principles in that they aimed to enhance collective inquiry amongst participants by being open, broad and meaningful to participants real life situation (Brown and Isaacs 2005). Themes of concern were inductively generated amongst teachers and principals facilitated from the following three questions:

- What are your professional concerns as a teacher?
- What are your concerns for your pupils?
- What are your concerns about this research?

The generation of themes mirrored the NIC process as concerns were identified, grouped into themes, and the teachers then voted on which themes they would like to discuss further that day. Furthermore, participants chose the structure of the day and what they wanted to discuss in an open and informal environment that centred on promoting teacher agency and voice. This focus group session was a once-off occurrence used to gain an invaluable insight into the culture and context of the schools this research was about to take place in and also provided the teachers of

\(^{53}\) Secondary School B did not go on to participate in the NIC research.
nearby schools the opportunity to interact with each other in a professional capacity. Focus groups are said to be more successful if they comprise of strangers as their contribution would not be prohibited by prior relationships (Newby 2010). However, in this case all participants were from nearby schools so many of them were already acquainted. The employment of further methods such as interviews with principals and teachers with teacher reflections provided as additional outlets to better elicit teacher and principal voice.

4.4.6 Conclusion

It is felt that the methods employed to collect data for this research held true to its central research design which aimed to: elicit participant voice as much as possible; minimise power differentials between the researcher and researched; and ensure that social interaction was central to the methods that were employed. Prolonged participant observation was employed as researchers cannot study the social world without being a part of it. The longitudinal interaction with participants allowed for repeated observations and the building of relationships between the researcher and researched. Interviews and focus groups were viewed as a socially constructive method of articulating meaning with people and reflections were used to further elicit student and teacher voice and to empower participants to reflect on their actions. The combination of multiple methods was employed in an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and for the weaknesses of one method to be offset by the strengths of another through triangulation. Of equal importance to the methods used to collect data is how the data was analysed.

4.5 Data Analysis

In order to provide a contrast for possible alternative analytical methods that were not chosen, this section will provide an overview of some traditional methods for analysing qualitative data before providing a rationale for choosing inductive, thematic analysis as the primary analytical method for this research. The steps taken to analyse the data will be detailed in an effort to show how a rich, systematic and complex approach was applied to develop patterns of meaning through themes that emerged from the data. Before the decision was made to employ inductive thematic analysis, many other qualitative data analysis options were considered.
The purpose of social science research is to interrogate and uncover the meanings of people’s world views and explore the tacit assumptions behind practice (Bryman 1988). The analysis of data needs to consider a number of factors such as the need to understand the context of individuals and to sufficiently understand the language they use (Lincoln and Guba 1987). Data analysis is one of the most critical phases in qualitative research and the primary aim of this study was to conduct a systematic search for meaning in the data (Hatch 2002; Bogdan and Biklen 2007). With the primary intention of answering a research question, qualitative data analysis is conducted to ‘make sense out of the data’ (Merriam 2009, p.203). For the purpose of this research, data analysis will focus on the interpretation of meanings, practices, and processes in the classroom.

4.5.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected for this research came in the form of video, audio, and text from sources such as interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries, video recordings, and photographs. Some primary analysis methods considered were frequency analysis which comprises of techniques for reducing texts to the words, identifying specific characteristics within the text and then analysing them using a variety of statistical techniques to test a hypotheses (Ryan and Bernard 1994; Stone et al. 1966). Keyword analysis involves searching for words and repetition of words that have a specific meaning with the purpose of trying to understand what participants are saying (Bernard and Ryan 2010). Constant Comparison analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) involves taking one piece of data (e.g. one interview) and comparing it with others to develop similarities and relationships with the ultimate aim of generating a theory (Thorne 2000; Bernard and Ryan 2010).

The constant comparative method was originally developed for use in the grounded theory methodology of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory has strong theoretical links as it seeks patterns in the data but they are ‘theoretically bounded’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.80). Furthermore, the primary aim of this analytical method is the discovery of data-induced hypotheses (Ryan and Bernard 1994). Grounded theorists want to understand peoples’ experiences in the most detailed and rigorous manner in order to generate a plausible theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data (McLeod 2001; Ryan and Bernard 1994). In order to initiate grounded theory research, there is a need to have a severely diminished understanding of the concept in question. Given that NIC is a well-structured and published concept (Beane 1995; Boomer 1992), it was not adopted as a suitable method of data analysis for this study.
Developing on from text-data, an analytical method that considers speech as the most relevant data is Critical Discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis is an analytical method that seeks to understand human experience through linguistic representation (Smith 2007). The critical theoretical perspective held by this research, which focuses on power relations prevalent in education, led to the exploration and serious consideration of the ‘critical discourse analysis’ method. Critical discourse analysis is a very systematic way of looking at language that binds knowledge and power and is centered on critical inquiry into the language that is used in an attempt to uncover the societal influences underlying our behaviors and thoughts (Boutain 1999). Furthermore, all discourse analysis strategies have strong theoretical links and can often involve testing existing theories in the data analysis process (Thorne 2000; Sandelowski 1994). The primary reason for not selecting this method was because this research is exploratory.

This study is exploratory as it is the first Irish-based tentative hypothesis on NIC trying to gauge how people will react to it and there are no existing theories to test implementing NIC in the Irish school context. Critical discourse analysis uses latent themes which refer to the power behind knowledge by examining the ‘underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations and ideologies that are implicit in the subtext of the data collected (Braun and Clark 2006). This research is only concerned with examining the surface dimensions of NIC through semantic themes and this is just one of the reasons why inductive thematic analysis is the data analysis method that has been selected as the most appropriate for this research design.

4.5.2 Inductive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke’s work (2006) was highly influential in leading the researcher to believe that inductive, thematic data analysis was the most suitable analytical method for this study. Thematic data analysis is a flexible method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is flexible because, unlike grounded theory and discourse analysis, thematic analysis is not tied to any pre-existing theoretical framework (Boyatzis 1998). Instead, the inductive aspect allows the theory to emerge from the researchers interaction with the research context where themes are identified in an inductive way (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Stemming from the ontological assumption that all voices should be heard and all individuals should be respected, methods that attempted to capture and promote voice for
participants were used throughout. An inductive approach to data interpretation was adopted to allow for the articulation of student and teachers voices rather than assuming a pre-imposed approach. Furthermore, the theoretically flexible associations of inductive thematic analysis are deemed most suitable to the exploratory nature of this research. Thematic analysis can accurately articulate voice and report on experiences and the ways individuals make meanings of their experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006).

While this research sought out a flexible analytical method, it also required an approach that could provide a rich, detailed and complex thematic description of the data which Braun and Clarke (2006) explicitly associate with inductive thematic analysis. This rich description is particularly important if you are researching an ‘under-researched area’ (ibid. p. 83) which is the essence of this exploratory study. Furthermore, the research design for this study involved a triangulation of methods and while the constant comparative method focuses on one piece of data at a time, thematic analysis was selected as it compares data across a number of sources to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006). A learner’s cognitive development is inseparable from their social environment (Rogoff 1995) and so the focus of analysis was on socio-cultural practices (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition 1983). Lastly, thematic analysis is deemed most suitable to this research because it requires a researcher to make explicit their epistemological and other assumptions that informed their analysis (Holloway and Todres 2003). This research places a strong emphasis on making the underlying assumptions of the researcher transparent to the reader54. While inductive thematic analysis largely derives from the language of participants, thematic selection is also influenced by the literature (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the context of this study, the researcher plays an active role in identifying themes, making decisions surrounding their selection, and incorporating a step by step process for analysing the data (Taylor and Ussher 2001; Patton 1990).

4.5.3 The Data Analysis Process

Braun and Clarkes ‘6 phases of thematic analysis’(2006) were chosen as the guiding analytical framework for this research and are as follows: (1) Familiarising yourself with your date, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. Each stage will now be explored in the context of this work.

54 See Conceptual Framework (Chapter Two) and Methodological Conceptual Framework (section 4.1 of this chapter)
(1) **Familiarizing yourself with your data**

The researcher transcribed every piece of qualitative data collected including; interviews; student and teacher reflections; audio recordings from focus groups and NIC sessions; and researcher-diary field notes from participant observation and video recordings. Human interaction is complex and this researcher had to make choices surrounding which aspects of interaction to transcribe and such decisions were influenced by the philosophical perspective of the researcher, the literature and the aims of the research project (Bailey 2008). This researcher immersed herself in the data for an extended period of time by reading, listening, and viewing it over and over again to gain an in-depth understanding of the data before beginning to analyse it (Savin-Baden and Major 2012).

(2) **Generating initial codes**

The researcher developed and refined coding categories by writing her own definitions for codes and assigning descriptive labels that captured the meaning of each code (Ryan and Bernard 1994). During this phase, the researcher had to overcome coding difficulties such as an overload of data, over-categorising, and getting used to computer programs (Savin-Baden and Major 2012). Nvivo was used throughout the coding process as a data management system to manage large volumes of data. In addition to a detailed description, every code contained inclusion and exclusion criteria (Crabtree and Miller 1992) and evidential pieces of data were linked to each code (Dey 1993). Each code was re-defined several times and once the descriptions were finalised, they were organised into hierarchies. As the data analysis was inductive, it involved a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame which allowed for the emergence of themes (Ryan and Bernard 1994).

(3) **Searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes**

The development of themes represents a movement in the data analysis stage towards interpretation (Ryan and Bernard 1994). Part of the inductive, thematic analysis process requires the researcher to make active decisions surrounding what counts as a theme and the level at which themes are to be identified (Braun and Clarke 2006). Much of the interpretive analysis had already been done at the coding phase (Miles and Huberman 1994) so the hierarchal list of defined codes with their supportive evidence were then organised into potential themes ensuring that all data relevant to these potential themes was linked accordingly. When analysing the data and selecting possible themes, the researcher was always mindful of the pertinence of the data, and its consistency across different participants and sources.
These themes were developed to identify patterns, discover relationships, and make interpretations (Hatch 2002). With the aid of Nvivo to manage the data, each theme was linked back and checked against the codes and Nvivo was also used for the creation of data analysis models. Literature also guided the researcher’s identification of themes. A researcher diary helped to develop greater veracity around the analytical process by documenting a log of what stages of the data analysis were completed, and their timescale. Furthermore, the two academic supervisors for this research reviewed the themes to see if they agreed with them before the specifics of each theme were refined further and given final names and clear definitions.

(6) Producing the report

This phase provided the researcher with a final opportunity for analysis. Findings were directly linked back to the research question and the discussion chapter provided opportunities to make explicit connections between the literature, the findings and the critical, social constructivist perspective underlying this work, eventually leading to a final report of the analysis.

4.5.4 Conclusion

The exploratory nature of this work is the main rationale for why inductive thematic analysis was utilised, but not before considering other methods. Inductive thematic analysis is similar to most qualitative data analysis methods in that it seeks to uncover patterns of meaning and is similar to methods such as constant comparison and grounded theory as it deals with ways of understanding human phenomena within the context in which they are experienced (Thorne 2000). However, it is distinctive in that it is a flexible analytical method without any theoretical ties, instead allowing for the themes to come from the data and the research as much as possible. It is, however, always cognisant that themes will be influenced by the literature and the theoretical perspective of the research. The research epistemology guides what you can say about your data. It also informs how you theorize meaning and a good thematic analysis should make transparent the underlying theoretical framework of the research and the underlying assumptions about reality (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data analysis process required an immersion in the data before the analysis process began which comprised mostly of reviewing, refining, defining, and re-defining the data into codes and themes. Final themes were decided upon with clear descriptions before writing up the research report. The ‘flexibility’ aspect of the inductive thematic analysis approach is both its key strength and its downfall where the absence of clear
guidelines around how this analytical approach is conducted means that it is subject to the ‘anything goes’ critique of qualitative research (Antaki et al. 2002). To offset criticisms surrounding the methodological process undertaken by this study, numerous validity measures were employed.
4.6 Validity

The exact meaning of the word validity is ‘truth’ and validity in any piece of research is its different claims to truth. All research must be able to truthfully stand over the data collected, the processes through which it was obtained and the findings and conclusions made from its analysis. In qualitative research, ‘fidelity’ requires the researcher to be as honest as possible in the self-reporting of the research and in documenting what actually happened (Blumenfeld-Jones 1995). There are several different validity measures a piece of research can employ but for the purpose of a focused discussion confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba 1985) were chosen as the overriding validity measures undertaken by this study. These methods incorporated the use of triangulation, member checking, and examining researcher bias which were considered as vital to enhancing the validity of this work. This section will identify how validity was enhanced throughout the study by employing this range of strict verification measures during the data collection phase, during its analysis and in reporting the findings.

4.6.1 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the degree of neutrality in a piece of research and the extent to which the findings of a study are determined by, and shaped by, the respondents and not by the agendas of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Riege 2003). That is, to show that findings of a piece of research ‘are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher’ (Shenton 2004, p.72). Techniques recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for establishing confirmability which were employed by this research are triangulation, examining your own bias’ as a researcher and audit trails which will now be detailed in the context of this study.

Methodological Triangulation

The employment of a range of methods in this research enabled the weaknesses of one method to be offset by another method in a process called methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon to produce a more accurate, comprehensive and objective representation of the object of study (Denzin 1978; Silverman 1993). Through triangulation, the deficiencies of each method should average out across methods leaving a true estimate of a single result (Brinberg
and Kidder 1982). Triangulation can also be used to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon under study and to add to the investigator's depth and breadth of understanding (Fielding and Fielding 1986; Adami and Kiger 2005). Based on the results of carrying out a triangulation study using three methods of qualitative data collection, Oliver-Hoyo and Allen (2006) recommended the use of multiple methods in order to develop a fuller picture of the situation and to ensure the validity of results. As outlined in Fig. 4.2, this research has employed a variety of methods to provide a complete account of the data collected for this research and this section will attempt to communicate how the weaknesses and threats of one method were offset by another chosen method through triangulation.

Participant observation is naturalistic in that students are being observed in their regular classroom environment but the presence of a researcher also presents validity threats. There is a risk of confirmation bias where participants may say what they think the researcher wants to hear (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007) as well as ‘reactivity’ threats; the Hawthorne effect and novelty effect, which result in the change in a person’s behaviour and responses as a result of being cognisant that they are participating in a research investigation (Hammersley, 1990; Onwuegbuzie 2003). The prolonged engagement element of this longitudinal study helped to diffuse the novelty effect as the researcher was present in each school for a number of months and repeated observations during this time helped to determine greater consistency. Furthermore, journaling can offset these risks as reflections are completed by the students and teachers in the absence of the researcher, therefore, the participants are not subject to and influential threats posed by a participant observation setting. In contrast, the individual nature of journaling cannot capture the social interactions, conversations, and the social construction of meaning in the classroom. The use of video-taping and audio recording can offset this as interactions and conversations amongst participants can be accurately captured via such methods. Participant observation is open to interpretation by the researcher and so interviews were used to elicit whether the researcher’s interpretation of events matched that of the participants. However, interviews also have their flaws.

In an interview situation, it is argued that power structures exist and power lies with the interviewer (Scheurich 1995; Kvale 1996). Furthermore, interviews present the ‘reactivity risk’ that what an interviewee may say in an interview is not genuine or true as there may be an eagerness by the respondent to please the interviewer and the voice of the participant is restricted (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989). The use of journaling as an additional data collection method can
offset power dynamics as students and teachers can be empowered to reflect on their actions, thus attempting to promote agency in the researched (Shiel and Jones 2005). Furthermore, journaling allowed this research to elicit the voice of participants further and reactivity risks were significantly reduced as reflections were completed in a space where the researcher was not present. Interviews can also be subject to bias where sub-consciously (or consciously) there may be a tendency by the interviewer to seek out the answer to their preconceived notions (Bell and Waters 2014). The maintenance of a research journal by the primary researcher can effectively contribute to minimizing researcher bias as entries in the research diary will make visible detailed accounts of experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings in order to contribute to the transparency of this work.

Interviews themselves can also be used as a method to offset weaknesses of the social nature of focus groups which present the potential risk of participants influencing each other’s responses where an individual may feel silenced by the presence of others (Kitzinger 1994). To address this risk, each teacher that took part in the focus group was also interviewed individually and given the opportunity to complete reflections to elicit their individual voice without the presence (and influence) of others. By combining multiple methods over a prolonged period of time, this enabled the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of the participants as they interacted with NIC and present a more holistic account of this exploratory study to the reader. In addition to the methodological triangulation employed by this research where different methods were compared, this research also took measures to validate qualitative data by comparing interpretations of results from different sources (Oliver-Hoyo and Allen 2006).

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation compares information from different sources to see whether they corroborate one another and is therefore a process of cross-validation (Silverman 1993; Wiersma 2000). Data triangulation is based on the premise that research should search for the truth and if there is truth to be found, the researcher should take a range of measures to ensure they find it (Adami and Kiger 2005). To ensure that truthful and accurate data was received from participants; this research looked for the counterfactual to disprove it. What was said to the researcher during interviews and focus groups was compared to what students wrote privately in their reflections. Similarly, what the researcher witnessed during participant observation was compared with
observations noted by the teacher in reflections. Threats to the validity of student data included confirmation bias and ‘reactivity’ threats; the Hawthorne effect and novelty effect (Hammersley 1990; Onwuegbuzie, 2003). Prolonged engagement in the classroom and data triangulation were the validity measures implemented to offset such threats.

In the data collection and processing phase of this research, data triangulation combined interview and participant observation data to make better sense of each other while teacher journal entries and teacher interview data were combined to check for consistency. Journaling acted as a key measure for consistency where the researcher questioned whether or not what the students were saying to the researcher during interviews, and what the researcher observed in the classroom, was consistent with what they were writing in their journals privately. Focus groups can be useful to triangulate with the more traditional form of interviewing as it involves data emerging from the interaction of a group as opposed to the one-to-one nature of interviewing (Morgan 1988) and the individual nature of reflections. The use of interviewing as an additional data collection method was used to offset this weakness. This research also looked to data that was convergent and what this exposed, that is, data collected from focus groups was compared to data collected from individual interviews with teachers, principals and students to verify consistent answers and expressed opinions in both settings. The more sources one examines, the more likely the researcher is to have an adequate finding and conclusion (Newman and Benz 1998).

In the data analysis phase of this work, inductive data analysis was employed to identify themes that developed and emerged over time. Convergent themes were recognised amongst different students and claims made by students were aligned with those made by teachers to further measure convergence. Furthermore, observations made by teachers about their students were also compared with interview data from parents to analyse, for example, whether aspects of the intended transferable skills of NIC also transferred outside the classroom. These emerging themes were identified by thematic coding. Data triangulation was embedded throughout the data collection and analysis procedures to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. As an additional validity measure during the data analysis phase, both of the academic supervisors for this research, who have a similar theoretical framework to the primary researcher, checked the coding process at various stages. This process could be viewed as a type of ‘inter-rater

---

As discussed in Methodological Triangulation (Section 4.6.1 of this chapter)
reliability’ which involves establishing whether another observer with the same theoretical framework and observing the same data would interpret observations in the same way as the primary researcher (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

A hypothesis set forward by Silverman (1993) states that, if the findings attained through all these methods correspond and deliver the same or parallel conclusions, then the validity of those findings and conclusions have been largely established (Silverman 1993). When drawing findings from data, this research posed the question: ‘Are my findings consistent enough to be warranted?’ Researcher observations and student journal entries were analysed for consistency against that written by teachers in their journals. For example, one area of teacher reflections requires them to list observed student behaviours. This work will seek to corroborate whether the student behaviours listed by the teachers are consistent with the behaviours observed by the researcher. Furthermore, data from teacher and student reflections and observation field notes will be compared across the three schools participating in this research. The role of triangulation in promoting confirmability must again be emphasised, in the context of reducing the effect of investigator bias.

Researcher Reflexivity

The issue of researcher reflexivity pertains to the capacity of the researcher to reflect on the possible biases and power dynamics that might distort the research process as well as how the researcher constructs the interpretations of the experiences they witness or record (Bott 2010). Within any study that attempts an ethnographic perspective, the issue of researcher reflexivity becomes more salient for the setting that the researcher is immersed in (Ibid.). The researcher in any participant observation becomes an insider within the context under study yet must still also adopt the role of an outsider to conduct the research (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). Within such studies

- discovering what participants, both insiders and outsiders, construe as normal or as important requires that researchers examine their own beliefs and the language they use to represent the lives and experiences of research participants (Agee 2002, p.52)

The power dynamics of such relationships are also of significant focus. For example Kelman’s (1972, p.989) analysis of power dynamics within social research comments on how participants rarely direct the manner in which the research is conducted as well as the manner of how they might be represented with the final research. Equally Nader (1974 p.292) views the various
researcher-researchee relationships as ‘studying up, down, or sideways’ to explore the power dynamics with those (respectively) that the researcher might feel relatively disempowered to critique, or those who would be relatively disempowered to critique the researcher, or peers of the researcher. For example, the participants that a researcher is “studying-up” might be funding their research, participants that a researcher is “studying-down” might be a teacher and her students, and “studying-sideways” might be teachers that the research is teaching with.

In the context of this study, the researcher was “studying up” with the NCCA who were both participants in this research and also funded this work. Prior to the provision of the NCCA funding, the researcher interviewed the director of curriculum and assessment in the NCCA. There was the risk that the researcher could feel disempowered as described by Neal (1995) who draws attention to the case of the low-status research student interviewing powerful people and the resultant feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability this can have on the student. As evidenced in section 1.6\(^{56}\), the changing relationship between the researcher and the NCCA was highlighted which presented opportunities for researcher bias where the researcher might be overly supportive of the work and the design and implementation of NIC in the participating schools could be subconsciously shaped by my involvement with the NCCA.

The researcher was “studying-sideways” with fellow teachers in this study which was based largely on the learning experiences of students which could be perceived as “studying down”. In relation to the relationship between the researcher and both the teachers and students, section 4.6.1 detailed the various ‘reactivity threats’ to this study where essentially, both teachers and students could behave differently, cognisant of the presence of the researcher. The risk of tension between the ‘insider-outsider’ was particular apparent as the researcher adopted a participatory teacher-researcher role, in order to experience and participate in the learning environment from the perspective of an ‘insider’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996). However, all participants were still aware that they were subjects of a research project as they had to sign consent forms and many of the NIC sessions were audio and video recorded.

Attention must also be paid to the concept of personal reflexivity regarding the issue of researcher bias within social science research. Personal reflexivity can be understood as people’s ability to reflect upon themselves taking into consideration their social circumstances (Caetano

\(^{56}\) Autobiographical context
and is also described as a private, subjective process that takes the form of internal
dialogue and conversations (Archer, 2003). This involves accounting for the influence of their
personal values and beliefs on the research process (Lumsden 2012) where it is held that a
researchers personal, social circumstances and beliefs can affect the specific courses of action
they take when conducting research (Alexander 1988), where sometimes researchers act at a
non-conscious level (Bourdieu 1992). To engage in a genuine attempt at reflexivity, researchers
Even though researchers can actively strive to mitigate bias, they will never achieve the ‘impos-
sible nature of objectivity’ (Lumsden 2012 p. 5).

Chapter Two\textsuperscript{57} and Chapter Three\textsuperscript{58} detailed the theoretical, epistemological and ontological
assumptions including understandings of how knowledge is constructed and produced and
beliefs about the socio-cultural nature of learning environments. A key criterion for reducing
researcher bias is the extent to which the researcher admits his/her own predispositions (Miles
and Huberman 1994). This study acknowledges that researchers cannot divorce their own values
and biases from the inquiry in which they are engaged in (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Toma 2000).
As the primary researcher made key decisions of what the foundational conceptual framework
would be to deciding on the themes that emerged organically from the data, researcher bias is
something that needs to be accounted for. Due to the qualitative (and therefore subjective) nature
of this work, a level of bias was assumed to be true across all decisions around whose voice and
perspectives will be privileged, negotiated, and/or silenced in this work (Fine 2006). The full
extent to which researcher bias will influence an inquiry will never be known (Krauss 2005) but
several validity measures were employed\textsuperscript{59} including the self-disclosure of assumptions\textsuperscript{60},
beliefs, values and therefore, biases that helped to shape this inquiry. As detailed in section 4.4.4,
the researcher maintained a journal which facilitated a level of internal dialogue and helped the
researcher to reflexively reflect on personal biases. Furthermore, the detailed audit trails kept by
this researcher of all the raw data pertaining to this work can also help to minimise the influence
researcher bias might have on the results of this study.

\textsuperscript{57} Conceptual Framework
\textsuperscript{58} Literature Review
\textsuperscript{59} See section 4.6 for a detailed examination of the validity measures employed by this study.
\textsuperscript{60} These assumptions based on the values of the researcher can be found in the conceptual framework of this thesis.
Audit Trails

To facilitate the provision of a transparent audit trail, this research retained all raw data from fieldwork such as; observation notes; audio recordings; video recordings; samples of students work; copies of all student and teacher reflections; and transcriptions of all interviews. All raw data is held in a secure location for inspection by an auditor if required. Following this, all data analysis procedures and the reporting of findings are documented and available for an auditor to determine whether the interpretation of data has been drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Halpern 1983).

4.6.2 Transferability

Transferability is a validity measure that contributes to the external validity of this research as it refers to the degree to which the results of a qualitative piece of research can be generalised or transferred to other settings to show that the findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Onwuegbuzie 2003; Denzin 2009). The main technique advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for facilitating the transferability of findings and conclusions is ‘thick description’ i.e. the provision of a clear, detailed and in-depth description of events so that others can decide the extent to which findings from one piece of research can be transferred to another context (Schofield 1993). In addition to the storing of all raw data from this research, a detailed observation diary was maintained by the primary researcher which contained researcher reflection and an in depth account of every NIC session with the students. Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1984) believe that performing multi-site studies can increase the transferability and external validity of a piece of research. NIC was carried out with three different classes of students, across three different schools. In all three settings, NIC satisfied LeCompte and Preissle’s (1992) conditions for increasing the external validity of research through replication: the status of the researcher; the social situations and conditions; the method of selecting respondents; and methods of data collection and analysis. In addition to truthfulness, ‘authenticity’ was selected as another suitable validity method to judge the honesty of this piece of qualitative research.
4.6.3 Authenticity

An additional validity measure that is pertinent to this research is meeting the five authenticity criteria as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) which are relevant to naturalistic and constructivist-orientated research inquiries (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008). The five authenticity criteria are: Fairness; Ontological authenticity; Educative authenticity; Catalytic authenticity and; Tactical authenticity. This section will now demonstrate how this study has met these criteria in order to satisfy the ‘authenticity’ validity measure.

Fairness involves adequately capturing the voice, thoughts, feelings, concerns and experiences of each of the participants being represented in a study and negotiating the agendas of a study with them (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008). This research has employed a triangulation of methods including journaling, interviews, and focus groups with the specific aim of eliciting the voice of each respondent and, in keeping with the underlying assumptions of this research; each aspect of the data collection phase was negotiated with all stakeholders.

Ontological authenticity refers to the documentation of how the participants’ awareness was increased during the research and how their experiences evolved in a meaningful way as a result of participation in the study (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008). The regular completion of reflections, where critical outlook was encouraged, provided participants with the opportunities to reflect on their work and actions, thus increasing their awareness.

Educative authenticity pertains to how much participants actually learned from taking part in a study and to satisfy this, key evidence of learning in terms of content, processes and self-regulation will be presented in the findings of this research. Catalytic authenticity refers to how participation in this research lead to participants taking actions and making decisions based on their new understandings (Guba and Lincoln 1989). This study attempted to capture such experiences through interview and journaling methods employed which attempted to accurately capture testimonies made by participants about areas of their profession and schooling that they would change as a direct result of taking part in this research. Lastly, tactical authenticity refers to the extent participants were empowered to act on their increased understandings to become co-constructors of knowledge and change agents (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2008). The social construction of knowledge and the empowerment of participants to reflect upon and change their actions through praxis is a central underlying assumption of research which has guided not only the methodology of this study but the concept of NIC as a whole. While extensive steps were
taken to employ methods that would satisfy these criteria, threats to validity such as researcher bias prevailed which needed to be addressed. A validity measure employed by this research which contributed to this study’s ontological and educative authenticity was member checking.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is a form of respondent validation performed by this research which involved taking the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the teachers, students, and principals for them to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account compiled by the researcher. In qualitative research, this technique is considered to be ‘the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in a study’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p.314) and the most critical technique for reducing researcher bias (Bryman et al. 2008). Once the data analysis phase of this research was conducted, the researcher returned to the participants with the data to ensure that their voices were accurately interpreted and represented. This was done both for validity purposes and also as a matter of respect and courtesy.

Member checking with the participating teachers, principals and policymakers involved providing them with full copies of interview transcripts to verify accuracy. Furthermore, preliminary findings from data analysis were also presented to teachers and principals to determine whether the researcher’s interpretation of what happened matched theirs. In October 2015, the researcher returned to the secondary school to carry out respondent validation with the 29 participating students from that school. Students were placed in groups and unlike the member checking process carried out with teachers and principals, they were not presented with findings. Instead, students firstly completed an anonymous survey consisting of five broad questions, for example, ‘what are the three main things you remember about NIC last year?’ Students were then placed in groups and asked to discuss the same questions again and mind map their group’s answers. Following this, a class discussion was held where feedback from each group was mapped on the board. The aim of this approach was for students to organically recall what themes stood out from their memory of the NIC process the previous year instead of imposing a list of themes on the students and asking if they agreed. Prompting and trigger questions were only used at times when the students did not arrive at the themes organically. At

---

61 It was not possible to return to either of the participating classes in Primary School as the students had since transitioned to a number of different Secondary Schools.

62 See Appendix 4 for a copy of the survey given to students.
the end of this day, the researcher presented a slideshow to the students sharing the main findings that arose from the data analysis with the students. This was done to determine whether the researcher ‘accurately captured the essence of the stories being told’ (Bloor 1978, p.639).

4.6.4 Conclusion

A wide range of verification strategies were employed by this research to ensure the authenticity of the claims to truth that have been made. This research inquiry is built upon assumptions relating to the empowerment of individuals by eliciting their voice in relation to decisions surrounding their curriculum. Therefore, it was pertinent that this study ensured that participant voice was accurately represented in its findings by employing a range of validity measures. This study employed a triangulation of methods to adequately capture this voice where data triangulation compared information to improve corroboration (Wiersma 2000). Transferability measures were employed so that this exploratory study could be considered for future implementation in similar contexts. In attempting to increase authenticity of this study, the researcher returned to participants to seek respondent validation through a member checking process. In an effort to remain loyal to the critical, social constructivist perspective of this research, member checking with students was carried out in a social environment to better allow students their own voice in checking their data rather than reinforcing their themes. Verification procedures such as member checking can also address some of the ethical issues and considerations pertaining to this research.
4.7 Ethics

In social science research, the ethical conduct of the researcher is of paramount importance and this study was always mindful of ethical issues, especially pertaining to the context of the school environment, and protecting the rights of young people. Ethical behaviour includes how people should act towards each other (Kitchener 2000) and has moral connotations that refer to the principles of right and wrong that guide ethical choices (LaFollette 1994; Bogdan and Biklen 1992). It was appreciated and acknowledged at all times that research involving children must meet the highest ethical standards due to the vulnerability of the participants. This section will look to some of the general ethical considerations of carrying out research in an educational setting before identifying ethical issues pertaining to this study and the ethical procedures implemented to address such issues.

4.7.1 Ethical considerations of carrying out research in an educational setting

Educational research needs to consider the ethical implications of what it does and some general considerations include the potential cost to the participants, costs to the profession and costs to society as a whole (Baumrind 1985; Lincoln and Guba 1987). Costs to participants include a breach of trust, an undermining of respondents own judgements and the loss of the participants sense of control (Lincoln and Guba 1987). Costs to the profession include jeopardising support for the research, undermining the credibility of the institution represented by the research, and undermining the commitment to truth of the researchers themselves (Baumrind 1985). Lastly, the ‘cost to society’ concerns an undermining of trust in expert authorities, broadening the impression of mistrust and suspicion pertaining to social science research and causing harm to people by inconveniencing and irritating them (Lincoln and Guba 1987; Baumrind 1985).

The ethical considerations pertaining to this research focussed mostly on the ‘cost to participants’ but was always cognisant of the potential impact it could have upon the credibility of the University of Limerick (UL) and the possible negative perceptions of professionals involved in teaching and educational research. Ethical guidelines are in place to test the social relevance, responsibility and moral stature of research conducted in the social sciences which apply to qualitative research conducted in an educational setting (Bulmer 1980). All educational research should be guided by a number of key ethical principles and considerations; namely,
respect for persons, non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity, and justice (McLeod 2010; NCGE 2008; LoBiondo-Wood and Haber 1998).

4.7.2 Ethical issues pertaining to this study

The primary conditions relevant to this study will be identified in this section before providing details of the steps taken to address these issues. The ‘cost to participants’ consideration (Baumrind 1985) led this researcher to question, at the commencement of this study; who will be spoken to and who will be worked with that need to be considered ethically? Participants in this study involved children, parents, and professionals (teachers, principals and policymakers). Thus, some of the main ethical implications involved were the acquisition of informed consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality for all participants. This research had to consider whether taking part in this research would benefit participants in any way but also whether it posed any potential risk to participants. Attempts were made to minimise the physical, social and psychological risk of participation for all contributors to this study, especially young people. However, this research was cognisant of, for example, the sensitive nature of students revealing their personal concerns and the associated risk of over-disclosure of these concerns. As such, measures were taken to ensure the protection and care of participants. The naturalistic approach taken and consequential methodologies employed by this research also presented some ethical issues for the study.

The subjective nature of this research rejects the idea that the relationship between the researcher and participants should be objective (Lincoln and Guba 1987). The primary researcher assumed the role of an interactive participant observer. This aspect led to ethical considerations pertaining to the relationship between the researcher and researched. Did the researcher exert any power over the students? Or, could the relationship be perceived as a relationship with the powerless (Hoy 2004)? Ethically (and morally), this research addressed these considerations by ensuring that relationships with students and indeed, with all of the participants, were built upon mutual respect, dignity, and trust. Additionally, the longitudinal nature of the study in combination with the role of the researcher as a participant-researcher unearths further ethical issues such as how the researcher-participant relationship could develop to include a heightened feeling of responsibility and care (Monrouxe 2009). A further method employed by this research that could present ethical threats to this work was the recording of students and teachers.
All of the interview, focus group, and some observation data was recorded on an audio recording device. Furthermore, some key occurrences such as the initial NIC day and student presentations were video recorded. The use of video recording as a data collection method had to be heavily defended to the UL ethics committee involving one resubmission to the board who requested further justification for the necessity of this method. The committee were informed that that the data collected from this source would be extremely rich and video recording was necessary to capture the high levels of interaction between teachers and students and, students and their peers. It was also emphasised that by conducting having a visual recording of the classroom, this would show far more than observations notes could capture. This had ethical implications surrounding the employment of informed consent, withdrawal, anonymity and confidentiality, amongst others.

4.7.3 Ethical procedures employed

In addition to conforming to the University of Limerick’s ethical standards, certain steps were taken to address the aforementioned ethical issues and also to maintain coherence with the conceptual, theoretical perspectives held by this research. Ethical procedures undertaken included: informed consent; withdrawal for participants; anonymity and confidentiality; care and protection of research participants; beneficence; and data representation and verification.

Informed Consent

All research participants should be given the opportunity to make an informed choice regarding whether or not to consent (Bryman and Bell 2007). Furthermore, in order to consider consent valid, it must also be informed so that participants can be fully cognisant of what the implications of the research are (Shaw et al. 2011). From the outset, participation in this study had to be from an informed and assenting position. Informed consent was received from every participating student, parent, teacher, principal, and policymaker before they were allowed to take part through the distribution of information sheets and accompanying consent forms which had to be signed. Stringent ethical parameters were followed when preparing information sheets for participants to ensure they contained suitable information relating to the purposes of

---

63 An extensive ethics application and supporting documentation were submitted to the UL Ethics committee in February 2013 and approval was received from the committee in March 2013 (before any research commenced).

64 Copies of information sheets and consent forms provided in Appendix 5
the project as well as details of how the project would be carried out. For example, that it would
involve a researcher present in the classroom and occasional video-taping of the students. The
information sheets contained appropriate levels of language and therefore, different information
sheets were given to students, parents, teachers, and policymakers to suit their relevant literacy
levels.

Special care was taken with the student forms to insure that they contained language appropriate
to their age with no technical terms. A verbal explanation was provided to parents and students
in an information session to provide further clarification and assist with any literacy problems.
Lastly, contact information for the research team (two academic supervisors and primary
researcher) was provided in accordance with the Data Protection Acts (Data Protection
Commissioners 2007). The researcher ensured that all consent forms were returned and signed
before any respondent could participate. With regard to students who were under 18, in order to
respect their dignity, assent was gained from both the students themselves as well as their
parents/guardians (Phelan and Kinsella 2013). Together with content regarding NIC, the
information sheets also contained details of the withdrawal options, anonymity, and
confidentiality.

**Withdrawal for participants, anonymity and confidentiality**

It was stressed to each participant in this study at the stage of informed consent and throughout
the process that their participation in this research was voluntary and they had the right to
withdraw at any stage. An ontological position of this research is founded on the principle that
all people are potentially active agents in the construction of their social world who seek to be
liberated from ideological processes (Comstock 1982). A resultant methodological implication
was that participants always had the choice to say no. Students and teachers were allowed the
freedom to make decisions around whether they wanted to be initially involved in the research
and were given the option to withdraw at any stage throughout the process. When considering
the option of withdrawal, the researcher is reminded of Hoy’s (2004) definition of ethics as
‘obligations that present themselves as necessarily to be fulfilled but are neither forced on one or
are enforceable (p.103)’. As such, participants were reminded and informed that they could
withdraw at any time without prejudice and, if they decided to do so, any data or recordings
involving these participants would be discarded. No participant in the study fully withdrew from
the process but one student in the secondary school was visibly uncomfortable during an interview with the researcher which led to it being ceased immediately and the data was not used. To further protect students, they were also assured that their anonymity would be preserved throughout the process.

In accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003 (Government of Ireland 1988, 2003) no identifiable data was disclosed to others without the express permission of the participants and respective parent/guardians. The only exception to this has been the capacity to identify the director of the NCCA and the Assistant Chief Inspector who both agreed to be identified. The ethical consequences of the research for participants in terms of anonymity ensured that pseudonyms were used in the dissemination of any findings and anonymity will be maintained in all publications ensuing from this study including conference presentations and reports generated for the funding body. The right of the participants to access data that they contributed was always acknowledged and participants were informed of same. In addition to anonymity, confidentiality was also prioritised for all participants.

The ethical consideration of confidentiality was adhered to as any audio recordings, video recordings and photographs were only accessed by the research team. Furthermore, all data collected was stored in a secure location in UL and all electronic data was encrypted upon collection. This study also adhered to the University’s requirements to store the data for 7-10 years and to ensure that it is effectively destroyed at the end of this period in March, 2024. At this time, all electronic data will be erased and all written data will be shredded. Further protection and precautionary ethical measures were also introduced to ensure the wellbeing of the participants at all times.

**Care and protection of research participants**

This research was not explicitly intrusive in nature and did not intend to cause any distress to students, teachers or the wider participant community. In relation to students sharing their personal concerns on the initial NIC day, and the associated risk of over disclosure, students were assured before commencement and throughout the day that if there was any concern that they did not want to share then that was their prerogative. Furthermore, the researcher and teachers reviewed all concerns that students noted individually in their student journals prior to
placing students in a group setting where they would be asked to share concerns. At two stages throughout the research, students wrote down individual concerns and then made the decision not to share them with the group due to their personal and sensitive nature. Students were interviewed at the end of their experience with NIC, in their own classroom when a mutual relationship of trust and respect had already progressed. The interview questions were phrased very similarly to the questions students had been answering in their reflections all year. The researcher did not attempt to exert any influence or control over the students at any stage during the process and with a primary aim of promoting agency in students, attempted to promote the empowerment of students throughout the research process.

Attempts were made to ensure that students were never pressured into doing anything they didn’t want to do and every effort was made to ensure that students felt at ease with the process at all times. The researcher was conscious of not exerting control over participants and took precautions such as never looking over students’ shoulders while they were writing personal reflections or attempting to lead their responses during interviews. In addition to not exerting control, the researcher ensured that students and teachers felt included at all times by being consulted on key decisions surrounding the research. Care and protection was further facilitated as the three members of the UL research team are qualified teachers and therefore have extensive combined experience interacting with students in a classroom environment. Furthermore, each member of the research team has full Garda vetting clearance to work with children. Lastly, to mitigate any potential harm, all participants were provided with the contact details of an independent representative in the form of the Chair of the Faculty Ethics Committee of the University. Contrary to causing any harm to students, this research made every effort to ensure that participants benefited from taking part in the study.
**Beneficence**

It was imperative that this research protected issues of beneficence, that is, if a participant took part in a study, they gained something from this participation (McLeod 2010). The benefit to students of taking part in this study was that they had the opportunity to engage in more meaningful learning rooted in their concerns that actively sought to engage them with the local community. Furthermore, this curriculum initiative addressed issues of transition and retention that are currently a significant problem in the schools that took part in this study. The participating teachers had the capacity to co-construct a more meaningful curriculum with their students as well as access to a wealth of professional development. For participating principals, the key aspects and requirements of NIC such as promoting student voice, teacher collaboration, and subject integration are components of the School Self Evaluation Report that must be completed by the principal of each school and submitted to the Irish Inspectorate. The process of NIC allowed for principals to report evidence of each of these areas in the report. Policymakers from the NCCA and the Irish Inspectorate were given regular feedback on the progress of the research from which they gained an insight into what areas students stated they wanted to learn about, schools’ attitudes towards the current Junior Cycle reform and a structured approach to implementing an alternative approach to curriculum organisation. Lastly, the researcher went back to the participating principals, teachers, and students during member checking to ascertain if they felt respected throughout their participation and if they found it beneficial to take part in this study which also speaks to the authenticity of this research. Ethical verification measures were also employed pertaining to how participants were represented in the data.

**Data Representation and Verification**

As previously detailed, the anonymity of participants was protected in their representation in the data but this study also attempted to ensure that participants were not misrepresented. Upon completion of the research project; the findings were presented to participants in a suitable format highlighting their contribution and the resultant benefits. Data verification methods were employed whereby complete interview transcripts were brought back to participating principals and teachers for them to verify the accuracy of the content transcribed. Furthermore, a draft copy of the findings was supplied to the school’s principal and participating teachers for respondent validation prior to its final publication. Data triangulation was also employed where, for example, what a student said to the researcher during an interview was compared with writings
in private reflections. Stringent member checks were performed with students where they were not simply given a list of findings and asked if they agreed or disagreed. Instead, the researcher returned to the school during the following academic year and students were asked to organically recall what they felt the benefits and challenges of taking part in this study were. Furthermore, in attempting to ensure that participants’ views were represented in a balanced way, they were always asked and encouraged to provide critical input and to give their critical opinions of the NIC process which were also reported in the findings where relevant. Lastly, students were allowed to keep their journals (after they had been scanned) so they had a record of their contributions and experience of engaging in NIC.

4.7.4 Conclusion

Research should produce products that fulfil the criteria of relevance, responsibility, utility and morality (Bulmer 1980) to minimise the cost to participants and society. This study had a heightened awareness of the ethical issues involved in carrying out research in an educational setting but in particular, the ethical issues pertinent to this study. A focus was placed on the cost to participants (Baumrind 1985) in terms of the potential risk to participants when taking part in this research but also what they could gain from the experience. Every effort was made to ensure that participants were protected and were never misrepresented and this was facilitated through data verification methods such as respondent validation and data triangulation. Furthermore, by following the strict ethical guidelines of the University of Limerick, the cost to the profession was reduced as the credibility of the University was not undermined in any way nor did the research cause any reason for participants to view social science research as a whole, negatively. Lastly, the researcher stayed true to all her underlying assumptions by carrying out every aspect of this study ethically. This work attempted to minimise power differentials between the researcher and researched as well as between the researcher and participants through a process of mutual respect where all opinions regarding the NIC process were encouraged (through reflections) at all times. While every effort has been made to ensure the validity and ethical soundness of this research, some limitations of the research approach prevail.
4.8 Methodological Limitations

There were some methodological limitations pertaining to how this study was carried out and the very nature of qualitative research. They were as follows:

- **Generalizability**: This study is subject to the most serious problem with qualitative research; the ability to generalise findings (Schofield 1993). Given the exploratory nature of the study and the level of funding that was available, aspects of the study’s generalizability are context dependent because this was a small scale study conducted across three schools in a small part of the city. Therefore, the results of studying these sample schools in the regeneration areas of Limerick cannot be fully generalized to the wider population.

- **Participants revoking their commitment to the project**: A feeder secondary school that had initially signed up to become involved in the research withdrew one month before research was due to commence. Furthermore, within the participating schools themselves, teachers that originally signed up to become involved in the process withdrew, all citing their existing workload as the primary reason.

- **Member Checking with Primary School Students**: As the research was carried out at primary level with students in their final year of primary school, it was not possible to go back to those students after the data was analysed and carry out respondent validation as the students were no longer in the primary school by the time the analysis was completed. The students had moved to a number of different secondary schools so it was not feasible to follow up with each primary school student.

- **Monitoring transition**: This research only dealt with one class of first years in the secondary school and only one of the students that took part in the research at primary level transitioned to this 1st year class. This limited the extent to which the researcher could monitor any cross-curricular transitional implications for students taking part in NIC. Furthermore, the primary schools that engaged in the process were mixed gender and the female feeder secondary school pulled out of the process which ruled out following any of the female members of the 6th classes to secondary level.

- **Retention**: The potential to monitor whether students participation in NIC had any influence on retention rates was limited due to the timescale of this study. Given that the researcher only had three years within which to complete this research, it was not possible to stay with students throughout their secondary schooling careers to properly map retention and monitor whether or not they completed the 5-6 years of secondary school.

---

65 Two teachers from this school attended the Focus Group day held for teachers as discussed in section 4.2.5.
4.9 Conclusion of Methodology Chapter

Power dynamics play a significant part in social science research and therefore employ methodologies that attempted to minimise the power differentials between the researcher and the researched. The overriding methodological implication for adopting a critical, social constructivist theoretical stance was to employ a range of diverse methods to capture the social construction of knowledge and meaning. A fully qualitative approach was deemed to be most suitable to the methodology of this study due to its focus on: the study of social processes and human interaction; facilitating the meaning-making process; and accurately capturing the experiences of participants. The methods employed in attempting to capture these aspects were: a longitudinal study; video recording; participant observation; interviews; journaling; and focus groups. The data collected was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach which attempted to develop patterns of meaning through themes that emerged from the data. In attempting to improve the rigour of the study, several validity measures were employed including triangulation and member checking. Lastly, every attempt was made to employ ethical procedures to ensure the minimisation of harm to participants and society.
Chapter Five: Summary of Interventions

This chapter will serve as a summary of the initiatives carried out in each of the three participating schools to preface the findings chapters and discussion of the issues that emerged. A descriptive summary of the NIC process in each school will be provided to share the themes chosen by each school and provide a breakdown of the learning activities pursued. This summary of interventions aims to share with the reader the learning and engagement experienced by participants to provide sufficient context for the findings chapter which will explore a deeper academic engagement of it. With regard to any participants that are identifiable in the pictures, written permission has been obtained to use their pictures in this thesis. Anonymity has been maintained for all other participants.
5.1 Primary School A

5.1.1 Credentials

Primary School A was a mixed gender school where the NIC initiative took place with a combined 5\textsuperscript{th} and 6\textsuperscript{th} class made up of 28 students, aged 10-12 years old. One teacher, Gary\textsuperscript{66}, was involved in delivery of NIC to the students along with the primary researcher. The NIC intervention took place one morning a week over the course of 15 school weeks. Four hours a week were dedicated to NIC on the school timetable every Thursday morning. See Fig. 5.1 for a full profile of Primary school A.

![Outline of NIC Sessions](Fig. 5.1: Outline profile of NIC process in Primary school A)

5.1.2 NIC Process

The initial NIC day in Primary School A culminated in students voting for the overall theme of ‘health’ which was generated from the expressed personal and world concerns about health from the class group (Fig. 5.2). The sub-themes of ‘Physical Health, Mental Health and Emotional Health’ were firstly explored starting with a ‘research day’ where students visited computer, newspaper articles, and book stations set up around the room to research their project areas and write up their findings (Fig. 5.3). To answer the questions they came up with, students suggested

---

\textsuperscript{66} Pseudonym
numerous activities to find out the answers including interviewing people with specific expertise. In the weeks that followed, students worked in their groups to compile questions and practice interview etiquette in preparation for the interviews with health professionals. During week 5 of the NIC process, health professionals arrived at the school to be interviewed by the students. Two project groups interviewed a psychologist about mental and emotional health, one group interviewed two professional Munster rugby players about physical health and diet, and two groups interviewed a beautician about hormones and skincare (Fig. 5.4). The entire morning was student-led where students: greeted the professionals; asked the interview questions; audio recorded the interview, took down key pieces of information, and opened the floor to give the other students an opportunity to ask the professionals questions of their own. The next two weeks were spent drafting projects based on all the information they had researched first hand and then presenting their project areas to the class for assessment (Fig. 5.5).

Fig. 5.2: Students vote for themes & list of themes with corresponding no. of student votes

Fig. 5.3: Students research their project areas for Physical, Mental and Emotional Health
Week 8 saw students move onto a new sub-theme entitled ‘Smoking, Drugs and Alcohol’ (SD&A). This theme was generated out of the numerous questions and concerns students documented on the initial NIC day about the effects of SD&A on your health. To plan for the learning in this theme, Cook’s (1998) ‘four questions for curriculum negotiation’ were mapped out with the students. The four questions are: What do I know already?; What do we want/need to find out?; How will we go about finding out?; and How will we show our learning?. The students firstly answered the four questions in their groups (Fig. 5.6) and then each group presented their answers and all suggestions were compiled on the board (Fig. 5.7). In answering these questions, the students determined their previous knowledge about SD&A, the gaps in their knowledge, suggested learning activities for acquiring new knowledge and suggested methods of assessment (Fig. 5.6).

This planning day determined that students wanted to have another ‘research day’, but this time using podcasts, computers, and newspaper articles as sources of investigation. Week 9 saw
groups taking responsibility for researching different aspects of SD&A and gathering information accordingly (Fig. 5.8).

Fig. 5.6: Students answering the four questions in their groups

Fig. 5.7: Compilation of students’ answers to Cook’s (1998) Four Questions
Week 10 involved students negotiating methods of assessment with their teacher. Suggestions from students when answering the question ‘How will we show our learning?’ were revisited and it was decided that the students would show their learning through plays, poems, raps and presentations. A full morning was spent scaffolding the assessment process and negotiating the criteria for assessment with the students. The teacher and students negotiated an assessment rubric as well as the designation of marks out of 100 that each method of assessment would be graded against (Fig. 5.9) and the students were constantly reminded of this rubric when designing their assessment tasks. Another activity suggested by students was to invite a guest speaker to their school to talk about the dangers of smoking to your health and in Week 11; a representative from Nicorette visited the class. In advance of this visit, students prepared questions for the speaker, practiced how to greet a professional visiting the school and prepared a ‘thank you’ speech. The guest speaker spoke for 20 minutes about the dangers of smoking to your health and then spent a further 40 minutes answering questions from students (Fig. 5.10). Week 12 was the assessment morning where different groups presented their projects (Fig. 5.11), acted out plays (Fig. 5.12) and performed raps and poems (Fig. 5.13). Students peer-assessed each group’s task in accordance with the established grading rubric and presented the ‘medals and missions’ of each performance to their peers. The teacher and primary researcher also presented feedback in the form of medals and missions.
Fig. 5.9: Rubric created by teachers and students and script drafting for ‘play’ assessment

Fig. 5.10: Guest speaker from Nicorette presents information and answers the students’ questions

Fig. 5.11: Student Presentations

Fig. 5.12: Drama as a form of assessment
Weeks 13 and 14 were spent answering a particular question the students had on the initial NIC day; ‘Are girls or boys better at sport?’ A suggested learning activity to answer this question was to design a PE curriculum for a sports day which would then be carried out where an all-female team would compete against an all-male team to carry out the designed curriculum. Students spent the full morning of Week 13 designing the curriculum including the selection of sports, setting out the timing, and structure of each sporting task and determining what resources would be required (Fig. 5.14). Week 14 was the students second last week of school and the girls’ team competed against the boys in a soccer match, athletics, skipping, rounders, and handball (Fig. 5.15). Throughout the day, a strict record of the results was compiled by the students which were then analysed in class afterwards where students determined observations such as; boys were better at team sports, girls were faster; and boys had better skills (Fig. 5.16).
Fig. 5.14: PE Curriculum designed by students to answer the question ‘Are boys or girls better at sport?’

Fig. 5.15: Students compete in boys vs. girls PE day
Fig. 5.16: Students compile and analyse results

Week 15 was the students final day of school before the summer holidays. The primary researcher visited the students briefly to review their NIC experience to date and allow the students to complete one final reflection on the entire NIC process. A final interview was also carried out with the teacher on this day.
5.2 Primary School B

5.2.1 Credentials

Primary School B was a mixed gender school where the NIC initiative took place with a combined 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} class made up of 23 students, aged 9-10 years old. One teacher, Mary\textsuperscript{67} and a full time Special Needs Assistant, Kate\textsuperscript{68} were involved in delivering NIC to the students along with the primary researcher. The NIC intervention took place one morning a week over the course of 6 school weeks. Three and a half hours a week were dedicated to NIC on the school timetable every Tuesday morning. See Fig. 5.17 for a full profile of Primary school B.

![Fig. 5.17: Outline profile of NIC process in Primary school B](image-url)

---

\textsuperscript{67} Pseudonym

\textsuperscript{68} Pseudonym
5.2.2 NIC Process

The initial NIC day in Primary School B saw the students elect the theme of ‘animals’ (Fig. 5.18) which was generated from the expressed personal and world concerns surrounding animal cruelty, animal extinction, and how to care for household pets. Week 2 centred on project design where; project groups were formed; students generated project titles and assigned different areas of responsibility; and students generated all the questions they needed to answer in order to complete their projects. Similar to Primary School A, in week 3 students conducted a ‘research day’ where the primary sources of research were books and computers (Fig. 5.19).

![Fig. 5.18: Student Vote and Theme Selection](image)

In week 3 students also prepared for a visit from a guest speaker from Limerick Animal Welfare (LAW), a learning activity suggested by students on the initial NIC day. Students came up with questions for the guest speaker and organised a charity collection for LAW. Students designed posters for the school asking teachers and students to bring in food and bedding to support the animal shelter (Fig. 5.20). Week 4 saw the visit from Chris and a dog from LAW where Chris
presented facts about the work done by LAW and how to look after household pets (Fig. 5.21). Chris answered each of the student’s questions and students noted down all the answers for their projects.

Fig. 5.20: Preparing questions and collection items for the LAW visit

Fig. 5.21: Guest speaker and “Bertie the dog” from LAW

The fifth week of NIC was spent carrying out another student-suggested learning activity – class surveys to determine the types of household pets students had, how many times they are fed, brought to the vet etc. Students designed all the survey questions and each group was responsible for surveying the class regarding different aspects of animal welfare. Students conducted the surveys and noted down all the results. Facilitated by the teacher, students then analysed the results and represented the findings in graph-format (Fig. 5.22) as this was an area of the maths curriculum they were currently working on. Following the surveys the students drafted their projects, compiling all of the information they collected, for assessment the following week (Fig. 5.23). Week 6 was the final week of NIC engagement where students presented each of their projects (Fig. 5.24). Peer assessment was also carried out in Primary School A where students shared medals and missions about the content and layout of projects and the presentation skills of group members. Time was also taken during this final NIC morning to review the students NIC
experience through a class discussion and to provide the space for students to complete their final reflections. The class teachers were also interviewed at this time.

Fig. 5.22: Students graphing the class survey results on animals

Fig. 5.23: Students drafting final projects

Fig. 5.24: Student Presentations

5.3 The Secondary School
5.3.1 Credentials

The participating secondary school was an all-male school where the NIC initiative took place with one 1st year group, 1 Basil\textsuperscript{69} made up of 29 students, aged 12-13 years old. Two teachers, Michelle and Sarah\textsuperscript{70} championed the NIC process with the primary researcher. Over the course of the intervention, 6 further teachers became involved in delivering NIC to this 1st year group. The NIC intervention took place for one full school year where one 40 minute class was dedicated to NIC on the school timetable\textsuperscript{71} every Wednesday morning. See Fig. 5.25 for a full profile of the secondary school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender of students</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range of Students</td>
<td>12-13 Years Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Teachers Involved</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Students with SEN*</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of NIC Interaction hours</td>
<td>66 Hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Secondary School**

**Outline of NIC Sessions**

**Wk 1:** Initial NIC Day
- **Water Charges Theme**
  - Wk's 2-5: Newspaper article research; podcasts; Roadmapping knowledge; Project designation; Prep for Computer Research;
  - Wk's 6-9: Computer Research; Documentary;
  - Wk's 10-14: Design, Execution & Write up of Experiments; Field Trip; Project Drafting; Project Assimilation;
  - Wk's 15-18: Class Survey & Debate; Project Review; Project Assimilation;
  - Wk's 19-20: Presentation Night Preparation; Presentation Night

**Racism Theme**
- Wk's 21-24: Planning for Racism Theme; Computer Research; Survey Compilation; Interview prep;
- Wk's 25-27: Interviews with Professionals; School & Street Surveys Conducted; Project Drafting & Write-up;
- Wk's 28-29: Presentation Prep; Poster Showcase to 4th year students and teachers;
- **Week 30:** Review of NIC Experience; Final reflections.

Fig. 5.25: Outline profile of NIC process in the secondary school

\textsuperscript{69} Pseudonym for class group
\textsuperscript{70} Both pseudonyms
\textsuperscript{71} While only one 40minute class was dedicated to NIC on the school timetable, students had further weekly engagement with NIC as the integration aspect allowed for the exploration of NIC themes during classes timetabled for other subject disciplines. Furthermore, extra classes were assigned for key learning events such as interviewing professionals and class field trips.
5.3.2 NIC Process

The initial NIC day in the secondary school culminated in students voting for the overall theme of ‘Future Life, the Economy and Social Issues’. This theme encompassed the expressed personal and world concerns students had around; the recession, racism, the introduction of water charges, and employment amongst others (Fig. 5.26). A planning day was held with the two coordinating teachers of NIC in this school (Fig. 5.27). Here they looked at all the sub-themes in relation to their subject areas and the 1st year curriculum and determined that the sub-theme of ‘Water Charges’ would be approached first with the sub-theme of ‘Racism’ to follow.

Fig. 5.26: Students vote for themes & breakdown of chosen theme into sub-themes
Fig. 5.27: Teachers plan the NIC curriculum and select ‘Water Charges’ and ‘Racism’ as sub-themes for perusal

Water Charges Theme

In the first five weeks of student engagement with the NIC process, students used Cook’s (1998) four questions approach to curriculum negotiation to examine the students’ existing knowledge surrounding water charges and to identify learning activities and assessment tasks. Assessment tasks were negotiated between teachers and students and it was determined at this stage that at the end of the students’ engagement with the water charges theme, a presentation evening would be held in the school where the students’ parents and teaching staff would be invited to attend. In relation to suggested learning experiences, due to the topical nature of water charges at the time, the students suggested numerous media outlets as sources of information. Students conducted a significant amount of newspaper article research (Fig. 5.28) and also listened to a podcast from a current affairs radio show. These media research activities were followed by a ‘roadmapping’ session where students documented and shared their knowledge to date using a roadmap teaching methodology (Fig. 5.29). Students spent the remainder of the five weeks deciding on project areas i.e. aspects of the water charges introduction that their groups wished to pursue and preparing questions for the internet research which was set to begin in Week 6. Before students were allowed to go to the computer room, they had to show their teachers a list of relevant questions they had compiled for internet research.

Fig. 5.28: Newspaper articles research  Fig. 5.29: Students roadmapping their knowledge

In week 6, 7 and 8 of NIC, students spent their NIC classes in the computer room researching the questions they had prepared for their project areas (Fig. 5.30). As students only had one 40-minute class a week of NIC, it took three weeks for students to research their questions and
compile their findings on a word document. In week 9, students watched a Prime Time documentary on the water charges debate and noted relevant information for their project areas.

Fig. 5.30: Computer Research

The project group responsible for researching ‘water conservation’ found numerous water saving tips online and suggested that some methods could be carried out through experiments in the school. It was decided that students would conduct an experiment to test; how much water is used when brushing your teeth with the water running versus using a cup of water; and to investigate if the school toilets had any leaks. Students spent week 10 planning and designing the experiments and assigning roles to each student (for example: timekeeper, students to brush their teeth, students to measure the water etc.). At this time, a science teacher agreed to become involved in the NIC process and wrote up the experiments with students in her science class and provided all the materials required to carry out the experiment. In week 11, the NIC class was spent in the school toilets where students tested the toilets for leaks by placing food colouring in the cisterns of the toilets and monitoring whether or not it appeared in the toilet bowls (Fig. 5.31). Students also carried out an experiment to test how much water is wasted when you leave the tap running (Fig. 5.32). In week 12, a maths teacher became involved in the NIC process and the results of the experiments were analysed and calculated. Water wastage was compared with the proposed cost of water per litre to determine how much water students’ families were currently wasting (Fig. 5.33).
During week 13 of the NIC process, 1 Basils’ geography teacher became involved and took the students on a fieldtrip to Ardnacrusha, a local water treatment plant. In advance of this visit, the geography teacher ensured that questions were prepared that were relevant to the students NIC
projects which then had to be answered throughout the course of the day. In week 14, students spent this time drafting and assembling their projects on water charges to date. In weeks 15 and 16 a class survey was taken to ascertain how many students agreed with the introduction of the water charges and how many disagreed after conducting their research. Students could not place their vote without consulting their research and presenting a valid reason for why they agreed/disagreed (Fig. 5.34). All the students that agreed with the charges then debated their reasons against those of the students that disagreed.

![Fig. 5.34: Class Survey on Water Charges with informed votes from each student](image)

In week 17, it was determined by the UL research team that the posters that the students had created for the presentation night were not reflective of the capabilities of students and the level of work and research that had gone into the water charges theme. The posters lacked creativity and were too text-heavy due to the content being written up on computers. Over the next two weeks, a feedback process ensued between teachers and students where students used the existing information from the initial posters but represented it more creatively in their own words and through their own artwork. See Fig. 5.35 for an example of a group’s poster before and after the feedback process.

---

72 The primary researcher was not present on this fieldtrip so there are no pictures available.
73 This was following on from a survey conducted by teacher Michelle, in week 1 of the process where it was determined that only 2 students agreed with the introduction of the water charges.
74 See findings chapter for a detailed account of this incident.
Fig. 5.35: One group’s project before and after feedback

With the new and improved posters finalised, week 19 was spent preparing presentations and poster showcases for the presentation evening the following week (Fig. 5.36). On a Tuesday evening in Week 20, a student-led presentation evening was held. The evening was attended by the students’ family members, members of the schools teaching staff, representatives from the NCCA and St. Kieráns initiative, and a reporter from the Irish Times newspaper who was writing an article on the student’s engagement with the NIC process. Eight students presented from a podium to all in attendance about their learning experiences through NIC (Fig. 5.37). A large portion of the evening was dedicated to a poster showcase session where all in attendance were encouraged to visit the students’ group project stations and question the students about their respective project areas (Fig. 5.38). This presentation evening concluded the water charges theme.

Fig. 5.36: Project finalisation and preparation for the presentation evening
The initial planning process for the ‘Racism’ theme was different to the approach taken for any of the themes across the three schools. Similar to the other themes, the racism concerns, questions and learning activities suggested by students on the initial NIC were used as the foundation for planning. However, instead of additional teachers gradually becoming involved in the NIC process as the theme developed, a number of teachers in the secondary school requested to become involved in planning the racism theme from the outset. A 30 minute meeting was held with the two NIC championing teachers and 4 additional teachers who wanted to become involved. During this meeting, the 6 teachers decided on 7 different project areas for students with corresponding learning activities (Fig. 5.39) and assigned themselves different areas of responsibility based on how their respective subjects were relevant to the racism theme (Fig. 5.40).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Topic</th>
<th>Group No.</th>
<th>Learning Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Law &amp; Racism</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Garda Interview to investigate racism &amp; the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in our School</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Prepare and carry out School Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in our City</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Prepare and carry out Street Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in Sport</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Research racism campaigns in sport &amp; interview with two professional soccer players about racism in soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday experiences of Racism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>‘Immigration to Ireland’ - interview arranged with a man who immigrated to Ireland to ascertain what it is like to move to Ireland from another country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Racism in our School</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Posters, ‘did you know facts’, racism terms (e.g. Xenophobia etc.) to be designed &amp; placed around the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key People Resisting Racism</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning about key historic figures fighting against racism, compiling information and displaying around the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5.39: Breakdown of project areas and learning activities for the racism theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Subject Topic</th>
<th>Subject Teacher 75</th>
<th>Areas to cover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Studies</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Ms. White</td>
<td>Types of questions, survey compilation, sample surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Religion in Action &amp; Social Justice</td>
<td>Ms. Ryan</td>
<td>Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>Mr. O’Neill</td>
<td>Migration statistics (per nationality), 1st Year Census, Terms such as Xenophobia, immigration, out-migration etc. for the ‘awareness of racism project group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. O’ Neill</td>
<td>‘Yu Ming is anim dom’ video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSPE</td>
<td>Human Dignity/Human Rights</td>
<td>Mr. Lacey</td>
<td>Show Racism the Red Card, Racism Workshop Package</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Historic Figures</td>
<td>Mr. Moynahan</td>
<td>Nelson Mandela, Ghandi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>Graphs and Statistics</td>
<td>Mr. Gubbins</td>
<td>Interpreting Street Survey Results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5.40: Breakdown of subjects and areas of responsibility for the 6 teachers involved in delivering the racism theme

Week 21 (week one of the racism theme) involved students forming new project groups, planning their project areas and designating areas of responsibility to each group member. For

75 Pseudonyms
this theme, different project groups took part in different learning activities. During weeks 22-24 the ‘racism awareness’ group and ‘key people resisting awareness’ carried out internet research for their respective areas. The project groups researching racism in their school and racism in Limerick City spent these weeks compiling survey questions, drafting surveys, and finalising the surveys (Fig. 5.41). The remaining groups prepared interview questions and practiced interview etiquette for the visits of interviewees (Fig. 5.41). The primary researcher organised two members of an Garda Síochána to be interviewed by the ‘Racism and the Law’ project group, however, students themselves organised two professional soccer players to be interviewed by the ‘Racism in Sport’ group and for a man who had immigrated to Ireland from Nigeria to be interviewed by the remaining group.

During Week 25, the students conducted interviews with gardai, sports professionals, and a man that immigrated to Ireland (Fig. 5.42 and 5.43). In week 26, the project groups responsible for researching racism terms and key historic figures launched a school-wide racism awareness campaign where questions and information were placed around the school (Fig. 5.44).
During week 27, the two groups researching racism in the school and racism in Limerick city carried out their surveys. Four students, accompanied by teachers, went into Limerick city and conducted 42 surveys in 30 minutes (Fig. 5.45). In the school, students went from class to class
asking students to complete surveys on their perceptions of racism in the school. During maths class, all of the survey results were compiled where the entire class analysed and graphed the results (Fig. 5.46). In week 28, students finalised their posters (Fig 5.47.) for the assessment task. The assessment task for racism was for students to present their projects to the 4<sup>th</sup> year students and their teachers (Fig 5.48) and took place in week 29. As with the primary schools, the last NIC session in week 30 was dedicated to reviewing the NIC process with the students where the students completed final reflections. The researcher also conducted teacher, student and parent interviews during this week.

Fig. 5.45: Students conducting surveys

Fig.5.46: Analysis of survey results

Fig. 5.47: Project Finalisation
5.4 Conclusion

The aim of this brief chapter was to provide the reader with an overview of the various planning, teaching, learning and assessment experiences encountered by the three schools that participated in the NIC process. The inclusion of pictures is aimed at aiding visualisation of the creativity and work completed by the teachers and students involved in this study. It is hoped that this descriptive account of events will serve well to foreground the analysis and interpretation of events which will be shared in the findings chapter which will also portray the students and teachers engagement with the process at a deeper level.
Chapter Six: Findings

Although combining three different school contexts, the findings from this research aim to synthesise the common issues and affordances of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum across the different settings. Three distinct aspects of the study emerged. Firstly, the meaningful learning associated with incorporating student concerns and a more relevant, integrated curriculum into students schooling. Secondly, the social processes facilitated and necessitated by NIC, the effects this had on students at a personal and classroom level in addition to the issues it raised. Thirdly, the effects of promoting learner agency through student voice in curricular decision-making will be presented concurrently with the facilitation of teacher agency. The negotiation process required to establish this teacher-student agency will be explored in terms of a diminished power differential in the classroom and student-teacher relationships built on trust.

Legend

Due to the qualitative nature of this inquiry, this findings chapter is largely built around quotes from the students, teachers, principals in the three participating schools. The following table presents a breakdown of the legends that will be used in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Quote Source</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S= Student</td>
<td>R = Reflection</td>
<td>PSA = Primary School A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T= Teacher</td>
<td>I = Interview</td>
<td>PSB = Primary School B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P=Parent</td>
<td>M = Member Checking Feedback Forms</td>
<td>SS = Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL= Principal</td>
<td>O = Observation Journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R = Researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNCCA = Director of the NCCA, John Halbert76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACI= Assistant Chief Inspectorate, Deirdre Matthews77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All sources referenced will be represented in the following order:

Name of Participant78, Participant Type, Quote Source, School.

For example: (Gary, T, R, PSA) represents: Gary, Teacher, Reflection, Primary School A.

---

76 John Halbert (Director of Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA) has agreed to be named in this study.
77 Deirdre Matthews (Assistant Chief Inspectorate) has agreed to be named in this study.
78 The names of participating principals, teachers and students will always be pseudonyms.
6.1 Section One: Meaningful Learning

The theme of meaningful learning will be explored firstly in relation to the source of learning in NIC i.e. students expressed concerns. The thematic aspect of NIC combined with the foundational base of student concerns will be set forward as elements of the NIC process which contributed to increased curricular relevance for participating students. Evidence of deep and meaningful learning within the process will be presented alongside the metacognitive capacities developed in students throughout the process. Lastly, this theme will present findings with regard to the integrated aspect of NIC and how it was enacted and meaningful for students across both the primary and secondary schooling sectors.

6.1.1 Meaningful Engagement

6.1.1.1 Student concerns

Teachers across all three schools felt that students learning about their concerns was largely a motivating factor that helped to promote meaningful engagement with their learning. Teachers largely felt that concerns often resonated with the personal issues for students who were then able to see a greater value in their learning. For example, ‘when they learned about their concerns they were learning about what matters to them and I could see them becoming more interested and engaged because of that’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). Students made strong connections between their concerns and a motivating intent to learn, as evidenced in reflection entries ‘I want to research more information about cigarettes so I can help my mam stop smoking’ (Paul, S, R, PSA) and ‘I want to learn more about cancer so I can understand how my granny got it in her spine’ (Noelle, S, R, PSA). Concerns prompted learning as students had to come up with their own questions about their concerns, which they then had to find out the answers.

The racism theme elected by students in the secondary school was found to be particularly meaningful due to the multi-cultural school context. Students reflected on the meaning they associated with this theme. For instance, a student from Ghana reflected ‘The issue of racism is very close to me so I am really enjoying learning so much about it’ (Peter, S, R, SS). The school-wide racism awareness campaign conducted by the 1 Basil students, as part of the NIC process, prompted many student reflections regarding educating others about this meaningful topic. It was
found to hold a particular meaning to the foreign students in the class ‘Maybe this campaign will educate students so that nobody shouts things at my cousin anymore’ (Dobrav, S, R, SS) and ‘I think people that are racist are just uneducated about different cultures so maybe this campaign will help that’ (Kristoff, S, R, SS). An increased level of engagement was observed by teachers who determined that students learning about their concerns held meaning for students.

When the survey carried out by students determined that 83% of them lived with a parent or guardian that smoked, student engagement levels reached an all-time high and motivated students to research how their parents could give up smoking...[and concerning a guest speaker from a nicotine patch company] I couldn’t believe how engrossed the students were in what he was saying and the quality of the questions they asked him

(Gary, T, I, PSA)

As the NIC themes were elected, some students felt that their viewpoints and concerns were not addressed in the learning that followed:

I didn’t enjoy the learning today because I voted to learn about vaccines and instead we had to learn about smoking (Sean, S, R, PSA).

Today I was so disappointed that the class didn’t vote to learn about the Geography theme as most of my concerns were about floods and earthquakes (Maura, S, R, PSB).

Furthermore, some students felt that one theme held more meaning for them than others. For example ‘I much preferred learning about the racism theme than the water charges theme as I don’t care about water charges but I do care about people being racist’ (Alan, S, I, SS).

Students not getting to learn about the theme they voted for was also a concern at the beginning of the NIC intervention in Primary School A where apprehensions were expressed by the researcher (and teacher) regarding the anticipated levels of investment and engagement from the students learning about themes they had not elected.

I think it’s a fair approach that students got to vote but I sensed a lot of disappointment from students like Michelle who I know has no interest in sport and would much rather learn about the environment theme (Gary, T, I, PSA)

79 Pseudonym
These concerns dissipated as the process evolved where students (initially frustrated with the selected theme) became more engaged with the process. ‘Martin and Sarah are really coming on board with the health theme and finding areas of interest and concern to them as they construct their questions’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). The final reflections completed by students at the end of their engagement with the NIC process also returned the same finding as students made connections between the elected “health” theme and their own families. For example, ‘I never wanted to learn about the health theme but then I was really happy we were learning about diabetes because my mother has it’ (Martin, S, R, PSA). In addition to concerns surrounding student engagement levels, ascertaining student concerns also proved to be problematic.

Student concerns as the source of learning in NIC presented an ethical dilemma for the implementation of the study. The sensitive nature of student concerns was highlighted in the three participating schools where concerns were expressed by teachers that the students could over-disclose delicate personal and family information that in retrospect they may regret. Furthermore, parents were initially concerned that a curriculum based on student concerns could lead to a predominance of negative learning content ‘at first I wasn’t sure about Alan learning about his concerns as I thought it could lead to a very dismal learning experience’ (Marie, P, I, SS). However, parents became largely positive about the process as they could see the meaningful connections that learning about concerns allowed for ‘I can see now that what Alan is learning about in NIC really means something to him’ (Anne, P, I, SS).

The concern regarding the over disclosure of information was flagged more at primary school level than at secondary school level due to the younger age of the students. As part of the “health” theme in Primary School A, students were discussing their questions and concerns surrounding ‘puberty’ when the researcher observed a female student oversharing information with her group about her personal, pubescent development (Joanne, R, O, PSA). The researcher shared this observation with the teacher who took measures going forward to mitigate the risk of this happening again ‘I stayed close to Melanie today as it was brought to my attention that she was sharing a little too much information about her own personal health’. Issues of discomfort surrounding students sharing their concerns with others also arose in Primary School B. For example, when writing their ‘personal concerns’ individually into their journals, James (S, R, PSA) noted that ‘I am concerned about my uncle who is in prison’. However, when it came to sharing concerns with the group, James chose not to disclose this concern. To tackle this, it was
emphasised to students by teachers and the primary researcher throughout each initial NIC day that they did not have to divulge anything that they were not comfortable with and students were closely monitored during these tasks. In addition to the connections made between student concerns and more meaningful learning, it was found that NIC provided a more relevant course of learning for participating students.

6.1.1.2 Increased Curricular Relevance

The themes that emerged were reported by teachers as a way of helping to situate the relevance of curriculum content for students beyond their school experience. The focus on concerns gave permission for students to explore issues that had meaning for them. Meaningful learning was facilitated through the exploration of the topical sub-theme ‘mental health’ in Primary School A while students in the secondary school engaged with the ‘water charges’ theme. Teachers found these themes to be more relevant to students due to the timing of the State’s introduction of the water charges and the national awareness campaign for mental health where information from news bulletins, social media, television, and radio surrounded students outside of school hours ‘students are coming in every day with the latest breaking news on the water charges debate’ (Michelle, T, R, SS) and ‘every student has a story about somebody famous or a family member who have spoken out about their mental health struggles lately and its helping them to connect more with the learning surrounding it’ (Gary, T, R, PSA).

Students were also explicit in situating their learning experiences in the wider, national context ‘every day we are learning new facts about water charges that have only come out in the news that day like how only this week the Minister has put a cap on the water charges instead of charging per litre’ (Mark, S, R, SS). The contemporary nature of the water charges theme also caused frustration for many students in the secondary school. Students were dismayed by the legislation surrounding the introduction of the charges changing numerous times over the duration of the student’s engagement with this theme:

*It’s so unfair, Irish Water just announced that they no longer need your PPS number so I have to change my entire project now (Gerard, S, R, SS)*

---

80 The initial NIC day in the participating secondary school took place at a time when legislation regarding the introduction of water charges in Ireland had just been passed and was widely covered in the media.
Irish Water just pushed out the closing date for the application so now I have to change my project and it’s done in permanent marker (Callum, S, R, SS)

However, students also realised that this was a necessary part of learning about a contemporary topic ‘Today I learned that when you are doing a project about a current event like water charges, things can change drastically and then you have to update your project’ (Brian, S, R, SS).

Teachers observed that when students connected their learning experiences with life beyond school, it stimulated higher engagement levels ‘students are really engaged with the water charges theme at the moment and I think it’s because they can really see the relevance of their learning to what’s going on in the country at the moment’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). The content of student learning was often conveyed as being situated in unprompted examples beyond school life:

People who smoke and drink too much are actually costing the country loads of money to look after them in hospital when they get sick and that’s why they put up the prices of drink and fags in the budget (Denise, S, R, PSA)

The things we learn about in NIC are about what happens in the real world so it is way more interesting than learning about stuff that happened hundreds of years ago (Jake, S, R, SS)

Teachers also facilitated students making connections with experiences outside of school by regularly asking students to bring in information from the news and incorporating current podcasts, newspaper articles and documentaries into their learning experiences. Students engaging with more relevant curriculum content did not go unnoticed by their parents. A number of parents commented on how their sons were making explicit connections between their learning and current affairs ‘I was very happy with the depth and relevance of the learning in NIC as learning about water charges peaked his interest in related issues such as austerity and the banking crisis’ (Breda, P, I, SS). Parents also expressed their appreciation for the relevant learning that was taking place through NIC ‘At 13 years of age the only thing you are aware of is yourself and your Playstation, but NIC made him more aware of what is going on in the news and the country and I am grateful for that’ (Marie, P, I, SS). Parents also commented (unprompted) on how NIC was necessitating more authentic learning experiences instead of their
sons completing abstract tasks ‘For homework, Thomas\textsuperscript{81} comes down for the 6 o’ clock news with his notebook and pen at the ready which is surely a better way of learning than copying passages from a book’ (Anne, P, I, SS) and ‘Adrian listening to podcasts and reading newspaper articles in school is really transferring to home life as he is more inclined to pick up the newspaper and listen to different radio stations in the evenings’ (Deirdre, P, I, SS). In addition to testimonials from students, teachers and parents surrounding students meaningful connections with the learning processes, the researcher felt it was imperative to evidence the learning that took place within NIC.

6.1.2 Evidence of Learning

The majority of students spoke about, and reflected upon, their enjoyment of the NIC experience and the reaction to the NIC process was largely positive. When students reflected upon key events such as interviewing professionals\textsuperscript{82} and the presentation night to their parents, there were numerous references to their NIC experience as being ‘the best day of school I have ever had’ (Martin, S, R, PSA). However, beyond simple enjoyment and engagement with the process, a key focus for the teachers and the researcher was to place students in a position to provide sufficient evidence of their learning throughout and to guide and facilitate that learning. A key concern for a teachers at the beginning of the process was whether the student’s enjoyment of the process meant that real learning was taking place ‘all the students seem to be really enjoying themselves but what are they actually learning in NIC?’ (Gary, T, R, PSA).

Tangible learning and knowledge acquisition took place but not at the cost of it being meaning, or value,free as students were not learning facts by rote. It was meaningful for them as it linked to their elected themes and ultimately their concerns. Student reflections were replete with students demonstrating their knowledge ‘Today I learned that Ireland has the lowest water charges out of all the EU countries’ (Mark, S, R, SS) and ‘Today I learned that “xenophobia” means being prejudiced against people from other countries’ (Jacob, S, R, SS). Although students could recall the knowledge up to a year later, the knowledge they acquired was also often deeply internalised. One student, James, from Primary School A went on to take part in NIC in the participating secondary school also. At the end of the NIC process in the secondary

\textsuperscript{81} Pseudonym

\textsuperscript{82} Students in Primary School A interviewed a psychologist, two professional Munster rugby players and beauty therapist as part of the ‘health’ theme.
school, James shared many of the facts he had acquired in Primary school because of the personal value it held for him:

\[
I \text{ remember that there were 60 different chemicals in cigarettes such as tar, rat poison, and lighter fuel because my mam smoked and I was thinking that all of that is going into her lungs } \text{(James, S, I, SS)}
\]

Furthermore, after NIC ended in the secondary school in May 2015, the researcher returned to the students five months later in October 2015 to conduct a “member checking” day. During this day, students commented on knowledge they acquired the previous year and the impact it had on changing their practice. For example, ‘I remember that you can save 12 litres of water by just turning off the tap when brushing your teeth which I always do now’ (Dara, S, M, SS) and ‘During the racism theme I learnt that some words I had been using as slang were actually racist so I would never use them anymore’ (Damien, S, M, SS). It is not just content but higher levels of analysis that is being promoted in this initiative and students displayed high levels of cognitive engagement with their knowledge.

As student learning was integrated across subjects and experiences, students were able to adapt their knowledge and apply it to different areas. For example, when students in Primary School B used their knowledge about graphs to represent the data they collected in their survey on household pets ‘we had just learned about bar charts in maths so we thought it would be a good way of showing the results of our survey’ (Anna, S, R, PSB). Analysis of information came more naturally to students exploring the water charges theme where they were able to contextualise their knowledge within the national framework ‘students are doing more than putting a poster together, they are researching national policy directives and analysing the impact this will have on Irish society as a whole’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). Furthermore, students were analytical when articulating the thematic aspects of their learning regarding the increased relevance of cross curricular links ‘When we learn through themes we dip into different subjects when they are needed and relevant to our theme, not just for the sake of introducing another subject’ (Eddie, S, R, SS).

The nature of the experiential, social, and participatory learning environment provided for by NIC led to students often implicitly analysing and synthesising their knowledge. Students in Primary school A were able to synthesise their learning by composing poems and plays about smoking, drugs, and alcohol. Meanwhile, students in Primary school B constructed
questionnaires and surveys to determine the different types of household pets owned by students in the class. Lastly, students in the secondary school planned, formulated, and conducted science experiments to test two water conservation hypotheses and then used their maths knowledge to analyse the results. Across all three schools, students illustrated their learning through the construction of projects which were used for assessment purposes, e.g., survey design and interpretation. Students also applied their learning to forming personal opinions on certain issues.

Critical thinking was displayed by secondary students when the information they acquired regarding water charges was used to inform a nuanced, critical decision about whether they agreed with the introduction of the water charges or not. In the initial stages of exploring the water charges theme, the teacher took a class survey to determine the amount of students that agreed or disagreed with the water charges. The results showed that 26 students disagreed and 2 agreed. After twelve weeks of students researching their respective project areas on water charges, the teacher retook the survey and 16 students disagreed and 12 agreed. This time every student had to supply a reason for their vote for;

*The students have researched information on water charges to such a depth that they are using it to weigh up the pros and cons of this new charge and make an informed decision based on their new knowledge*  
(Michelle, T, R, SS)

This memory also stood out for many students on the member checking day:

*What stood the most was when I completely changed my vote about water charges after researching all the expensive processing and filtration process water has to go through before it gets to our taps so I decided I now agreed with them*  
(Liam, S, M, SS).

In Primary school A, students also used information they researched about nutrition and healthy eating to make decisions about their own eating habits. For example, ‘today everyone in the class agreed that we wouldn’t drink energy drinks anymore after we researched all the sugar that is in them and they are only for professional athletes’ (Lucy, S, R, PSA). Furthermore, the teacher in Primary School A spoke about how he hoped the information acquired by students surrounding the dangers of smoking, alcohol and drugs would lead to more informed decision making in these areas in the future:
The students are at a crucial stage in their lives where they might be offered cigarettes, alcohol and drugs in the near future and I genuinely think that the information they learned in the last 6 weeks will influence future decisions they will make. (Gary, T, R, PSA)

In addition to students’ analysing and applying their learning, students also began to think about their learning practices more.

6.1.3 Metacognitive Capacities

Across both the primary and secondary schools, data evidenced students developing an awareness of their own learning processes whilst engaging in NIC. Students made connections between their learning and their concerns ‘I learn better and work harder when I am learning about things I care about’ (Catriona, S, R, PSB). Students were also more conscious of their own learning practices in relation to questioning and the social aspects of learning ‘I realise now that I learn much better when I come up with my own questions to find the answers to’ (Liam, S, R, PSA) and ‘I learn lot’s more when I can discuss things with my group, especially when we have different opinions on things’ (Brian, S, R, SS). Teachers alluded to how students were beginning to teach themselves how to learn ‘today students saw the mind map I drew on the board and then taught themselves how to construct a mind map when answering their own questions’ (Mary, T, R, PSB). This was echoed in corresponding student reflections ‘today I figured out myself how to draw a mind map to answer a question instead of just writing out the answer and I think my answer is better now’ (Daniel, S, R, PSB) and ‘today I learned more about how to make mind maps to plan the answer to my question’ (Patrick, S, R, SS).

Students were also conscious that they were learning about topics in very different ways, e.g., by incorporating computer research, experiments, and the road mapping methodology into their learning ‘learning is so different in NIC, today we used roadmaps to learn, last week we did computer research, and next week we are designing experiments’ (Gerard, S, R, SS). The metacognitive capacities developed in the students did not go unnoticed by the parents of students in the secondary school who observed that ‘NIC challenges him more, it challenges him to actually think about how he is learning’ (Anne, P, I, SS) and ‘NIC seems to educate them about thinking for themselves, thinking about how they are learning and forming their own ideas and opinions. It is fantastic’ (Marie, P, I, SS). Students recognising that the way in which they
were learning were changing is evidential of the increased awareness they had regarding their own learning practices.

Student involvement in evaluating their progress through NIC assessment structures was also found to be metacognitive in nature. Across the three participating schools, students thought about how they would assess their own learning by constructing assessment rubrics in collaboration with their teachers. In doing so, students became more confident in setting up the conditions for their learning and assessment ‘we decided what we would be tested on in the posters so then it was easier to make sure we did our posters right’ (Laura, S, R, PSA). Students also felt that they produced better work as a result of being involved in devising the rubrics ‘we knew our posters would be tested on 5 different areas so we were always thinking about those areas when making our posters and then they were way better’ (Luke, S, R, SS). Students rated their own work and their peers work according to rubrics that they devised and took the task very seriously:

These are 11/12 year old students and they were so strict, firstly when marking their own posters but then when they were assessing their friends they could give really critical and fair reasons as to why posters fell down in some areas and always brought their reasons back to the rubric we had displayed on the board.

(Gary, T, I, PSA)

Students also became involved in coming up with their own assessment activities which had to reflect their learning. Students chose poems, dramas, projects, and presentations to showcase their learning and assessment requirements were devised with students ‘we are doing a play for our test but every character in the play has to show 5 or more pieces of information they researched’ (Lucy, S, R, PSA). This acquired level of assessment literacy got the students thinking more about their learning ‘today I learned way more when writing the play than I did from just reading and writing in normal tests’ (Ava, S, R, PSA). Promoting this level of metacognition in students was not without its challenges.

Although students found these strategies engaging, they were often frustrated with the explicit need to demonstrate their learning ‘we had to change our play AGAIN today. Joanne said that the character of the thief didn’t show anything we had researched’ (Melanie, S, R, PSA). These struggles were also shared by teachers. At times, students didn’t have sufficient capacity to engage in assessment tasks and a high level of scaffolding from teachers was necessitated.
Secondary school teachers sometimes struggled with the extra workload involved in negotiating assessment strategies with students ‘while I know the students benefited from it, it took a lot of extra time and effort to involve students in assessment tasks and I would have been quicker just doing it myself’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). Struggles with novel assessment approaches were also experienced at primary level ‘A lot of work went into devising the rubrics for students for the poems and plays and if I am being honest, It would have been easier just to give them a written test’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). When asked about the aspect of this process that was the most challenging, Gary (T, I, PSA) felt that:

Assessment would be the main challenge. I felt that the assessment could have been more structured, especially for the first attempt...[as] the first time we were [just] hoping they would show their learning and they didn’t so we had to make some changes for the second attempt

Therefore, rubrics and learning outcomes were designed, with student input, to help guide these assessments in the future.

6.1.4 Integration

The process of integration in this study can be best described by providing a comparison of integration of subjects across primary and post-primary schools. This study found that integration across subjects was far easier for teachers to achieve at primary level than secondary level. However, this led to higher levels of teacher collaboration in the secondary school, due to the fact that the primary school teachers were solely responsible for the delivery of all curriculum subjects to their students. This is evidenced in the data through the involvement of 8 teachers in the delivery of NIC in the secondary school83, 1 teacher in Primary School A and 2 teachers in Primary School B84. Where the integration aspect of NIC stimulated collaboration amongst 8 teachers in the secondary school, their combined 14 subjects85 were integrated into the learning throughout the water charges and racism themes. The principal of the secondary School commended NIC for promoting greater curricular coherence for teacher collaboration when stating that:

83 Two co-ordinating teachers (Sarah and Michelle) and 6 additional teachers became involved in the process.
84 The reason why two teachers were involved in Primary School B was due to the high level of special needs students in the class so two teachers taught that class at all times.
85 History, CSPE, Business Studies, German, Geography, Irish, Religion, Maths, Technology, Science, English, Economics, Accounting and SPHE.
NIC promotes cross-curricular links in its very nature. It represents obvious, logical and joined up thinking. It’s the same syllabus and the same curriculum; teachers are just working together to change the order in which students learn about it so it can fit into an NIC theme.

(Luke, PL, I, SS)

Data from the teachers also emphasised the cross-curricular links necessitated by NIC where teachers were stepping outside their professional network of subject-specific collaboration; ‘I do work with other teachers but it’s always other German and Business teachers but in NIC, I was working with history, geography, maths, and religion teachers also’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) and ‘it was a nice change to work with teachers of disciplines other than History and Maths for the racism theme’ (Michael, T, I, SS). Although teacher collaboration in the secondary school was higher than both Primary schools, the curricular constraints of implementing an integrated curriculum were also greater at secondary level.

Resistance to the NIC initiative by teachers was less so in the primary schools because teachers individually had the knowledge base to deliver the integrated aspect of NIC. Primary teachers had a broader range of subjects in comparison to the participating secondary teachers who specialised in an average of 2 subject areas each. This was evidenced by the variance in initial concerns expressed by the participating teachers across the schooling levels. At primary level, Gary (T, R, PSA) stated that ‘the integration part of NIC should be fine as it’s something I do anyway on a daily basis’. However, participating secondary teachers were more apprehensive ‘I only teach German and Business so the integrated part of NIC will be the biggest challenge for me’ (Michelle, T, R, SS) and ‘NIC sometimes makes me feel a bit limited by my specific subject qualifications……..my main concern is that my subject areas won’t fit into the theme the students vote for’ (Sarah, T, R, SS). As engagement with NIC progressed, the initial levels of apprehension expressed by teachers gradually developed into a heightened awareness of how their subject areas could be incorporated into a thematic curriculum.

NIC often made secondary teachers more aware of the flexibility of the curriculum and how it can be delivered ‘At first I was very wary about how the NIC themes would integrate with my subjects as I have always taught the same way but now I find it is very easy to incorporate my subjects into NIC’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Teachers that gradually became involved in the NIC process at secondary level also commented on the ease with which they could incorporate their subject areas into the NIC themes ‘I only got involved with NIC for the racism theme but I was surprised at how straightforward it was to slot parts of my History and CSPE curriculum into
the theme’ (Michael, T, I, SS). However, teachers also expressed frustration that there was not enough time provision to plan and communicate with the other participating NIC teachers ‘it was fantastic that so many teachers contributed to the NIC themes but there was no system in place for the teachers to communicate or plan with each other’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Aside from one meeting, where six teachers met to plan how their subjects would fit into the racism theme, the teachers never met again in a formal setting to communicate how their plans were delivered ‘the initial meeting we all had to plan the racism theme was so productive but we never met again to discuss how we were getting on or how we were assessing the work’ (Sarah, T, I, SS).

Substitution funding was provided to the school by this research to release teachers from their classes to spend more time planning for NIC. However, mostly this was not availed of due to existing workloads and concerns expressed about missing classes with their other students.

The principal of the secondary school was also constrained by the integration aspect of NIC where a crowded timetable of separate subjects meant that he could only assign one 40 minute class a week to NIC. Implementing an integrated curriculum was more fluid in the participating primary schools as the principals were able to assign, with ease, one full morning a week\(^{86}\) to NIC because of the broad range of subjects the teachers could cover. Furthermore, primary teachers were used to being with the same class of students all the time. Implementation was more fragmented at secondary level as it required high levels of organisation and planning amongst the participating teachers to ensure that the required subject areas were incorporated as and when needed to satisfy the elected theme. There was a lack of curricular coherence at secondary level due to the boundaries between subjects and a lack of consistency as the students had to physically leave their classes to attend different classes. This was explained by the principal of the secondary school:

\[
\text{Unfortunately NIC is very much an individual initiative within the school at the moment where students have 40 minutes of integration but then they have to leave NIC and go to their separate Maths, French, and Technology classes.} \quad \text{(Luke, PL, I, SS)}
\]

\(^{86}\) Four NIC contact hours per week in both schools
6.1.5 Conclusion of Meaningful Learning Section

This study is replete with evidence that when students connected their personal and world concerns to their learning it held more meaning and relevance for them. While this finding was perhaps somewhat predictable, the level at which students became conscious of their learning practices and invested heavily in areas such as assessment was less so. The findings from this study indicate that the learning within NIC developed higher order cognitive capacities in students which was observed by teachers and parents alike and displayed by the students themselves. Student awareness of their learning was also evidenced as students repeatedly testified that learning via the integration of subjects ‘made sense’ to them. Some practical considerations of the integration of subjects also emerged from the study with different experiences reported by teachers and principals across the primary and secondary schooling sectors. A theme that was constant across all three participating schools was the high level of social dynamics facilitated, and necessitated, by the NIC process.
6.2 Section Two: Social Dynamics

Social and interactive methods of experiential learning are central to the NIC process with a particular emphasis placed on group work. Consequently, students developed a range of soft social skills as an outcome of their engagement with the process. In addition to these capacities, tacit skills such as presentation, interviewing, research, questioning, and problem solving skills were also developed in students. The social environment which NIC provided combined with the acquisition of a range of skills had an impact on the students’ self-esteem, the social process of transition between primary and secondary school and the overall dynamic of participating classes. It also surprisingly emerged that noise was a consequence of the active social environment where student voice was encouraged.

6.2.1 Group Work

Most of the learning that took place in NIC was through the medium of group work and across the three participating schools students largely felt that group work was the aspect of NIC they mostly enjoyed due to the opportunities it presented for them to collaborate with their peers:

*My favourite part of NIC is working in groups with my classmates because we can help each other and discuss our different opinions on things* (Philip, S, R, PSA).

*Group work was the best thing about NIC, it is such a brilliant way of learning because you have four people working together to try and answer a question or solve a problem* (Brian, S, M, SS)

While group work was cited as the aspect of NIC students most liked, there were aspects of group work that students disliked. Students reflected upon their frustration when other members of the group were not contributing equally to the workload, going off task and not completing their work on time ‘I felt like I was doing the majority of the work for our group today while Ryan and Patrick were doing homework they forgot to do’ (Mark, S, R, SS) and ‘I hated group work today because two of the group members were really giddy and we didn’t get our poster fully completed’ (Thomas, S, R, SS). Two months into the process in the secondary School, the teacher noticed a significant drop in the level of expected group work behaviours.

---

87 As explored in Section 1.3 – Metacognitive Capacities
88 Pseudonym
89 Pseudonym
agreed at the start of the process and the class drew up a group work contract to address this. Each class member signed the contract and it was displayed in the classroom at all times for ease of referral. Group work behaviours improved directly after developing the contract as students became more aware of their behaviours. For example, reflections from two students in the same group evidenced the impact of the contract on their team ‘when we were making the group work contract I realised that I can take over a lot in our group which I tried to change today’ (Patrick, S, R, SS) and on the same day a group member reflected that ‘group work was much better today because Patrick didn’t shout over the rest of us like he normally does, he listened more instead’ (Mark, S, R, SS). However, this improvement was not permanent as emphasised by one student requesting a move to another group after the introduction of the contract due to problems he was having with one group member who was persistently not doing any work. Problems with group work behaviours persisted throughout the process across all three schools and the contract did not seem to resolve the most common issues of students going off task and students not being held accountable for their work. Despite some persistent problems with group work behaviours, the regularised nature of group work across all three schools became apparent.

A common observation from teachers, students, and the primary researcher was the ease in which working in groups became so normalised. Group work went from being a heavily scaffolded process\(^\text{90}\) to a more standardised process as documented in Primary School A:

\begin{quote}
Getting students into their groups is very disruptive. The students have to be reminded of who is in their groups then when they are moving they bring their own chairs instead of using those already at the desks. There were large amounts of noise and commotion and when they eventually got to their groups they all sat in a row with nobody facing each other and I had to manoeuvre them.
\end{quote}

(Gary, T, R, PSA)

However, after the 4\textsuperscript{th} NIC session the same teacher reflected that ‘Group formation is becoming more of a norm which is a relief. Students know who they are in their groups with now and know that they have to bring their NIC journals and set the chairs up in a circle’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). This feeling was shared at secondary level where Michelle (T, R, SS) reflected after the third NIC session that ‘The class is now moving seamlessly into the groups and self-allocating the

\(^{90}\) A considerable amount of time and scaffolding was provided to establish group work behaviours and as the process developed, students agreed on the norms for their group interactions. From the outset of each NIC experience, role cards were assigned to each group member to ensure that every student had something to be accountable for within the group. Central to these roles was ensuring equal voice for all group members, aiming to provide a safe environment for students to express their opinion and ensuring that each student stayed on task.
roles within each group without any major disruption or without any behavioural problems which is a really positive outcome.’ Students also became more confident in setting up the conditions for their learning ‘on Thursday mornings when Joanne comes in we know we have to get straight into our groups, take out our projects, and decide on our roles’ (Sam, S, R, PSA).

The normalisation and progression of group work can be attributed to the consistency of students working in groups in every NIC session ‘we do loads of different things in NIC but the one thing that stays the same is the group work every week’ (Kevin, S, R, SS) and ‘we don’t use the role cards anymore, we just pick the roles ourselves according to who is the best at what and then rotate them during the class’ (Reece, S, R, SS). Another aspect of group work that became normalised was students building new knowledge together in their groups.

Group work was enhanced by the capacity of students to relay issues of significance pertaining to a theme from their own lives and experiences. For example, during the ‘water charges’ theme, group work provided the opportunity for students to share their knowledge ‘Greg [pseudonym] was in Poland last week and today in our groups he was telling us all about the cost of water there and we figured out that Ireland’s water charges are actually way cheaper than Poland’ (Adrian, S, R, SS) and ‘Dara’s [pseudonym] dad has been to two water charges protests and Dara went to one last week so he was able to tell us lots about the protests for our project in our groups today’ (Donal, S, R, SS). In NIC, not only was the curriculum apparently more relevant and meaningful but group work contributed to the NIC learning experience by enabling group members to provide examples of their own knowledge to their peers.

A regular feature of NIC was for students to construct questions they had around a concern or theme and group work was observed by students as aiding this process ‘Today I loved coming up with all the questions for our survey as Kristoff92 is really good at the questions and he gave us ideas to come up with our own’ (Eddie, S, R, SS). In their groups, students also came up with learning activities with one group organising a soccer player to come to the school to be interviewed ‘we are doing our project on racism in sport and Damien93 told us his cousin plays soccer for Limerick AFC so we decided that we would contact him and ask him to come in and talk to us about racism in soccer’ (Liam, S, R, SS). Lastly, for each assessment task in NIC, students were encouraged to review other groups posters, presentations, plays etc. for peer-assessment purposes which provided further opportunities for students to learn from each other.

---

91 As explored in section 1.1 – Meaningful Engagement
92 Pseudonym
93 Pseudonym
in a group environment ‘I learned from the EU comparison on Mark’s poster that Ireland pays the lowest water charges in the EU’ (Ryan, R, S, SS).

6.2.2 Student Self-Esteem

Throughout the NIC process in each school, pupils engaged in learning and assessment practices that were viewed to be atypical from their normal schooling experiences. Students were continually put in positions to voice their opinion to the class and to present their work in front of the class. Aspects of NIC that they did not always wish to participate in were:

*I felt sick today at the thoughts of presenting; I wish we didn’t have to do it* (Sarah, S, R, PSA)

*I get so nervous when I have to stand up and talk in front of the class, we never usually do it and it’s my least favourite part of NIC* (Paul, S, R, SS)

However, student presentations and learning experiences where students had to voice their opinions were a regular feature and central to NIC process. Students gradually became more versed in articulating their opinions and presenting their work and as a result their confidence levels grew. After four months of his students engaging with NIC in Primary School A, Gary (T, I, PSA) cited an increase in students’ self-esteem as the main benefit of the NIC process:

*NIC has had a profound impact on their confidence levels due to them being supported by their group members, encouraged to express their opinions in a respectful environment, presenting in front of their classmates and interviewing professionals.*

When reflecting on the entire NIC process, Gary (T, I, PSA) stated that one student, Mark, stood out for him the most throughout the entire period of NIC engagement due to his growth in confidence. Initially, Mark was reluctant to partake in any situations where he had to speak up at both a group and classroom level. He was visibly uncomfortable when put in such situations and his early reflections cited ‘sharing my concerns’ ‘presentations’ and ‘being the leader’ (Mark, S, R, PSA) as the parts of NIC he disliked the most. Gary attributed the increase in Mark’s self-
Esteem to greater interaction with his peers and constantly being put in a position where he voiced his opinion and presented his work:

*Mark [pseudonym] is a very nice young fella, very coy, always does his work but he really came out of himself when taking part in NIC and as the weeks went on, he not only came out of himself on Thursday mornings but every day and in all aspects of schooling. Working with his peers, being asked for his opinion and input on a daily basis, standing in front of the class presenting information and being involved in interviewing the professionals had, for me, a lasting impact on Mark’s [pseudonym] confidence. This couldn’t have come at a better time also as he is about to go to secondary school in September.*

(Gary, T, I, PSA)

This finding of increased levels of self-esteem in students was repeated in the other participating schools. In Primary School B, Mary (T, I,) attributed ‘*a significant increase in the confidence of students was because of the group work and the incorporation of presentations into most NIC tasks*’. Similar to the case of Mark, a teacher in the secondary school felt that NIC was especially beneficial to the quieter students:

*to see how positively the quieter students and the more anxious students responded to NIC and how much their confidence grew in terms of being able to stand up in front of the class and give their opinion on matters they felt strongly about was a real stand out benefit of NIC to me.*

(Michelle, T, I, SS)

This observation was further reiterated by the parents of students in the secondary school, who made direct associations between their sons involvement in interviewing professionals and presenting in front of their parents on the presentation night to an increase in confidence levels ‘*I can see Matthew’s [pseudonym] confidence growing after each of the major NIC tasks like when they interviewed the guards and after interacting with parents on the presentation evening*’ (Moira, P, I, SS). Teachers attributed higher levels of self-esteem to more than just the social aspects of NIC.

Increased confidence levels were also accredited to students becoming aware of their own increasing critical capacity. Teachers cited ‘*students being left to figure things out for themselves*’ (Sarah, T, I, SS), ‘*learning from their mistakes*’ (Michelle, T, R, SS), and ‘*critiquing their own work and the work of their peers*’ (Gary, T, I, PSA) as areas specific to the NIC process that contributed to a growth in students’ self-esteem. However, students often grew
frustrated with being asked for their input in class ‘sometimes I wish Ms. White would just tell us the answer instead of constantly asking what we think and all the class discussions’ (Nikki, S, R, SS) and ‘it’s much easier when Mr. O’Sullivan corrects the tests and gives us a grade instead of us having to do it and tell people what they did right and wrong’ (Sam, S, R, PSA).

Nevertheless, a teacher commented that students’ self-esteem developed over time as students became used to new assessment procedures ‘as students came to rely less on the teacher for answers and took part in assessment tasks more their confidence in themselves and their work grew tenfold because their work was improving’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). This was also identified by a student who reflected that ‘Today I felt really confident when giving out the medals and missions to the other groups ‘cause this is the second time we have done it and I was better at it this time’ (Laura, S, R, PSA). The students appeared to be more confident of themselves because they could see that they had become better at something and a reason cited for this improvement by the teachers in the secondary school was feedback.

A critical incident pertaining to feedback occurred in the secondary school when students had prepared posters for assessment but discussions between teachers and the primary researcher determined that the posters were not of a high enough standard. The posters were very “text-heavy”, there were problems with the layout problems, and they were also lacking in creativity. A feedback process ensued where it was communicated to students by their teachers that they needed to start their posters again, using the same researched information, but they had to be hand written, contain their own illustrations, and have a more structured layout. Students were initially angered and discouraged with the feedback ‘I cannot believe we have to start our posters again from scratch, what a waste of time’ (Alex, S, R, SS) and ‘I have terrible handwriting and I cannot draw so my new poster is going to be crap’ (Callum, S, R, SS). This frustration was highlighted by the fact that a planned presentation evening to their parents had to be delayed by two weeks to allow the students to make changes to their posters ‘I cannot believe they are changing the date for our presentation night all because of the posters, NIC is crap’ (Brian, S, R, SS).

The teachers were also uncomfortable with the feedback ‘the students were really disheartened today when they were told they had to change their posters and I was a bit disheartened myself’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). However, as the students were facilitated by teachers in constructing their new posters their confidence levels grew and once the new posters were constructed, the

---

94 Pseudonym
95 containing information that had been directly copied and pasted from the internet
majority of students agreed that the new posters were better\footnote{See Appendix 6 for a picture of posters before and after the feedback process.} ‘our posters are SO much better now, actually our old ones were pretty terrible now that I look back at them’ (Brian, S, R, SS). The level of feedback communicated from teachers to students was cited as increasing students’ confidence because ‘the students could see that their posters were ten times better because of the feedback they got’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). It was deemed that both the teachers and students benefitted from this feedback process and the member checking day did not highlight any negative dispositions regarding students having to change their posters.

6.2.3 Transition

This research was carried out with students in the final years of primary school and the first year of a feeder secondary school to attempt to monitor how NIC could facilitate the transition between the two schooling levels. Only one student from the participating primary school class was in the feeder secondary school class so the data is limited from the perspective of how NIC can increase curricular coherence across schooling sectors. However, there is much evidence in relation to how the social process of NIC can provide a scaffolding experience to help students transition from primary to secondary school.

The primary school atmosphere was described as ‘a comfortable, safe environment where they [students] have been in the same class for 8 years’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). In contrast, the secondary school atmosphere was described as ‘alien to the primary experience’ where ‘1st year students are lost as they have to find their way around a new school and attend different classes for different subjects with different students’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). It was felt by the principal of the secondary school that scaffolding was required to help this transition process and ‘taking NIC in 1st year will serve as an important bridging process as they are keeping parts of their primary experience whilst engaging in a social learning environment’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). Regarding the curriculum, the integrated aspect of NIC is more similar to how students learned in primary school where students learn about multiple subjects in the one setting. However, teachers highlighted that the consistency of students being in the same class was more coherent with their primary schooling experiences where students remain in the same classroom with the same teacher for the year. There was a belief that NIC was more consistent with primary schooling where ‘parts of NIC almost transported students back to primary school because the students are
with the same class group for the year and it’s a very safe space like I would imagine they experienced in primary school’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). Furthermore, secondary teachers’ perceptions were that the routine of NIC was more coherent with their primary schooling:

There is a lot of routine in NIC; the routine of students being in the same class, getting into their groups, being able to talk with their friends in a safe environment and working on continuing projects which would be like their primary school experiences. (Michelle, T, I, SS)

A critical incident pertaining to transition was documented by the teachers and principal in the secondary school. During the first two weeks of the school year (prior to NIC being introduced) one of the students, Patrick, ‘was complaining of stomach aches, extremely anxious, asking to leave school early and we had to phone his parents twice’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). Co-ordinating NIC teacher Michelle was also Patrick’s class tutor and made a direct link between an improvement in Patrick’s transition process and the social learning experiences of NIC:

It might have happened eventually but I put the speed at which he settled in completely down to NIC. On the first day of NIC, Patrick [pseudonym] was put straight into a group setting where he was encouraged to talk to his peers, share his concerns and participate in class discussions. As time went on he became more confident, made more friends and the anxiety and absence from school completely stopped. (Michelle, T, I, SS)

Parents also commented on the impact that aspects of NIC such as group work, interviewing professionals and presentations had on their sons’ experiences of transitioning into secondary school:

Matthew [pseudonym] can be a bit socially awkward at times but NIC seems to be all about interacting with other people whether it be other students or interviewing guards so that is definitely helping him settle into 1st year a bit better. (Moira, P, I, SS)

Furthermore parents attributed their sons NIC experiences with helping them to make friends:

Lenny [pseudonym] was the only student from his primary school to go into St. Michaels [pseudonym] so he was at an immediate disadvantage but within three or four weeks of NIC he is talking about 7 new friends he made because of working in groups. (Anne, P, I, SS)

This point was reinforced by an early reflection of Lenny’s (S, R, SS) which stated that ‘I didn’t know anyone in 1 Basil [pseudonym] on the first day but when we were put into our groups and we were talking about our concerns and stuff it helped me to make friends.’
In conclusion, perhaps the greatest testament to NIC as easing the transition into secondary school was demonstrated through the case of a student, Donal. Donal arrived to the secondary school 8 weeks into term and the principal made the decision to assign him to the 1 Basil class because of their participation in NIC:

1 Basil [pseudonym] have settled into secondary school quicker than any other 1st year group and this transition process has been accelerated by NIC. This is why I decided to place Donal [pseudonym] into 1 Basil [pseudonym]. All the group work and opportunities NIC provides for students to get to know each other and work together in a social environment will help him settle in as I know he is a bit anxious about making friends. (Luke, PL, I, SS)

The impact of NIC at a classroom-level was not exclusive to the 1st year group in the secondary school and was found to have influenced the dynamic of each of the three participating classes.

6.2.4 Classroom Dynamic

A key finding to emerge from the data across all three schools was that the cooperative social learning environment afforded by NIC contributed to a change in the classroom dynamic. Teachers and students cited a change in teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and the overall atmosphere of the classroom as reasons for a more positive dynamic in the classroom.

The co-ordinating teachers of NIC across all three schools stated that their relationships with students had improved because of NIC. Teachers attributed this improvement partly97 to the high levels of interaction and communication between themselves and the students throughout the NIC process ‘The students’ ease of communication with me as a teacher’ and ‘working in a more social setting outside the formal structure a class usually takes had a positive impact on my relationship with the students’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Similarly ‘NIC provided such an interactive environment amongst the students themselves that it naturally transferred into their relationship with me which improved as a result’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). While there was evidence of improved teacher-student relationships because of the social dynamics of NIC, the data determined that changes in relationships amongst the students themselves were the primary driving factor behind a more positive dynamic in the classroom.

97 They also attributed the improvement to a reduction in power differentials in the classroom as will be detailed in section 6.3.4 of the Findings Chapter.
In Primary school A, Gary (T, I, PSA) stated that a more positive classroom dynamic was one of the two main benefits of NIC\textsuperscript{98} in his classroom and attributed it to ‘a much better relationships amongst the students’. Before and during the NIC process, Gary informed the primary researcher of a strain in the relationships amongst the female members of his class due to some minor bullying issues and students simply not getting along. The impact the social dynamics of the NIC process had on the classroom environments was illustrated by the final NIC task for his class where the students design and enacted a PE Curriculum to answer the question\textsuperscript{99} ‘Are boys or girls better at sport?’ Before this task, the NIC groups were always mixed gender; however, this undertaking required all female and all male teams. This caused great concern for the teacher initially ‘I am really worried about how the girls will work together due to tensions amongst some of them’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). This was also referenced in student journals ‘we got new teams today and I hate being on a team with Denise\textsuperscript{100} and Melanie\textsuperscript{101}’ (Catriona, S, R, PSA). Over time, student relationships improved due to: the all-female groups being forced to spend three weeks collaborating with each other in a close group setting as they designed the PE curriculum; students became extremely invested in the work and; the ‘Boys versus Girls PE Day’ inspired a competitive nature in students where teams were assigned by gender. This did not go unnoticed by the students:

\textit{There hasn’t been any arguments on our team because we are working really hard to try and beat the boys}  
\hspace{1cm} (Catriona, S, R, PSA)

\textit{I loved the way our boys vs. girls sports day really brought the girls together more}  
\hspace{1cm} (Gillian, S, R, PSA)

\textit{I think today showed that we have really come closer as a class}  
\hspace{1cm} (Laura, S, R, PSA)

Their teacher accredited NIC with promoting a more inclusive learning environment:

\textit{The boys versus girls’ PE day designed by the students’ solved a lot of tensions and arguments, especially amongst the female students. The entire class left on their last day of primary school far closer because of that day and NIC in general.}  
\hspace{1cm} (Gary, T, I, PSA)

The social environment created by the constant use of group work in NIC intentionally placed students in social circles they would not ordinarily choose to place themselves in. Teachers were

---

\textsuperscript{98} The other main benefit was an increase in student’s self-esteem as detailed in section 6.2.2 of this findings chapter

\textsuperscript{99} Generated by students on the initial NIC day

\textsuperscript{100} Pseudonym

\textsuperscript{101} Pseudonym
always responsible for creating groups which were mostly formed based on aspects such as ability and gender balance. In the days following when groups were changed student reflections often included comments such as ‘I’m not friends with anyone in my new group’ (Peter, S, R, PSA) and ‘I hate my new group’ (Donal, S, R, PSA). The scaffolding provided by teachers around group work behaviours and the emphasis NIC placed on respecting other peoples’ opinions led to improved and more diverse student relationships forming. This finding of inclusivity and diversity was articulated in the final reflection of a student:

*I really liked the group work in NIC because I got to interact with people in my class that I wouldn’t normally play with in the yard or sit with at lunch. I love sport so I am kind of only friendly with other boys that love sport. But then in group work when we were talking about things like our concerns I realised I actually had loads of things in common with some of the other lads that had nothing to do with sport. So because of NIC I now hang around with more different types of people.*

(Sam, S, R, PSA)

The social environment necessitated by NIC also pertains to findings in relation to changes in the overall atmosphere of participating classrooms. Teachers accredited the following aspects of NIC as leading to a better and more social atmosphere in the classroom: ‘the constant group work’ (Michelle, T, R, SS); ‘interviews and guest speakers’ (Sarah, T, I, SS); ‘the encouragement of students to voice their opinions in class discussions’ (Sarah, T, I, SS); and ‘assessment structures that required students to rotate around groups to assess each others posters’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Furthermore, Gary (T, I, PSA) accredited the improvement in the classroom environment solely to NIC ‘because of NIC, the entire atmosphere in the class is more lively, social, and productive’. Equally, Michelle (T, I, SS) stated that ‘The atmosphere in NIC classes is different. It’s better because there is a constant buzz of activity going on in the NIC class which would be very different to my normal classes’. The perceived change in atmosphere at a classroom level because of NIC also extended to a school level in terms of the school culture due a combination of the social dynamics facilitated by NIC and the meaningful learning associated with it.
6.2.5 School Culture

At a school level, the primary researcher only had a deep level of engagement with the school culture in the secondary school\(^{102}\). Data from the observation journal maintained by the primary researcher determined that the school culture in the secondary school was largely characterised by student behavioural problems. The teaching staff was’ pre-occupied by classroom management as observed from staffroom interactions where teachers spent most of their free classes and lunch hours filling out student discipline sheets, report cards, and ringing parents regarding their sons behaviour’ (Joanne, R, O, SS). The finding that discipline is prioritised in this school is also evidenced by the emphasis placed on the school’s code of conduct and the regimented discipline procedures within the document that staff must adhere to. The administration involved in reporting student behaviours was lengthy and ‘*a lot of teachers spare time is spent filling out green sheets*\(^{103}\)’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Furthermore, there is a section on the staff noticeboard dedicated to regularly informing teachers which students are currently expelled or suspended or on ‘half days’\(^{104}\).

The researcher noted daily observations regarding the communication amongst teachers in the staff room regarding student behaviour. Staffroom observations documented a high level of teachers consulting with other teachers during their free classes and lunch breaks to discuss student behaviours (Joanne, R, O, SS). This finding was supported by the principal of the secondary school who admitted that ‘*the highest level of teacher collaboration in this school at present is teachers approaching other teachers who are class or year heads to report student behavioural problems*’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). Consequently, it was found that teachers in the secondary school were limited by the amount of time they had to spend on classroom management administration and there were high levels of staff dissatisfaction and teacher fatigue due to the extra demands this placed on their time. This was further evidenced by deputy principal Sarah disclosing that ‘*teacher burnout levels in the school are high where I regularly have teachers absent on stress leave*’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). Lastly, classroom observations carried out by the primary researcher also documented high levels of student apathy where some

\(^{102}\) As detailed in the Methodology Chapter, prior to the introduction of the NIC initiative, the primary researcher spent one academic year in the Secondary School to immerse herself in the culture of the school and build relationships with the staff and students in the school.

\(^{103}\) The lengthy discipline record that must be filled out detailing exactly what a student did before they can be placed on report.

\(^{104}\) A ‘half day’ is a discipline procedure within the school where some students are only allowed to attend school in the morning as they are too disruptive in the afternoon.
students appeared distant and disengaged from their learning (Joanne, R, O, SS). This school culture had a direct impact on the implementation of the NIC initiative.

Time constraints were the greatest impediment of the existing school culture on the NIC initiative. This was evidenced by two teachers that initially committed to the NIC process withdrawing due to other demands on their time and one teacher going on leave. Participating teachers cited ‘time for professional planning’ (Sarah, T, I, SS) and ‘time for collaboration with colleagues’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) as major struggles with their engagement in the NIC process. Teachers expressed the sentiment that for NIC to make a meaningful impact in their school, aspects of the school culture would need to change such as ‘having more of a teacher uptake’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) and ‘teachers being assigned planning time on their timetables to do the NIC process justice’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). Furthermore, numerous teachers approached the primary researcher during her time in the school expressing a desire to become involved in the initiative but that they could not due to increased demands on their time (Joanne, R, O, SS).

It was found that levels of student apathy did not have any direct impact on the NIC initiative but instead served as a comparison between how students were normally engaging with their school work and the meaningful engagement displayed by students during NIC. This study also found that undesirable student behaviour had no direct impact on the success of NIC. This was evidenced by the fact that during the entire academic year of participating students engaging with NIC, no student behavioural issues were experienced or reported from an NIC class. This was an area that the participating secondary teachers and the school principal had a heightened awareness of ‘the students are invested in this work, they asked to learn about it, and it is born from their own concerns so I think that’s why we had no problems with behaviour’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). Furthermore, Michelle (T, I, SS) accredited positive student behaviours to the ‘active and involved nature of the work where students are too busy to misbehave’. The principal of the secondary school recognised NIC as an opportunity to tackle some of the issues currently dominating school culture by describing NIC as a ‘tide that raises all boats’:

> With regard to teachers, I feel that NIC could lessen teacher burnout where the teacher no longer has to put on a performance for students. They are the facilitator rather than the sole distributor of information and NIC has contributed hugely to teacher collaboration in this school. The learner is far more active, involved and engaged in their learning. The students, regardless of their ability, are making a contribution to their learning. The model of a good student is where they sit quietly, writing down notes. They are not discussing their learning. The NIC model requires active, social learning where students work as part of a group. I also feel that NIC could
improve behaviour. For students with emotionally behavioural difficulties and for those without special educational needs – I felt it would stop them from becoming bored and acting out.

At a classroom level across all three schools, the culture experienced by students during NIC was found to be different to that experienced in other classes. This was evidenced by a high level of students making unprompted comparisons between their learning in NIC and in classes outside of NIC, a metacognitive act where they were attempting to make sense of their learning experiences. Comparisons widely cited in student reflections referred to how students felt they were being taught differently in NIC; ‘It’s not as repetitive as the way we are usually taught’ (Michael, S, R, SS) and how they were learning differently ‘I thought the way we learned together was so much better than sitting quietly in class just taking down pieces of information’ (Patrick, S, R, SS). Student comparisons to ‘normal’ schoolwork were most prominent when the students were taking part in novel learning activities, e.g., ‘Today was such a different day, instead of doing normal, ordinary work we spent an NIC class in the bathroom doing experiments’ (Brian, S, R, SS). Overall, there was a prevailing sense from students that the culture of learning in the NIC classroom was distinctive from their other classes ‘I found the learning interesting and fun and a change from what happens daily at school’(Gillian, S, R, PSA).

Teachers also referred to a change in culture. Teachers made comparisons between the classroom culture in NIC ranging from concerns expressed regarding noise levels in NIC classes\textsuperscript{105} to teacher testimonies regarding the ‘active’, ‘involved’, ‘interactive’ and ‘social’ culture the NIC classroom facilitated. Students regularly expressed a desire for the culture of other classes to be more like NIC. Students longed for a more social environment in other classes ‘why can’t there be group work in all our classes, we get way more work done that way’ (Matthew, S, R, SS). Students at secondary level also desired more integration of subjects as ‘it makes more sense to learn that way’ (Dara, S, R, SS). Furthermore, at secondary level, students aspired to NIC becoming more widespread across the school ‘Why can’t more teachers do NIC? If this really took off then all our classes would be far more interesting and productive’ (Eoin, S, R, SS). Interviews with parents determined that the culture outside of school had also changed due to students’ involvement in NIC.

Parents indicated that the culture at home had changed because of NIC as students were

\textsuperscript{105} As detailed in section 6.2.6 of this chapter
engaging more communally with their families. Parents attributed this change in behaviour due to the level of meaning that the ‘water charges’ and ‘racism’ themes held for their sons ‘Usually I get a “fine” when I ask him about his day at school but he was coming home and engaging in the conversations far more about current topics such as the water charges’ (Moira, P, I, SS).

Parents also commented that there was more critical engagement at home ‘at home we talk a lot about current affairs and he doesn’t usually join in but when he was learning about water charges he suddenly had loads to say’ (Breda, P, I, SS). Similarly, ‘there were some great debates at the dinner table and Thomas [pseudonym] was making really valid and informed arguments’ (Deirdre, P, I, SS). Parents also spoke to their awareness of how their sons were learning differently during NIC ‘He seems very interested in the work he does and the different ways he learns in NIC in comparison to most of his other classes’ (Marie, P, I, SS). Similarly, another parent stated that

*School is normally very structured and he relies on the text book to learn information and this is one of the weaknesses of our education system that you study in order to pass an exam. In NIC, Lenny [pseudonym] is researching information himself, working in groups and watching the news to gather information for his project which is a very different and much better way of learning.*

(Anne, P, I, SS)

However, a perceived negative attribute of the ‘different’ ways of learning was that the social dynamics facilitated by NIC led to a significant increase in noise levels.

### 6.2.6 Noise

One of the more surprising issues of concern for students and teachers was the issue of noise. Group work was the majority of students’ favourite aspect of NIC; however, students often cited the class being too noisy as the aspect of NIC they liked the least ‘Noise was the part of NIC I disliked the most, definitely’ (Paul, S, R, SS). Furthermore, on the member checking day in the secondary school when students were asked what they remembered most about NIC classes, the data often included comments such as ‘when I think back on NIC I think about a noisy class’ (Alan, S, R, SS). Students conceptualised noise as making it difficult for them to concentrate with ‘sometimes it was hard to concentrate because the room was so noisy’ (Gerard, S, R, SS). However, students also recognised the correlation between noise and group work ‘the noise in NIC was good and bad. It showed we were working really hard together but then sometimes it
was hard to concentrate’ (Greg, S, R, SS). This finding was also shared by teachers with a particular focus placed on noise by the teachers in the secondary school.

One teacher cited noise as ‘the worst part of NIC’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Noise was conceptualised differently by teachers who often viewed it as difficult and unruly. The teachers were uncomfortable with the noise levels and related noise with undesirable behaviour ‘I just can’t get used to the noise. I usually associate noise levels like that with students misbehaving and I’m finding it very hard to adjust to it’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). The noise levels from NIC classes were also viewed as an inconvenience within the secondary school. NIC took place in a partitioned classroom and because of the noise; the teacher in the adjoining room had to move her class to another room for that 40 minute class every Monday as she informed the principal that ‘she couldn’t possibly teach a class with that noise going on next door’ (Luke, PL, I, SS).

Participating teachers admitted that a quieter classroom made up their usual dynamic but noise was given credence because they were aware of the social dynamics of the NIC class. Teachers then became more accepting of the noise with ‘the students are in groups, so I get that it’s a productive noise I have become more tolerant of it’ (Sarah, T, R, SS) and ‘I got used to the noise as time went on and could relax a bit more’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). The students and teachers recognised the contradictory element of being agitated by noise in in a process they enjoyed primarily due to the social interactions it afforded ‘I know it sounds silly as you can’t have one without the other but group work was my favourite thing about NIC and the noise was my least favourite’ (Thomas, S, R, SS). Furthermore, Michelle (T, R, SS) commented that ‘It seems like a ridiculous complaint because I am the first to say that the social setting of NIC was the most beneficial part, yet that’s what caused all the noise’.
6.2.7 Conclusion of Social Dynamics Section

Across all three schools, the social environment necessitated by NIC had to be scaffolded by teachers at the introductory stages and throughout the process. All social skills acquired by students were developed on a gradual basis through the consistent nature of teaching methodologies such as group work during the course of their engagement with the NIC process. However, conclusions about group work being the most favoured aspect of NIC were also met with statements of frustration from students about aspects of group work they did not enjoy such as working with certain group members, equal completion of work and noise levels. The social dynamics promoted by NIC in relation to students’ self-esteem increased as they engaged more in interactive learning experiences that were viewed as atypical from their normal schooling experience. The possible affordances NIC can bring to the transition process between primary and secondary schooling sectors were also evidenced. Coherence with primary schooling experiences and new friendships facilitated by the social environment central to NIC were cited by teachers and parents as easing the transition process.

Relationships also impacted on the overall classroom dynamic with improvements in teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships cited as a benefit of NIC in all three schools. On a broader level, the school culture of the secondary school was explored and this study determined that NIC impacted positively on student behaviours and engagement due to the meaningful curriculum content that students were exploring and the social dynamics of the NIC classroom. Furthermore, the findings revealed that NIC also impacted on the culture at home where parents reported that students were more communally and critically engaged at home due to social teaching methodologies involved in NIC and the meaningful, topical nature of the themes they were exploring. Improvements in the overall atmosphere of classrooms in transforming into active, social environments also had its negative attributes with noise repeatedly cited as the least favoured aspect of NIC by both teachers and students where noise was perceived to be a consequence of increased student voice.
6.3 Section Three: Agency

The issue power is a key focus of this research and one of the primary driving reasons for this initiative was to challenge power dynamics in the classroom. Promoting greater agency of students and teachers emerged as a product of this study. This section will examine the agency promoted by NIC at a student and teacher level across all three participating schools. The role of student voice and student reflections in supporting learner agency will be examined in addition to looking at the influence of increased student decision making and autonomy on the agentic engagement of participating students. Findings regarding teacher agency will be presented in light of connections associated with the increased capacity NIC afforded teachers in making decisions surrounding curricular planning, teaching, and assessment. Findings regarding the process employed to negotiate teacher-student agency will also be shared along with the struggles and challenges experienced by teachers during the implementation and negotiation process which will be presented in the form of curricular constraints. Lastly, this section will present findings surrounding the impact that existing school and classroom cultures had on the implementation of NIC and conversely, the impact that this curriculum initiative had on participating classroom and home cultures.

6.3.1 Learner Agency

The findings that emerged pertaining to learner agency relate to students having an active voice in the NIC process. The promotion of student voice in NIC relates to learners making curricular decisions around curriculum content, how it is assessed, how they want to be taught, and how they want to learn. Students exercised their voice when articulating their concerns on the initial NIC day and also when they meaningfully represented themselves in determining curriculum content by electing themes which were based on their expressed concerns. The NIC process therefore allowed for an engagement with material that was immediately relevant and meaningful to students. Students commented on the fairness and equality of the voting process when reflecting that ‘I thought the class vote was a really fair way of deciding what we were going to learn about’ (Lucy, S, R, PSA) and ‘everyone got an equal say when we were voting for the themes which is what a democracy means’ (Brian, S, R, SS). Findings pertaining to a democratic schooling experience emerged as students chose to vote more often, e.g., voting for

---

106 See section 2.1 of the Conceptual Framework Chapter. Also section 1.2 of the Literature Review Chapter
ways they wanted to learn about themes ‘In NIC, the students take most decisions to a vote, the students vote on whether they should interview somebody or get in a guest speaker’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Student voice was reflected in the NIC process by the extent to which students were involved in shaping learning experiences. For example, students in Primary School A designed and enacted a PE curriculum, students in Primary School B decided to carry out a classroom survey on household pets and students in the secondary school voted on professionals they wanted to interview. Learner voice also emerged as students participated in decisions surrounding assessment:

\[\text{Student voice and input was evident in today’s assessment tasks where we had two plays, one poem, one rap and one presentation. Each task was graded with the same rubric which I designed collaboratively with the students.}\]  

(Gary, T, R, PSA)

Within the NIC process, students having a voice in their learning was viewed to be atypical from their usual experience of schooling. This was recognised by teachers as novel and students were initially reticent to engage with the process ‘It took a while for them to believe that I was actually looking for their opinion’ (Mary, T, R, PSB) and ‘they wouldn’t be used to being asked for their thoughts and opinions several times a day’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). The invitation to give opinions about what they would learn, and how significantly these opinions directed pedagogical strategies, was widely cited by students in their reflections ‘the most important thing I learned today was that our opinions really matter’ (Donal, S, R, SS). There was a sense of student appreciation across participating schools that for the ‘child-run’ approach to learning and that their values and voice were meaningfully listened to and acted upon. Numerous references were made by students about being given a ‘choice’ and an ‘opinion’ in their learning ‘Today we got to choose what WE wanted to learn about’ (Denise, S, R, PSA) and ‘if we come up with a good suggestion to help us learn more about health then sometimes we are allowed to do it’ (Greg, S, R, SS). This sentiment was also relayed by teachers ‘Thursday mornings are all about what the students think about things and what kind of work they would like to do next’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Furthermore, six weeks into the process, Michelle (T, R, SS) reflected that ‘I was taken aback at how students responded and interacted when given their own voice’. Student voice was a constant variable throughout the NIC process and was also elicited through student reflections.

Student voice was promoted as students completed reflections following each NIC session across all three schools. Emergent from the data was awareness from students that their voice
determined their learning experiences and student reflections enabled them to reflect on these learning experiences. For example, ‘we were asked our opinions a lot – during class when we were asked how we wanted to learn about things and then in our reflections when we gave our opinions on the learning that took place that day’ (Mark, S, R, SS). Enabling students to reflect on their learning was aimed at empowering students as agentic individuals whereby student voice helped to shape teachers reflection on their classroom practices; ‘student reflections let me know what the students liked and what they disliked and I genuinely take this into account when planning the next lesson’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). The teachers perceptions of student reflections as sources of feedback was shared by students who viewed reflections as a way of communicating their insights about learning with their teachers: ‘Our reflections were a way for us to tell the teacher what we enjoyed and didn’t enjoy about the class and he often changed things based on what we wrote in them’ (Martin, S, R, PSB). Students also acknowledged and expressed a sense of appreciation that teachers acted on the feedback they provided in their reflections:

> It was nice to be asked how we felt about the work and especially what we disliked. Anytime we wrote in our reflections about things we didn’t like, after Joanne saw them, we would have a class discussion about the things everyone said they disliked and we had to come up with ways to improve it together. (Eoin, S, I, SS)

In addition to communicating feedback to their teachers, students also saw their reflections as a ‘log’ of their NIC journey that ‘helped you to think back over all the work you did in NIC’ (Niall, S, R, PSB) and enabled students to ‘help you remember all the different things you did and learned in NIC’ (Reece, S, R, PSA). Across each of the three schools, teachers placed a value on student reflections. Teachers viewed journals as ‘an additional outlet for students to express their voice’ (Mary, T, I, PSB); an opportunity to ‘give teachers valuable feedback on the weekly NIC classes’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) and ‘enables students to really think about how they are learning that takes place in NIC’ (Gary, T, R, PSA).

Despite the teachers supporting the completion of student reflections, member checking data determined that the completion of reflections was viewed largely negatively by students in the secondary school. Students largely disliked writing reflections and cited them as being ‘so repetitive’ (Damien, S, R, PSA), ‘really boring’ (Dobrav, S, R, SS) and ‘the worst thing about NIC’ (Dara, S, R, SS) where students ‘often just ended up writing the same thing every week’ (Nikki, S, R, SS). Students struggled at times with the freedom and accountability required of
them in completing reflections ‘we shouldn’t have to come up with what we would change about
the lesson if we didn’t like it, that’s the teachers job’ (Callum, S, R, SS) and ‘we do loads of hard
work in NIC classes, sometimes we even do the teacher’s job and then it’s like we are punished
by having to do reflections’ (Ryan, S, R, SS). Student involvement in decision-making
surrounding what they would like to change about their learning experiences is an example of
how they displayed agentic engagement within the NIC process.

6.3.2 Agentic Engagement

NIC helped to promote agentic engagement through student voice in curricular decision-making.
Students were often agentically engaged because they were given a choice about how they
learned and how they were assessed. For example, students in Primary School A were involved
in making decisions around the assessment strategies and criteria such as projects, presentations,
plays, poems, and raps with one student noting that ‘our group decided to put all our research
facts into a poem instead of on a test’ (Ava, S, R, PSA). However, the impact of such student-led
decisions was not without challenges as they required a high level of scaffolding by teachers to
acquire the capacities to design these assessment tasks. Although students found these strategies
engaging, they were often frustrated with the explicit need to demonstrate their learning ‘I hated
today. We wanted to put loads of cool characters into the play but we weren’t allowed because
they didn’t have anything to do with any of the information we had researched’ (Laura, S, R,
PSA). These struggles were also shared by teachers ‘a lot of work had to go into helping students
construct their plays and poems whereas if I just gave them a written test it would cut all of that
out’ (Gary, T, R, PSA).

Students were carefully scaffolded to take on extra responsibilities which eventually reduced the
obligations on the teacher. Students were initially cautious about this aspect of the process and
were observed ‘offering up very safe contributions to class discussions at the start of the
process’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Teachers facilitated this by gradually handing over tasks they usually
oversaw. For example, learners were empowered to take on research tasks such as surveys,
sourcing guest speakers and interviewing professionals but with certain criteria set by the teacher
‘Before students were allowed near a computer they had to show me a list of relevant research
questions they had prepared’ and ‘students had to come up with a list of reasons why the guest
speaker they put forward would add to their projects’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). However, students did feel constrained in some areas of directing their own learning, e.g., when researching information independently on computers, students often became overwhelmed by the amount of information available to them. Students noted that ‘there was so much information on the internet that I actually didn’t find the answers to any of my questions’ (Patrick, S, R, SS) and ‘there are so many different answers on the internet and how am I supposed to know which is [rite] and which is wrong’ (Gillian, S, R, PSA).

Student decision making extended beyond learning and assessment experiences to making rational choices around curriculum content i.e. what they learned about; ‘In NIC we are asked what we want to learn and we come up with loads of options by looking at our concerns (Peter, S, R, PSA); ‘we decided that we wanted to learn about the theme by voting for it’. However, the final reflections and “member checking” day in the secondary school determined that while students agreed that they voted democratically for the overall theme of ‘Future Life, the Economy and Social Issues’, they felt constrained because the teachers made the final decision surrounding which sub-themes to explore ‘we are supposed to make all the decisions in NIC but in the end, the teacher decided that we were going to learn about water charges’ (Greg, S, R, SS) and ‘we decided on the overall theme but actually we didn’t have any say when Ms. White decided we would learn about water charges and racism’ (Thomas, S, R, SS).

Students were satisfied with the agentic engagement NIC facilitated surrounding their involvement in deciding on the content to be explored within the sub-themes; ‘we decided that we wanted to learn about areas like racism in sport and racism and the law’ (Dara, S, R, SS) and ‘we decided what we wanted to learn about by making our own question about the sub-themes and then the answers would be our learning content’ (Liam, S, R, SS). Participating teachers commented on the agentic engagement displayed by students across the primary and secondary schools in relation to students having the capacity to make rational decisions to do something; ‘When students were designing the PE curriculum, students were leading every aspect of the task and making all the necessary decisions’ (Gary, T, R, PSA); ‘The students felt they were doing something worthwhile because they had the self-efficacy to make important

107 Under the overall theme of Future Life and the Economy there were nine sub-themes (all of which were determined by the students’ concerns) as follows: The Recession, College, Employment, Taxes, Water Charges, Homelessness, Racism, Crime and Drugs. After the students voted for the overall theme, the teachers chose to explore Water Charges and Racism for a number of reasons including; links to their subject areas, links to the curriculum, the topical nature of water charges and NIC taking place in a multi-cultural school.
decisions such as wanting to interview people to help answer questions they had about racism’ (Sarah, T, R, PSB). The students were then given the capacity to act on these decisions by carrying out suggested learning experiences such as when they interviewed a psychologist and guards. It was noted by teachers that students agentic engagement also transferred to classes outside of NIC where ‘Even in my German classes, the students were asking me to learn about specific topics and making suggestions on what to learn next and how we might go about it’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). The freedom NIC afforded students surrounding their curricular decision-making resulted in students becoming more autonomous learners.

Furthermore, students initially struggled to select relevant content for their projects which was a concern voiced by teachers ‘students are just copying and pasting all the information they can find online and are finding it hard to write short, succinct and relevant answers’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). Students had to be heavily scaffolded to research relevant information online and then transfer the information into their own words. As students became more comfortable and acquainted with online research, they came to rely on the teacher less for guidance with numerous references in student reflections such as ‘today I learned how to just pick the relevant pieces of information from the internet’ (Shane, S, R, PSA) and ‘I kept my answers much shorter today and I only included the relevant bits’ (Simon, S, R, SS). As the NIC process advanced, students were observed to rely less on the teacher for guidance and work more autonomously. For example, after completing a one-day PE curriculum designed by the students, reflections included statements such as ‘I was amazed that we designed the entire PE day ourselves. Today was a huge success and I think we could have done it all without the teachers’ (Philip, S, R, PSA). While this work acknowledges that learners assumed a more agentic role in their learning, it is also recognised that a collective approach involving teacher agency is required for this initiative to be successful.
### 6.3.3 Teacher Agency

The intention to promote learner agency was not designed to be at the expense of teacher agency. It was found that NIC provided teachers with a process to implement a wider range of professional decision-making surrounding the planning, teaching and assessment of their curriculum.

**Teachers as curriculum makers**

Participating teachers exercised their agency by planning a curriculum which bridged learning and content with the expressed concerns of students. Teachers at primary and secondary level applied their agency in different ways as they made decisions about the order of how they delivered their curriculum. At secondary level, a teacher admitted that ‘*usually I teach the business curriculum in the same order every year but the water charges theme forced me to change around that order significantly*’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Furthermore, at primary level it was noted that ‘*my morning usually consists of maths for an hour and a half followed by English and Irish but on Thursday mornings we covered whatever bits of the curriculum were needed to answer the students questions on health*’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Teachers made rational choices in mapping out their students’ learning, e.g., a co-ordinating secondary teacher made the decision to take students to a water harnessing plant to inform the ‘water charges’ theme and the primary teacher planned for guest speakers to come to the classroom to inform the ‘health’ theme.

Teachers had the capacity, through the NIC process, to enact a more professional bridging between curriculum content and the questions and concerns voiced by students on the initial NIC day. There were initial apprehensions regarding this approach, for example ‘*To be honest I was only 50-50 as to whether a curriculum based around concerns would work but when you sit down and start planning you can make so many links between the students’ concerns and your own subject content*’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). At secondary level, the planning process was found to be more challenging due to the specific subject disciplines held by teachers. A teacher of Irish and Geography stated that ‘*when the theme of water charges was decided upon I struggled to identify where Irish was going to come into it but I immediately knew what parts of the 1st year Geography curriculum I could hit on*’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). The planning process was found to be easier at primary level ‘*I looked at this list long of concerns and was able to recognise easily*
enough where I was going to bring in history, maths, geography etc.’ (Mary, T, I, PSB) and ‘planning for the integrated part of NIC wasn’t a problem for me as I could easily recognise where the various subjects could fit into the theme’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). By putting students in a position where they had to complete weekly reflections, NIC also set the conditions for teachers to incorporate feedback from the students into their planning for future learning ‘I would genuinely take on board some of the suggestions made by students in the reflections when planning the next NIC class’ (Michelle, T, R, SS) and ‘if it was obvious from the reflections that they really didn’t like something then I would change it around for the next time or maybe leave it out altogether’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). NIC also gave teachers the capacity to experiment with teaching the curriculum in different ways.

**Pedagogy of NIC**

NIC provided the conditions for teachers to try out new teaching methodologies and make new judgements as professionals. Teachers admitted that ‘some teaching approaches were completely new to me’ (Gary, T, I, PSA) and ‘NIC forced me to teach in ways I wouldn’t normally teach’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). All of the work completed in NIC was through the medium of group work which was not new to teachers, yet one teacher commented that he had ‘put the students into a physical group setting before’ but only after engaging with NIC did he realise that ‘there was no actual group work taking place’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). He elaborated that ‘I used put students sitting in groups where they took turns to read out loud but there were no roles, no discussions and the students weren’t producing any work together like they do in NIC’. Similarly, a secondary teacher admitted that ‘I would never do group work with 1st year groups, I would only attempt it with 5th and 6th year groups’ (Sarah, T, R, SS). Teachers equally had to concede the use of a range of teaching strategies based on the wishes of students that they may not otherwise have employed.

Entrusting students to assume an agentic role in their learning was nurtured by teachers providing pedagogical support for their students:

> I would never organise a guest speaker to come in and my subject areas wouldn’t normally cater for class trips outside of the school but when the students suggested it, I couldn’t really say no as it was relevant to the water charges theme and I knew NIC was about doing things a bit differently.  

(Michelle, T, I, SS)
Teachers fostered students’ abilities to be more accountable for their learning by employing teaching methodologies such as Jigsaw learning which requires students to teach their peers and requires students to regularly present the key findings from their research to the rest of the class. Teachers found this to be effective as ‘when the students know they have to present to or teach their peers, they work that bit harder at it’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). Teacher agency was promoted by NIC as each participating teacher made rational decisions to make changes to their teaching habitus and working environment when approaching NIC classes ‘I just went with the group work today because of NIC and by the end of the morning I had a way better grasp on things’ (Mary, T, R, PSB). Teachers also recognised the affordances of NIC with regard to their own professional development ‘I know that Thursday mornings from now on will involve group work and student research and as a newly qualified teacher I am learning so much from the process’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). In addition to experimenting with new teaching approaches, NIC also put teachers in the position to try-out new assessment strategies.

**Assessment of NIC**

The introduction of NIC to the three classrooms made participating teachers aware of their own power and the capacity they had to make and implement decisions surrounding the assessment of their curriculum:

> I always give written and oral tests and then decide on the end of term tests with the other German and Business teachers but with NIC I was making more decisions around assessment on my own and even with the students. (Michelle, T, I, SS)

> I usually follow assessment templates that Ms. Breen left for me108 and although I’d put my own twist on them I felt I was only putting my own stamp on things when I introduced presentations, plays, and poems as types of assessment. (Gary, T, R, PSA)

Some assessment strategies were novel to teachers who admitted that they had never used, e.g., posters as a form of assessment before and were ‘completely unaware of the amount of work that needs to go into posters’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). Issues surrounding teachers’ expectations for students were highlighted during a poster assessment task in the secondary school where concern was expressed from the researcher about the quality of the students’ posters and suggestions

---

108 Gary was in Primary School A covering a maternity leave for Ms. Breen (pseudonym).
made as to how to proceed. The researcher informed the teachers that the posters were currently at an average C1 grading level to which Sarah (T, SS) replied ‘but they are [emphasis added] only C1 standard students’ (Joanne, R, O, SS), Furthermore, Michelle (T, O, SS) responded that ‘this is as good as you are going to get out of them’ (Joanne, R, O, SS). After a lengthy feedback process of teachers asking students to re-design their posters (resulting in high disappointment levels in the students), students produced far better posters and consequently the teachers

expectations for students increased ‘it was a struggle to get there but I am blown away by the new posters and that the students were able to produce them’ (Sarah, T, R, SS) and ‘after the poster incident, I realised that I don’t give the students enough credit for what they are capable of’ (Michelle, T, I, SS).

**Collective Agency**

The community approach to learning facilitated by NIC where teachers interacted collaboratively with their students allowing them to assume more responsibility for their learning meant that teachers had to relinquish some control as greater agency was distributed across the class. This necessitated a move away from a traditionally adult-directed approach to learning and assessment to involve the child-run perspective in a community of practice. The adoption of assessment strategies such as peer-assessment represented a challenge for teachers ‘I really struggled with negotiating assessment with students. When I was designing the criteria for the play with the students I felt like I was telling them what was coming up in the test’ (Gary, T, I, PSA) and ‘the involvement of students in the design of grading rubrics was completely foreign to me’ (Michelle, T, R, SS). Teachers exercised their professional agency by overruling some student decisions concerning assessment ‘We learned from our experience of grading the presentations, and this time I set the criteria and the students decided on the allocation of marks’ (Gary, T, S, PSA). This negotiation of the assessment strategies highlights the significance of attempting to promote teacher agency within the broader concept of collective agency. Final interviews with participating teachers at the end of the NIC process in each school revealed changes teachers made in their dispositions as teachers and in their teaching as a direct result of their involvement with NIC.

As with students, teacher agency and voice was promoted through reflections. At primary level, through the medium of reflections, a teacher admitted that ‘control’ made up his natural
disposition as a teacher where ‘I like to be in full control of the classroom and as such there are a lot of rules and procedures for everything we do’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). When asked in a final interview ‘Has your engagement with NIC affected how you will teach in the future?’ this teacher answered that ‘I have relaxed a lot more because of NIC and don’t crave control anymore’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Furthermore, this teacher exercised his agency and made a conscious decision to reprofessionalise by: ‘Listening to student opinions more’, ‘using a lot more group work in my teaching’, ‘standing back a bit more’ and ‘handing over more tasks to the students’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). In the secondary school a coordinating teacher reflected that ‘discipline and authority’ made up her natural disposition as a teacher and ‘I put a lot of work into the notes that I provide so that students can sit quietly in class and take them down’ (Sarah, T, R, SS). When asked in the final interview if her teaching disposition had changed because of NIC, she listed numerous changes to her teaching such as: ‘relaxing more on the discipline side of things’; ‘trusting students more’; ‘welcoming more student input’; ‘incorporating more group work into my teaching’ and ‘giving students more credit for making sound suggestions about how they want to learn’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). This study has determined that student and teacher agency were promoted by the NIC process, but this agency had to be negotiated.

6.3.4 Negotiating Teacher-Student Agency

Aspects of agency such as learner voice and an increased capacity to make decisions surrounding teaching and learning were new to students and teachers alike and, as such, had to be negotiated. Through the medium of NIC, teachers and students across each participating school admitted to their classrooms being transformed from being teacher-led to adopting a community-aligned approach to learning centred on collaboration between teachers and students. A diminished power differential in the classroom, an environment of trust between the teacher and students, and teacher-student relationships were found to be the most influential supports to the promotion of student agency throughout the negotiation process.

Throughout the negotiation process, the collaborative approach of teacher-student curriculum planning contributed to the redefinition of power relations in the classroom. A conscious decision was made by teachers, using their sense of professional judgement, to take a step back and allow students to take more control over their learning. This redistribution of power in the
classroom was implemented in a gradual process and was not easily achieved. When asked what he found to be most challenging about engaging with the negotiation process, a teacher revealed that ‘initially, it was the whole aspect of the students being in control’ and admitted that ‘the students are used to me subconsciously suggesting what their opinion might be, and then they would decide what their opinion was’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Trust was cited by teachers as a necessary tenet for supporting learner agency.

A reciprocal trust was gradually established in NIC classrooms. For students to believe that their voice would be heard and for teachers to feel confident enough to take a step back, a greater sense of trust was felt to be cultivated. Participating teachers admitted to ‘hand holding’ (Gary, T, R, PSA) and ‘having a lack of faith in the student’s abilities’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) in the past but after relinquishing some control and observing students taking on extra responsibilities, requirements essential to the success of the NIC process, Gary (T, I, PSA) stated that ‘I wouldn’t have trusted the students to do any of this before engaging with NIC’. He also attributed a gradual building of trust down to ‘simply keeping our promises’ (Gary, T, I, PSA). Reflecting on the entire process, Michelle (T, I SS) stated that ‘now that we are finished the NIC process, I can safely say that everything that was promised to the students on the first day was fulfilled’. This did not go unnoticed on the students behalf with Paul (S, R, PSA) reflecting that ‘I liked that the teacher trusted us and wasn’t yelling at us for doing things differently’ and ‘we are still learning about all the things we asked to learn about on the first day’ (Laura, S, R, PSA). This is indicative of multiple references made by students as to how learning suggestions they made on the initial NIC day were acknowledged and pursued, thus contributing to the role trust played in supporting student agency. The relationships established between the teachers and students were also a part of negotiating student-teacher agency.

Negotiation between teachers and students was central to the NIC process and appropriate relationships had to be established to support this. Throughout the NIC process in the secondary school, teacher-student relationships were becoming more about negotiating agency than discipline and control ‘I would usually be viewed as a very strict teacher but NIC has allowed the students to see a different side to me due to my involving them in more decisions’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). Teachers and principals also credited NIC with breaking down barriers between teachers and students ‘NIC has really impacted on my relationship with students as there is less of a teacher-student boundary there now’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). Similarly, the principal of the secondary school stated that:
The teacher is no longer viewed as the disseminator of information. There is more of an equal relationship where learning content and outcomes are negotiated with students and the students really appreciate that. (Luke, P, I, SS)

While teachers were more open to incorporating student voice and input into each NIC lesson, central to the negotiation process were “non-negotiables”. There were many aspects of NIC that teachers were not willing to concede on such as time constraints, resource constraints, and aspects of the curriculum that had to be addressed. ‘The students loved carrying out the in-class survey on animals but didn’t want to convert the results into graphs which is something we needed to cover in maths so it had to be done [emphasis added]’ (Mary, T, R, PSB). At times, participating teachers felt it was necessary to revert to the traditional teacher-led approach to learning, often due to time and curricular constraints. It was found that teachers felt disempowered by curriculum constraints throughout the NIC process which is indicative of the wider curriculum constraints of implementing NIC.

6.3.5 The Curriculum Constraints of Implementing NIC

Developing on from section 6.1.4 of the findings chapter on ‘integration’ where it was determined that integration was easier to realise at primary level, this study found that the practical considerations of implementing NIC into the existing curriculum was far easier to achieve at the primary level also. At secondary level, the principal was constrained by a crowded timetable of separate subjects and could therefore only assign one 40 minute class per week to NIC. At primary level, both principals were able to incorporate one full morning of NIC a week due to the relatively existing integrated nature of schooling at this level and the absence of any state exam pressures. However, at secondary level, coordinating teachers felt that the students’ engagement with NIC suffered due to the lack of consistency with which they engaged with the process as ‘one forty minute class a week is not enough as by the time the students organise themselves into groups and get down to work the class is up, even having a double class would make a huge difference’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). This concern was shared by the principal of the school who felt disempowered by an overcrowded timetable when allocating time to NIC:
it was unfortunate that 1 Basil [pseudonym] could only engage with NIC for one class a week but it was extremely difficult for me to even get that one class when there are state requirements for how many classes of maths, geography etc. the students need to be attending.

(Luke, PL, I, SS)

Furthermore, at secondary level, NIC was carried out at the cost of other aspects of the curriculum. In the secondary school, NIC replaced students only assigned SPHE\textsuperscript{109} class for the week which meant that students had no access to Health Education for the year. This was highlighted as a major concern by one of the teachers:

\textit{It was always at the back of my mind that when students were in NIC, they should have been in an SPHE class. Some things came up at the end of the year that students in 1 Basil [pseudonym] had questions around relationships and sexuality and this would have been covered in SPHE if they had the opportunity to take this class.}

(Sarah, T, I, SS)

Equally, data from students on the member checking day revealed that this was also a concern for students ‘\textit{because we did NIC we completely missed out on SPHE}’ (Greg, S, M, SS) and ‘\textit{everyone else in 1\textsuperscript{st} year got to do SPHE and learn about health concerns that we didn’t get to because we were doing NIC}’ (Gerard, S, M, SS).

Concerns were expressed by teachers in the secondary school\textsuperscript{110} that their capacity to implement NIC was constrained by a lack of time for professional planning with their colleagues ‘\textit{all the planning we do is in our own time and over email; there is no time for us to physically meet up and plan together}’ (Michelle, T, I, SS). As NIC necessitates teacher collaboration at secondary level, it was found that this structural barrier led to a breakdown in teacher communication at times where they relied on the students to inform them of their progress in other classes. This frustration was articulated by Sarah (T, I, SS) when reflecting that ‘\textit{because we don’t have the time to plan together, we don’t know what the other teachers have covered for the water charges theme or what stage they are at on the projects, we rely on the students to tell us}’. Participating secondary teachers were further constrained by exam pressures and the need to cover curriculum content.

When considering the future implementation of NIC in their school, both coordinating teachers felt that NIC would only be suitable for non-exam years ‘\textit{NIC wouldn’t work in 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 5\textsuperscript{th} or 6\textsuperscript{th} year as all the teacher and students time needs to be put into preparing for the state exams}’

\textsuperscript{109} Social, Personal and Health Education

\textsuperscript{110} Teacher collaboration was only required at Secondary level as there was no teacher collaboration at primary level due to one teacher being responsible for teaching the class for the year.
Similarly, Sarah (T, I, SS) stated that ‘I would do NIC with 1st year and Transition year\(^{111}\) classes again but I couldn’t consider it for any other year as there is just too much work to get through before the exams’. Concerns expressed by teachers regarding ‘covering curriculum’ were also expressed at primary level to a lesser degree ‘I am worried that we are only picking bits and pieces from e.g. Geography that are relevant to the theme and we won’t cover it in full’ (Mary, T, R, PSB) and ‘If we were to only answer the questions the students had we wouldn’t get all the curriculum covered’ (Gary, T, R, PSA). Teachers overcame this concern by exercising their agency and ensuring that aspects of their teaching were defined as non-negotiable as explored in section 3.5. Some of the underlying reasons as to why participating principals and teachers volunteered to become involved in the NIC process also stemmed from curricular constraints.

Participating teachers and principals cited ‘the meaningful learning associated with NIC’ (Luke, PL, I, SS) and ‘the involvement of student voice’ (Michelle, T, I, SS) as some of the reasons for signing up to the NIC process. However, their reasons to engage in this with students were also due to an exasperation of the current curriculum where too many demands are set surrounding reporting requirements and student retention. Principals cited some very pragmatic reasons for their involvement. The principal of the secondary school linked his involvement in NIC to his own agendas and requirements as school leader. He was very much aware of the cross-curricular links afforded by NIC and commented that ‘this aspect of NIC will really help if an inspector comes to the school and asks me to identify where we are promoting cross-curricular engagement in the school’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). Furthermore, the principal admitted that the schools involvement in NIC could help satisfy some of the requirements placed on schools by the Irish inspectorate, for example, ‘the teacher collaboration that NIC facilitates will satisfy a lot of the School Self Evaluation requirements’ and ‘participation in NIC would help in completing a good report for the inspectorate around areas such as retention and student engagement also’ (Luke, PL, I, SS). The response from Assistant Chief Inspector Deirdre Matthews echoed the principal’s observations when she stated that NIC was a useful way of informing the School Self Evaluation because:

Any approach that enables teachers to consult with students about which teaching approaches suit their style of learning is likely to assist in informing a school’s policy on the use of a range of methodologies and of ensuring that teaching approaches enable students to benefit from a range of learning experiences including active learning, collaborative learning, independent learning

\(^{111}\) 4th year in Secondary School
Although the primary driving factors for the principal of the secondary school’s involvement were practical in nature, the principal felt that what was getting lost in his role was his aspiration to be ‘a leader of learning’:

There are so many competing priorities as a principal, from Finance to HR to IR. There are so many demands. I am trying to run the school, deal with middle management, and constantly implement new initiatives such as anti-bullying policies. What often happens is that the urgent replaces the important and the learning can get forgotten about. When I listened to the initial presentation on NIC it reminded me of my role as a leader of learning and I would now view NIC as hugely important for learning in this school. (Luke, PL, I, SS)

This sentiment was shared by the inspectorate when stating that ‘The role of the principal is not always focused on learning and school leaders are key in ensuring that the learning experiences and outcomes achieved are appropriate to their school context’ (ACI, I).

Pragmatic tensions such as low student engagement levels and classroom management problems were cited by secondary teachers as reasons for their involvement with the NIC study ‘I hoped that by students learning about their concerns they might become more intrinsically motivated to learn’ (Sarah, T, I, SS); ‘I hoped NIC might assist with some classroom management issues I was having’ (Sarah, T, I, SS). At primary level, Gary (T, I, PSA) hoped that NIC could improve student attendance ‘it’s my hope that if students are working on continuing projects that mean something to them they might be less likely to miss school as much’. Lastly, two participating teachers cited their own pragmatic agendas around professional development as their reasons for becoming involved with Sarah (T, I, SS) viewing her involvement with NIC as ‘an opportunity for me to expand on my existing bank of teaching methodologies’ and Gary (T, I, PSA) admitting that ‘as an NQT I am always looking for ways to build on my teaching skills and NIC is a chance to do this’. The pressures of curriculum constraints can also be linked to difficulties in introducing new initiatives to schools and this struggle was also experienced by policymakers.

The implementation of any new initiative to a school faces great difficulties as even policymakers find that they can be powerless, as exemplified by Director of the NCCA

112 Newly Qualified Teacher
While John admitted that ‘what we do now at junior cycle isn’t serving students well’, he also stated that ‘the NCCA are experiencing great difficulties in its attempt to implement the new Junior Cycle’. John attributed the biggest challenge of the change process as being the established culture within schools and its associated problems with introducing change:

The culture that we have built up over the last 50 or 100 years is one of ‘this is how we do it’. We have always done it this way, it has given us results that are reasonable in terms of the kinds of learners that we turn out of our education system and it seems to work at a certain level. Now we are asking schools to step off the cliff a little bit and say ‘we are going to leave that behind us and try something new’. There is none of us that find’s change easy and yet without really stepping off the cliff of what we do now, we are fated to make the same mistakes again. It is going to be difficult, if people didn’t feel it was difficult and didn’t feel really uncomfortable, it probably isn’t going far enough.

School culture was also cited as one of the biggest problems facing the implementation of School Self Evaluation (SSE) in Irish schools:

We are aware that involvement of all teachers in a reflective, evidence-based SSE process and consultation with parents and students to inform decision making is a new departure in many schools. This cultural change will be problematic in some schools.

Furthermore, the assistant chief inspector also acknowledged that at post-primary level that ‘Schools’ perceptions about being over-loaded with initiatives, including the changes to the Junior Cycle, will be a challenge for the implementation of SSE.’

This study has attempted to present the reality of implementing a curricular initiative into Irish primary and secondary schools. The reality is that despite the greatest intentions of participating teachers and principals, they were faced with many practical constraints that limit their commitment to the initiative. While this study concerns the implementation of a small scale curricular initiative, it was found that similar constraints are also experienced and shared by a national policymaker and the Irish Inspectorate when trying to implement large scale curricular initiatives.

Policymaker agency within this thesis was explored to ascertain what extent policymakers influence the Irish curriculum and to what extent they can promote an NIC culture in Irish schools. An extensive interview with John Halbert, Director of curriculum and assessment with the NCCA provided a detailed insight into what the policymakers consider important in the junior cycle.
6.3.7 Conclusion of Agency

This thesis has found NIC to be a curriculum structure that can stimulate learner agency and agentic engagement in schooling by incorporating student voice, decision making, autonomy, and reflection into the curriculum. The intention of NIC to promote learner agency and was not designed to be at the expense of teacher agency. On the contrary, it aimed to provide them with a process to implement a wider range of professional decision-making about their curriculum and how it is planned, taught and assessed. The process of achieving collective agency was articulated through transforming learning environments from being adult-led towards a more community approach to learning centred on collaboration and student empowerment. Increased student agency was negotiated namely through a diminished power differential between teachers and students in addition to an environment of trust and support provided by teachers as their students participated in socio-cultural activities. While these influential supports within the school network contributed to the agency of students and teachers, it was found that teachers felt disempowered by the curriculum restraints imposed on them at secondary level in particular. Issues emerged concerning time, curriculum content and exam pressures which affected the success of the NIC intervention. These constraints were less impacting at primary level due to the absence of state exams in a schooling environment where one teacher is responsible for the delivery of all subjects. Interviews with policymaker John Halbert and Assistant Chief Inspector Deirdre Matthews revealed that their agency was also constrained when trying to implement new initiatives into Irish schools which they attributed partly to the long established culture and traditions of Irish schools and practitioners.

Building on the previous two conclusions of sections; meaningful learning and social dynamics, the findings of this study will now be discussed in light of existing literature.
While the findings chapter has presented the findings analytically under separate sections, this discussion represents a synthesising function which is representative of a complexity of competing factors all taking place at once. The synergy between the findings is representative of the integrated nature of this work where integration exists across several variables such as subject disciplines and cognitive, democratic and agentic principles. For example, the findings of this study determine that agency is deeply connected to the social aspect of the learning and therefore, they cannot be decoupled. For the purpose of the current study, three main themes have been selected for discussion. These are as follows:

- Agentic engagement
- Teacher Professionalism
- The emergence of NIC as ‘Curriculum as Praxis’

7.1 Agentic Engagement

7.1.1 Introduction

This theme will focus on the agentic engagement of students within the NIC process whilst the pivotal role played by teachers in supporting this agentic engagement will be explored in the subsequent ‘Teacher Professionalism’ theme. In the context of this study, the student’s engagement was found to be more ‘agentic’ (Giddens 1984) as it involved students making rational decisions to do something and then acting on it. When students assume this level of responsibility for their learning, the classroom moves towards a ‘child-run’ (Rogoff et al. 1996) environment where learners acquire knowledge themselves through ‘active exploration’ (Ibid 1996). The aspirations of NIC are in line with Lawson and Lawson’s (2013) calls for a move away from a compliance-orientated student engagement which frames learners as passive individuals needing to be stimulated by teachers to an action-oriented, agentic engagement which occurs when students direct their own learning by actively expressing their thoughts and

---

114 Section 7.2 in this Chapter
opinions. This agentic engagement was not possible without the support of the participating teachers referred to by Rogoff et al. (1996) as ‘skilled partners’ (p.390) who facilitated a transformation of participation in the classroom to enable the students to assume more control over their learning. The nature of student agency within NIC will be explored throughout this theme which will draw on findings and supportive literature to determine the extent to which the students’ engagement with the process was, in fact, agentic. Given that NIC was a process of social construction, the social aspects of agency will be discussed with reference to power dynamics. This study also considers meaningful engagement to be a product of agentic engagement where the agency afforded to students’ affected the meaning they attached to their learning. Lastly, the agentic and meaningful experiences afforded to students in NIC are presented as a possible catalyst for transforming classroom culture.

7.1.2 The nature of agency in NIC

As explored in section 3.4.2 of the literature review, the core characteristics of agentic engagement are held to be student involvement in: curricular decision making (Boomer 1992; Beane 1995); students’ active contribution to teaching and learning practices (Reeve 2012); and students interacting with others in a co-operative and critical learning environment (Lawson and Lawson 2013). Each of these components are central to socio-cultural theories which assert that learning should be an active, social endeavour where decisions are led by both adults and young people as they learn in a ‘community’ environment (Brown et al.1989; Rogoff, 1994; Cobb and Bowers 1999). The level of agency achieved by this work was practical and realisable in the contexts within which it was situated. It was found in section 6.3.2 of the findings chapter that learner agency experienced by students participating in this study was coherent with the literature in terms of an active student voice in making curricular decisions around how they want to be taught and how they want to learn. For example, students had the capacity to act on curricular decisions they made by carrying out suggested learning experiences such as interviewing professionals.

The NIC process can facilitate agentic engagement as learners are enabled to act as educational decision-makers (Cook 1992). Furthermore, student participation in the selection of assessment activities, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and the design of rubrics echoes findings that the involvement of learners in assessment processes can contribute to the establishment of different power relationships within classrooms (Hayward 2012). Lukes (1974) associates power with the
ability to prevent decision making and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) argue that power is exercised by preventing peoples’ access to decision making arenas. Furthermore, Freire (1972, p.85) states that ‘to alienate men from their own decision-making is to change them into objects’. Therefore, the fact that student involvement in the co-construction of curriculum is deliberately planned for in Boomer’s (1992) ‘Negotiated model’ shows a commitment to both student agency and to reducing power differentials in the classroom. The perceived improvement in the balance of power between teachers and students in the NIC classroom could also contribute to a reduction in Habermas’ systematically distorted communication’ theory (1972) which attributes undesirable aspects of communication to an imbalance of power.

Additional components of agentic engagement found in the context of this work which expand upon Reeve’s (2012) claims (students’ active contribution to teaching and learning practices) included: determining curriculum content; assessment structures; and providing feedback to their teachers on learning tasks through student reflections. The agentic role assumed by students contributed to a more balanced power differential in the classroom amongst teachers and students. NIC expands upon this concept of agency as student decision making extended beyond learning and assessment experiences to learners making rational choices around curriculum content through voting democratically for themes. Also indicative of their agentic engagement with the NIC process was the active role students played (in collaboration with their teachers) in making key decisions surrounding the design, enactment, and grading of assessment activities such as plays, posters, and presentations. Lastly, the reflective component of NIC empowered students to direct their own learning by providing teachers with feedback, in their reflections, surrounding what they would like to change about their learning experiences in NIC. This study argues that NIC can satisfy the need (identified by Cook-Sather 2002) for more educational initiatives to be introduced that ‘invite students to define the terms of discussion, suggest directions, and propose alternatives to the status quo in teaching and learning’ (p.23).

For learners within NIC, agency can be viewed as a conscious decision to shape the curriculum ‘in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently’ (Giddens 1984, p.9). This agency ‘depends upon the capability of the individual to make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference, that is, to exercise some sort of power’ (Giddens 1984, p.14). Allen (1995, p.286) elaborates on the need for an empowering curriculum for learners as ‘in the age of empowerment, education can no longer ask children to
abide by NO TALKING rules; rather, children must be encouraged to voice their concerns, opinions, and plans as learners; to discuss decisions; to talk and act like citizens in a democracy’.

As per section 6.3.2 of the findings chapter, a democratic schooling experience emerged as students made decisions on curriculum content and voted for themes they wanted to learn more about. This supports the view that ‘democracy’ is the process which insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that this leads to appropriate action (Beane 2005). Furthermore, NIC supports the views of a ‘democratic classroom’ as that which: enables the co-creation of curriculum between learners and teachers (Schultz 2007); involves young people in decisions surrounding their learning (Mursell 1955); and where the process by which decisions are made involves negotiation (Boomer 1992). Ultimately, if people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led (Dewey 2004).

Equally, teachers must also be given the experience of what it is like to work in a democratic way. Professionals must be given a voice and some form of decision making role in their work. This must involve the sharing of knowledge and the distribution of responsibility, accountability and autonomy within this. This study found that students’ increased involvement in curricular decisions was viewed to be atypical from their usual experience of schooling and as a result, students struggled at times with the agency afforded them through NIC.

7.1.3 Adjusting to Agentic Engagement through NIC

Initial difficulties with agentic engagement were experienced by students as they developed new habits and learned new skills. Students were initially hesitant to engage with the process and offer up their genuine opinions and learning suggestions because it was not the norm for their input to be requested for such decisions\(^{115}\). Students also struggled at times with completing reflections (an activity introduced to the NIC process to further promote agency) because they had no prior experience in reflecting on their learning through such formal methods. This work acknowledges that participating students have existing schema and routines. Nuthall (2007a, 2007b) speaks to these as ‘ritualised routines’, which are routines of practice that exist which

\(^{115}\) As presented in Section 6.3.2 of Findings Chapter
have never been questioned, developed by everyone’s common experience of schooling. In these routines, both teachers and students have learned exactly what to expect of each other (Quantz and Magolda 1997) and as a result, many aspects of learning become predictable (Nuthall 2007b). These ritualised and predictable routines are long established and therefore it understandable that students would find it difficult to adapt when confronted with new schema (Piaget 1957) which relate to how people organise knowledge which is then used to understand, interpret, and respond to situations (Wadsworth 2004).

Tensions were experienced by students as they were involved in decisions surrounding self-assessment, peer-assessment, and the design of assessment activities and rubrics. Section 6.1.4 of the findings chapter evidenced how students grew frustrated with the explicit need to demonstrate and produce evidence of their learning. Within Nuthall’s (2007a, 2007b) ritualised routines, assessment can consist of students trying to predict the answer the teacher is looking for and students have learned to play (and accept without question) the reciprocal roles that these routines require (Nuthall 2007b). While student engagement can represent a better path to learning (Skinner and Pitzer 2012), engagement alone does not guarantee that learning is taking place (Beane 2007). A commonly held belief by teachers is that if students are engaged most of the time, some kind of learning will be taking place (Nuthall 2007b). The ritualised routines described by Nuthall have cultivated a compliant engagement (Lawson and Lawson 2013) in students where their engagement is framed as fundamentally passive, needing to be stimulated by a teacher at all times (ibid). Furthermore, the ESRI have published significant work indicating high levels of student disengagement from lower secondary schooling in Ireland (ESRI 2006). Students are often used to being placed in a compliant role (McCoy and Byrne 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that students found aspects of their newly appointed schema difficult to adjust to.

Students also had to come to terms with the fact that learning cooperatively with their peers involved a lot of noise and they were often uncomfortable with this as detailed in section 6.2.6 of the findings chapter. While students expressed an understanding that if they are working in groups, the classroom is going to be noisier; the issue of “noise” was repeatedly reported by participating students and teachers throughout the entire NIC process. In order to empower students to share their perspectives and opinions, there needs to be on-going dialogue about the meaning and nature of their education (Cook-Sather 2002). Although dialogue is often regarded as crucial for effective pedagogy (Howe and Abedin 2013), noise appears to be a consequence of
the enabling conditions of dialogue amongst students working in groups and negotiation between teachers and students. Furthermore, for students to attain the agentic process of engaging with their peers and teacher in dialogic acts of peer-assessment and feedback, noise would be a product of this. Participating students also struggled with aspects of feedback they received on work completed.

There was an initial resistance by the secondary school students to feedback from their teachers and the UL researcher regarding the first draft posters they had designed and constructed. In order to progress from compliant engagement, Larson (2000) argues that intrinsic motivation is central to genuine student engagement. According to Larson (2000), a condition for intrinsic motivation is ‘temporal arcs of effort’ where individuals ‘consistently modify and/or re-evaluate their efforts and strategies in pursuit of ongoing goals, tasks, and (intrinsic) rewards’ (p.449). In the context of this study, the feedback process in the secondary school required the students to revisit and re-design their posters. There was a sense of frustration and disappointment felt by the students upon receipt of the feedback. However, this communication process was central to the ultimate improvement of the student work which was later acknowledged by students. This study recognises that NIC is not an effortless process and there will inevitably be struggles as students adapt to the process and the increased levels of agency it necessitates. Throughout NIC, students were being asked to work in ways which were novel and challenging but, over time, they overcame many of the initial struggles and came to progress in the role as the process developed.

In addition, students became more confident in setting up the conditions for their learning and as a result, developed greater metacognitive capacities where they were more aware of their learning processes while participating in NIC. Section 1.4 of the findings spoke to the progression of the assessment literacy of students over time and how they valued and found meaning in participating in assessment design over time. Similarly, section 3.4 showed how, after the feedback process, secondary school students went on to adapt their posters and how this task had intrinsic meaning for students who saw significant value in the feedback process. Section 6.3.7 of the findings chapter revealed how students largely felt that they were constrained by the curriculum. This was evidenced by the numerous comparisons students made between their learning in NIC and how they ‘normally’ learn in school. Additionally, as students became used to playing a more agentic role in the classroom, they felt constrained when they
were not consulted in relation to every decision made in NIC - as evidenced in section 3.3 of the findings when teachers made the final decision on the selection of sub-themes.

Teachers reported that as a direct result of students engagement with NIC, students agentic engagement transferred to classes outside of NIC and as the process advanced, students were observed to rely less on the teacher for guidance and work more autonomously. The Habermasian (1972) emancipatory interest of knowledge also places a value on agency and autonomy for learners and considers social systems that prevent a person from developing their capacity for freedom and autonomy as repressive. Furthermore, aspects of NIC such as the negotiation of learning strategies between a teacher and her students afforded them the capacity to make curricular decisions which resonates with the liberal-progressive philosophy that places a value on teachers and learners working together collaboratively (Dewey 1962). It is also centred on individual autonomy and democracy (Russell 1945; Dewey 1981). The NIC process also considers agency in terms of the capacity of learners to have a sense of empowerment to speak out, communicate and interact productively with others.

7.1.4 The Social Dynamics of Agentic Engagement

The NIC process provides the conditions for the curriculum to give students (who currently feel restrained by the curriculum) the capacities to speak out and to be engaged with their teachers in a process of negotiation in a community of practice. Socio-cultural theory recognises that environments that promote social interactions can be more conducive to achieving learning results (Honig and McDonald 2005; Lave 1993). The negotiation process required dialogue and discourse amongst the students themselves and between teachers. Concession was a necessary element of the communicative process where teachers had to concede to using unfamiliar pedagogical strategies and students conceded on areas teachers were not willing to negotiate on, for example, aspects of the curriculum that had to be addressed. Habermas’ (1970b) conception of ‘communicative settings’ can be applied to schools and his ‘ideal speech conditions’ can be applied to interactions between teachers and students where participants have the power to enter into and influence the content of a speech situation. The following elements of Habermas’ ‘ideal speech conditions’ (ibid) (although recognised as fully unattainable) were facilitated by the NIC process:
• Greater freedom to enter into discourse (Habermas 1970b) where teachers welcomed student input and students had the greater capacity to make rational decisions and act on them;
• A lessened power differential amongst all parties to communication (Habermas 1970) where teachers made the professional decision to invite students to contribute to curricular decisions;
• Greater opportunity for equal discussion and a participatory democracy (Habermas 1987) necessitated by the roles established in group work where students were responsible for ensuring that each student's voice was heard; and
• Greater freedom to modify a given framework (Habermas 1987) where students directed curriculum content and pedagogical strategies.

The combination of dialogue and meaning in the negotiation process attempts to afford students the sense of agency to achieve the Habermasian (1984) concept of ‘communicative action’. Put simply, the aim of communicative action is to reach a mutual agreement via social and meaningful interaction between persons (Habermas 1979; Morrison 1995). The initial NIC day provided a structure whereby students reached a meaningful mutual agreement by voting for learning themes based on their concerns. This approach continued throughout the NIC process where the students’ voice and values were represented in democratic decision making arenas. Habermas (1979) puts forward four validity claims for communicative action inherent in speech acts: claims to truth, rightness, sincerity and meaningfulness. The findings of this study show that students were provided with a greater capacity to stand by their opinions, to be sincere when they articulated their concerns, and for their learning to hold meaning for them by pursuing a curriculum organised around their expressed concerns. This learning environment which promoted democracy, agency, and meaningful learning impacted on the dynamic of NIC classrooms.

The cultural context of peer relationships and interactions was found to be powerful across all three schools as each co-ordinating teacher accredited an improvement in the classroom dynamic to the interactive nature of the NIC process. As detailed in section 2.5 of the findings, NIC promoted a more inclusive learning environment as the constant use of group work placed students in social circles they would not ordinarily choose to place themselves in. The ‘homophily’ principle is the tendency for ‘like to associate with like’ (McPherson et al. 2001,
p.422) in respect to a variety of variables including age, gender, socioeconomic status and education (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Kossinets and Watts 2009). Moreover, students of adolescent age (similar to the age of students participating in this study\textsuperscript{116}) are more likely to select in-school friends who are similar (Kiesner et. al 2004). NIC facilitated a break from the traditional homophily of classrooms as it forced students to interact outside their own regular groups as they were always formed by teachers. In their groups, students who may not normally interact worked together in a social setting where issues of meaning to them, i.e. their concerns, were discussed communally.

Students were given the opportunity in every NIC class to interact with each other and establish roles within the groups while working on their themes. Issues of peer acceptance and inclusion rates in school can increase during collaborative and social tasks (Verbrugge 1977; Ladd, 1996). Social inclusion in classrooms can promote equality practices as there is a heightened awareness of equal access to different learning opportunities and knowledge (Penney 2002). Furthermore, equality and inclusion are listed as two of the underpinning values of the new Junior Cycle framework in Ireland (NCCA 2010). Studies show that children who are accepted by the majority of their classmates are more likely to feel a sense of inclusion, that is, a sense of belongingness and relatedness (Ladd and Kochenderfer 1997); experience higher levels of motivation to learn and; engage more in scholastic tasks with peers (Furrer and Skinner 2003). This is concurrent with the finding from this study where co-ordinating NIC teachers reported an increase in student engagement levels when students were working collaboratively on tasks that held meaning for them. Furthermore, an increase of ‘agentic’ decision making (Giddens 1984) through communication and interaction was felt by teachers to significantly heighten the meaning students attached to their learning.

\textbf{7.1.5 Meaningful Engagement}

In addition to ‘meaningfulness’ being a pre-requisite for achieving Habermas’ (1984) \textit{communicative action}, one of the guiding principles of constructivism is the consensus that learning is a search for meaning (Held 1980). Additionally, socio-cultural theory recognises that a key feature of learning environments that are supportive of learning are those which facilitate participation in genuine and meaningful work in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, Habermas (1972) conceptualises the practical interest of knowledge as that

\textsuperscript{116} All participants in this study were aged from 10-14 years of age and the adolescent age is 12-18 years.
which focuses on understanding and meaning making. Section 6.2.1 of the findings chapter detailed how students saw a greater value in their learning where learning about their concerns resonated with personal issues for students. The focus on concerns gave students permission to explore issues that had meaning for them, not just personally but collectively. Beane (1997) believes that making room for personal and world concerns in the curriculum gives students a stake in the curriculum. Building on this premise, it is ‘imperative to engage learners in processes and practices that both influence learners’ lives on a daily basis and play such a powerful role in determining their personal and collective futures’ (Hayward 2013, p.184). Furthermore, by incorporating significant self, social, and world issues into the curriculum offers a meaningful context for bringing knowledge to young people (Beane 1995; Drake 1998). This study found that that when learning activities had personal meaning for students, this increased intrinsic motivation and, in turn, deeper learning. Lawson and Lawson (2013) describe this as ‘cultural relevance’ where deep academic engagement occurs when a learning activity has personal significance and practical value.

Section 1.2.1 also presented findings surrounding the ethical implications of eliciting student voice in the form of expressed concerns. A sensitivity risk of the process was highlighted when one student over-disclosed personal information on an initial NIC day while another student chose not to share his personal concerns at a group level. There was a heightened awareness amongst the primary researcher and the participating teachers that students exposing concerns of a personal nature could promote bullying or inhibit the social dynamics of this process if it wasn't carefully monitored. The perceived novelty of shaping a curriculum so significantly around students’ concerns, and the apprehension by students to share some concerns is perhaps unsurprising as ‘the traditional curriculum fosters dependence by cutting learners off from their needs and concerns’ (Onore 1992 p.191).

There are ethical implications of students exposing their concerns and whether they are worth the associated risks i.e. by sharing their concerns, are students gaining more than they are risking? The findings across all three schools resonate with claims that when students are learning about their concerns it creates deeper student-connections with the learning content of a curriculum (Wrigley et al. 2012) which in turn holds a more personal and social significance to young people (Beane 2005). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that students exposing their

---

117 In section 6.2.1 of Findings Chapter
concerns can be an issue of discomfort and the associated sensitivity and ethical risks need to be mitigated by teachers. Teachers need to set clear boundaries about the ethics of concerns when scaffolding this process with students.

In addition to the meaning students elicited from learning about their concerns, it was found that the curriculum became increasingly relevant and relatable to students as they explored contemporary themes such as ‘mental health’ and ‘water charges’. As students made connections between their curriculum and the real world, NIC facilitated a more ‘authentic’ learning experience for students. An authentic curriculum is where students can establish meaningful connections with their world (Stein 2004) and authentic learning experiences are those where students explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts that involved real-world problems and hold relevance for the learner (Donovan et al. 1999). The topical themes that students were investigating were also ‘authentic’ as they ‘engaged in students’ lived experiences’ (Tochon 2000). The intention to shape a curriculum around students’ concerns was intended to bridge the personal experiences of students with what they learn and how they learn it. For example, students researching the water charges theme witnessed water charges protests and new legislation being introduced throughout the course of the theme.

The learning that took place in NIC moved beyond content recall to promote a deeper level of analysis and internalisation of knowledge as evidenced when participating students in NIC:

- Analysed information and applied what they had learned to other contexts (contextualisation), for example, students analysing the impact the introduction of water charges would have on Irish society as a whole
- Used new knowledge to make a difference to their lives and influence how they behaved, for example, secondary school students revised how they used water after carrying out water conservation experiments
- Evaluated the relevance of information researched for inclusion in final assessment tasks e.g. poster creation
- Evaluated their learning further through reflections

These cognitive processes cohere with the more complex categories of Blooms (1956) taxonomy: application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. At the uppermost level of Blooms

118 See section 6.1.2 of Findings Chapter
hierarchy is the ‘evaluation’ spectrum where the ability of students to assess, appraise and critique is considered to be the most sophisticated of cognitive tasks (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). Examples of evaluation took place across the three schools where students evaluated their learning by: providing feedback to teachers through reflections; critiquing their fellow-students work in peer-assessment tasks; judging their own work in self-assessment tasks; and being involved in the design of grading rubrics. The interactive and collaborative environment where this level of learning took place is also coherent with Vygotsky's (1978) view that all higher order cognitive functions can be learned and communicated socially.

\[119\] As detailed in section 6.3.4 of the Findings Chapter
7.1.6 Cultural Congruence

One of the key findings of this study relates to the agentic capacities in students that NIC promoted, facilitated, and necessitated through a social and meaningful learning environment. But what was it about this classroom environment that enabled greater resonance with students’ personal identities and agentic engagement? This study believes that agentic student engagement, especially in areas of concern to young people, is facilitated by “cultural congruence” (Lawson and Lawson 2013) where students experience support for their socio-cultural and personal identities while participating in engaged activities (ibid). Cultural congruence is about establishing a culture of empowerment where teachers are empowering students to voice their opinions and teachers are being empowered to exercise their agency with regard to curricular decisions.

The findings of this study resonate with claims made by Lawson and Lawson (2013) that the conditions for cultural congruence need to be set, and maintained, by teachers. In order for NIC to make a meaningful impact, the culture of the participating schools would need to change. The teachers would have to be open to planning, teaching and assessing in different ways. Additionally, socio-cultural theory refers to ‘apprenticeship’ relationships between young people and teachers where students are ‘supported to negotiate learning through different routes and at different rates’ (Honig and McDonald 2005 p.8) by their teachers. Furthermore, teachers time cannot be constrained by classroom management as was the case in the participating secondary school where it was found that that the existing school culture was dominated by discipline issues120. However, this study discovered some additional components that expand upon Lawson and Lawson’s claims to examine the role of NIC and students in transforming the culture of the classroom to enable increased agency.

NIC created new routines of practice that were culturally congruent for students. The initiative provided a process which enabled students to perceive how the curriculum could align with their own personal identities and thereby reciprocate to inform the culture of the classroom through the feedback they provided to teachers. As detailed in section 3.2 of the findings, student voice (through their reflections) helped to shape teachers’ reflection on their classroom practices.

120 As discussed in Section 6.3.7 of the Findings Chapter and this will be explored further in Section 7.2 of this chapter; ‘Teacher Professionalism’
Hattie (2014) considers the core purpose of feedback in the classroom as that which incites behavioural change and promotes learning. Furthermore, Harfitt (2015) determined that feedback from students to their teachers acted as a catalyst for teachers’ professional development where student voice acted as a trigger for teachers’ reflection on their classroom practice. In the context of this study, the students recognised the agency the NIC process afforded them and placed value on the fact that what they wrote in their reflections was read and acted upon.

The normalisation of new learning practices also contributed to transforming the culture of the classroom. The consistent feature of group work in every NIC class, the regular requirement for students to present their work and the constant variable of students being asked for their opinions and input are examples of how NIC created new routines of practice that were culturally congruent to agentic engagement. As students were entrusted by teachers to work more autonomously and become involved in designing and grading assessment tasks, they developed a confidence that came from being aware of their own increasing capacity. Prior to the introduction of NIC, there were ritualised routines (Nuthall 2007) in participating schools where there were low teacher expectations of what students were capable of; however, NIC challenged conceptions of student capability. The agentic engagement experienced by students also had the potential to be transformative of school culture because of its practical approach to creating a new, living, evolving, and inclusive culture. The finding that NIC resulted in an improvement in the overall classroom dynamic (including student-student relationships and teacher-student relationships) led to the discussion in section 7.1.4 of this chapter on the affordances of NIC to facilitate a more inclusive learning environment. Therefore, it is felt that NIC can build a greater sense of cultural congruence as students experience an increased sense of belonging.

7.1.7 Conclusion of Agentic Engagement Section

The nature of agentic engagement in the context of this study is centred on students having the capacity to make curricular decisions regarding e.g. content, and then act on them by negotiating how they want to be taught and assessed with their teachers. NIC presents a structured, practical approach for realising learner agency through agentic engagement. The critical perspective of this work recognises the underlying aspects of power present in the conversations that teachers have invited students to take part in. However, some of the unforeseen findings of the study such

121 Section 6.3.4 of the Findings chapter
122 Section 6.2.5 of the Findings chapter
as: noise being a consequence of agentic engagement; students using their reflections to communicate feedback to their teachers (thus shaping learning experiences); and the struggles associated with students’ newfound enhanced agency can contribute to further implementation of similar initiatives in the future. Opportunities where NIC has the ability to transform the culture of the classroom at a local level were presented and acknowledged as integral to promoting increased agentic engagement. However, it is recognised that for NIC (or any new initiative) to be successful in schools, there needs to be a transformation of culture at a school-wide level and congruence amongst policymakers, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents in order to promote more aligned thinking between each educational stakeholder. This study recognises that agentic engagement isn’t solely about the students. Participating teachers have played a vital role by enabling the conditions for the construction of the agentic engagement experienced by students in NIC.
7.2 Teacher Professionalism

7.2.1 Introduction

It is well-documented that teacher professionalism is a highly complex and contested area (Williams 2000; Hargreaves 2003; Sexton 2007). It is recognised that, internationally, teacher professionalism is largely in an era of *new professionalism* (Hargreaves 1994) which represents a shift in power (Whitty 2001) focusing on increased practitioner control, professional development and accountability (Goodson and Hargreaves 1996; Hoyle and Wallace 2005). The dominant approach to curriculum reform has typically been centralised, where policymakers enforce curriculum change in response to political agendas (Skilbeck 1984; Fullan 1991). In response to how fraught change processes are as ‘top-down’ models, there has been a push towards more ‘bottom-up’ approaches that entrust teachers to make professional judgements regarding what is best for their students (Gleeson 2010; NCCA 2010). For teachers to inherit a professional status, they must be entrusted and committed to making a difference by developing a risk-taking mentality and becoming change agents (Fullan 1993; Hargreaves 2003).

To respond to initiatives that might de-professionalise teachers, there is currently a demand for more teacher empowerment (Trant 1998a), for teachers to be given more ownership of the curriculum (Sachs 1999), and for teachers to be placed at the heart of the curriculum change process (Gleeson 2010). In his paper aptly titled “*Giving the curriculum back to teachers*” Trant (1998a) argues that teachers cannot claim the status of professionalism until they assume full responsibility for all aspects of the curriculum including: setting goals, choosing content, applying the most suitable learning methodologies, and implementing appropriate assessment strategies. It is not the place of this thesis to engage in a thorough investigation of teacher professionalism. Instead, this theme will explore how teachers responded to the challenging context of introducing a new curriculum initiative to their classrooms and the impact of NIC on their professional practice. This study believes that to be accorded the title of a professional, there needs to be some degree of agency afforded to teachers. From the curricular interventions carried out by this work, it follows that agency can be promoted within teacher professionalism, including how teachers support learner agency.
7.2.2 Teachers Supporting Learner Agency

This study understands student agency to involve learners making curricular decisions around curriculum content, how it is assessed, how they want to be taught, and how they want to learn. The process of implementing a curricular structure that facilitated increased agency was articulated through the negotiation of student agency as well as the effective promotion of teacher agency. Entrusting students to assume an agentic role in their learning was nurtured by teachers by enabling conditions for agentic engagement, namely: a diminished power differential between teachers and students; an environment of trust between the teacher and students; and pedagogical support from teachers. The nature of negotiation involved teachers making concessions in several areas of their teaching to allow for more student voice. The teachers’ supportive role in the NIC process also helped to facilitate a transformation in the culture of their classrooms.

Redistribution of Power

The gradual redistribution of power experienced in participating NIC classrooms can be attributed to teachers committing to relinquishing a certain level of control. Teachers are expected to exercise authority over learners (Lortie 1984; Lynch and Lodge 2002) but participating NIC teachers had the professional courage and belief to devolve some power to students. Teachers made the professional decision to take a step back and allow students to exercise more autonomy over their curriculum and their learning. The reciprocal trust that was gradually established between teachers and students also contributed to teachers supporting student agency through the authentic negotiation of curriculum with students. Teachers cultivated their students’ confidence to defend their decision making and autonomously engage in learning activities as explicated in MacLellan’s (2014) review of interventions to enable learner self-confidence. The main factors to promote this self-confidence were synthesised into a teacher’s focus on:

The learner’s engagement in socially designed learning activities to promote non-academic self-concept; as well as facilitating the development of knowledge…[and] activities in which learners have to explain their reasoning and argue for the veracity of the evidence on which they make their claims  

(ibid p.68)
The democratic component of the NIC approach attempted to minimise the power differential in NIC classrooms. For students to be empowered to engage in agentic decision-making, it is held that teachers must confront ‘the power dynamics inside and outside their classrooms [that make] democratic dialogue impossible’ (Ellsworth 1992, p. 107).

Democratic learning environments are a result of explicit attempts made by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that bring democracy to life (Wood 1998) and NIC saw teachers introducing voting systems as a means for students to have their say in decisions concerning, for example, curriculum content. This study found that students initially struggled with the agency NIC promoted, particularly with regard to voicing their opinions at the start of the process and assessing their own learning. This could be due to the long-established routines of students (and teachers) where rigid and controlling learning environments are often alienating for students, and are conducive to the development of passive and compliant-oriented forms of engagement (Pope 2003; Lawson and Lawson 2013).

By comparison, a democratic curriculum emphasises access to a wide range of information and the rights of students to have their opinions heard (Apple and Beane 2007). This understanding of a democratic curriculum is synonymous with the NIC process which centres on student voice and first-hand access to information as students generate their own questions and research the answers to these questions. In the context of teacher professionalism, the teachers involved in the NIC process could be categorised within the ‘activist teacher professionalism model’ as conceptualised by Sachs (2003) where teachers are concerned with creating and putting in place standards and process to give students democratic experiences. Entrusting students to assume an agentic role in their learning was nurtured further by teachers providing pedagogical support for their students.

**Pedagogy of NIC**

The participating teachers supported student agency by conceding to the use of pedagogical approaches that enabled students to take charge of their own learning in a collaborative environment. Participating teachers committed to a more participatory curriculum (Apple and Beane 2007) where social interactions were critical in order for students to learn new information (Vygotsky 1978) through group work, dialogue and negotiation. NIC challenged
teachers to move beyond their traditional approaches to employ teaching methods that were conducive to the autonomous and interactive learning environment necessitated by NIC. In the choice and execution of the pedagogical strategies they employed, teachers experienced a ‘disequilibration that……forces the subject to go beyond his current state and strike out in new directions’ (Piaget 1985, p.10). This did not necessarily corrode the agency of the teacher but recognised a concession to students’ learning desires. For some teachers, the opportunities NIC presented to enhance their own professional development were cited as the primary reason for becoming involved with the process. Participating teachers focused their professional development aspirations on methodological development to cater for more collaborative learning. This commitment from teachers is coherent with the requirement of the Teaching Council in Ireland for teachers to take personal responsibility for sustaining and improving the quality of their professional practice by shaping their own professional development (2012). Additionally, Darling-Hammond (1994) and Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) consider any commitment from a teacher to enhance their professional development with a view to improving their practice to be at the core of teacher professionalism.

Methodologies such as group work, feedback, and student involvement in assessment were the main pedagogical strategies employed by teachers which appeared to facilitate a greater level of learner agency. The constant teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil dialogue and negotiation involved in NIC allowed for an appropriate setting for students to learn within their ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978). The ZPD has been defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86). Teachers utilised a ‘scaffolding’ (Wood et al. 1976) approach described as ‘support provided for the completion of a task that learners otherwise might not be able to complete’ (Pol et al. 2010, p.271) to support students as they explored new learning approaches with their peers. This scaffolding approach resonates the ‘community of learners’ framework set forward by Rogoff et al. (1996) where active learners are guided by skilled partners in working towards a more collaborative learning environment which is representative of a transformation in the level of participation by teachers and students. Furthermore, by incorporating Boomer’s (1992) ‘Four Questions for Curriculum Negotiation’ teachers helped students to learn new information by building on prior knowledge, a learning approach advocated by Piaget (1972) and Vygotsky (1978). The critical importance of

---

123 As detailed in Section 3.4 of the Literature Review Chapter
scaffolding was emphasised by teachers in getting students into a new ‘ritualised routine’ (Nuthall 2007a) of forming groups. Scaffolding was also experienced across schools when teachers supported students independently researching information on computers. Across all three schools, students were overwhelmed with the amount of information available to them and teachers had to scaffold the process so the students selected the most relevant information to their project.

**Supporting the Social Dynamics of NIC**

The social constructivist teaching methodologies such as group work that teachers used to support learner agency required participating teachers to make concessions around noise levels. Noise was a product of the social aspect of NIC and teachers had to concede a quiet classroom in order to allow for the productivity of students working in a social environment. Noise was viewed as undesirable from teachers who were initially exasperated by how loud the NIC classroom was. The social interaction necessitated by NIC was representative of a radical change in culture for the participating schools and perhaps this is why teachers and students alike found noise so unusual. The presence of noise in the classroom can result in teachers ‘controlling the amount and distribution of talk’ (Edwards and Furlong 1978, p.21) which could be detrimental to the NIC process. It’s unsurprising that teachers were uncomfortable with this noise as relatively high noise levels were not a feature of their normal classroom environment. Furthermore, how a teacher controls a class can be part of their professional identity as a teacher (Elton Report 1989). Teachers in the secondary school were more aggrieved towards noise than the participating primary teachers and this could be attributed to the perceived discipline problems in this school.

The level by which teachers in the secondary school felt uncomfortable with noise fundamentally reflects the school culture where staff are pre-occupied with classroom management. There is a misconception that a quiet and well-managed class can be indicative of a learning class (Clark 1998; Nuthall 2002), where control and discipline are regarded as necessary precursors of learning (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Although a well-managed class is a necessary condition for learning, it is not wholly sufficient for significant learning to take place. Furthermore, what a ‘well-managed class’ looks like in NIC might be very different to what it might look like to someone coming from a more traditional teaching background. In the context of this study, participating teachers became more tolerant of noise and recognised that it was necessary for
students to engage in dialogue and learn collaboratively. Participating teachers gradually becoming more comfortable with noise and more aware that students talking and student engagement required noise is further evidence of teachers gradually relinquishing control and power in their classrooms. This study perceives noise to be a necessary part of communicative action (Habermas 1972) where negotiation and dialogue are social practices involving verbal communication (Flanders 1960) and therefore, require noise. Dialogue involves ‘the exchange of competing ideas’ (Bakhtin 1981, p.348) and for a person to fully express themselves they have to respect the fact that others may not fully agree with their ideas and opinions and may perceive them as noise.

**Cultural Congruence**

The diminished power differential in NIC classes and the greater agency afforded to students by their teachers to include their opinion in curricular decision making represented a transformation in the culture of the learning environment towards a community approach to learning and decision making. The participating students perpetuated this ‘community of learning’ (Rogoff et al. 1996) but it was the teachers who established the culture by setting up the conditions, within a normal schooling environment, to promote agentic engagement. Teachers enabled the conditions for agentic engagement through trust, relinquishing control, and supportive pedagogies. This is a natural progression towards cultural congruence as conceived by Lawson and Lawson (2013) who understand it to be the support received by students in their perusal of agentic engagement. Furthermore, the transformation of classrooms and schools into learning communities is central to constructivist thinking (Sergiovanni 1995). The cultural congruence was experienced crucially and critically amongst the students but it was the teachers who gave the permission for this new culture to evolve. The level at which teachers could establish cultural congruence is also dependent on how they were supported. The principals of the participating schools supported cultural congruence by:

- Providing appropriate classrooms that facilitated group work
- Handed over a certain level of decision making to teachers regarding curriculum content selection and assessment strategies
- Providing teachers with time to plan for NIC classes and giving teachers the space to reflect
Despite the supports in place, teachers felt restricted at times due to some structural constraints in schools. Teachers in the secondary school felt particularly constrained by the limited engagement they had with NIC as they were only assigned one forty minute class a week for NIC. The secondary teachers also felt they were not allocated enough time for planning and collaboration with other teachers which was required more at secondary level than primary level. Furthermore, across all three schools each teacher admitted that being involved in NIC resulted in an extra workload which teachers had to complete in their own time. Curriculum integration and negotiation is a highly demanding and complex process:

Curriculum integration is not for the professionally faint hearted, it is hard work both intellectually and physically and teachers who use this approach face considerable pedagogical and personal challenges, no matter how enthusiastic and committed they are.

(Beane 2007, p.71)

An overall principle of this study is to enhance the ‘professional capital’ of teachers defined as ‘one’s own or group worth, particularly concerning assets that can be leveraged to accomplish desired goals’ (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, p.1) by removing constraints and providing the support to realise NIC. This work has invested in: ‘human capital’ (ibid.) by enhancing teachers’ abilities to plan and enact learning through NIC; ‘social capital’ (ibid.) by facilitating teachers’ abilities to work together openly, developing purpose, and trust; and ‘decisional capital’ (ibid.) by promoting the capacity for teachers’ to exercise their autonomy to make good discretionary judgements. The findings of this study have contributed to the compilation of a list of critical supports that will be necessary for the effective enactment of NIC, which will be shared in the recommendations section of this thesis. This study acknowledges that the objective of NIC to promote learner agency and the role of teachers as supporters of agentic engagement is not intended to be at the expense of teacher agency.

7.2.3 Professional Agency

Agency can be described as ‘the capacity for autonomous action, independent of the determining constraints of social structure’ (Calhoun 2002). Teacher agency has been theorised as teachers’

---

124 As explored in section 6.3.6 of the Findings chapter.
125 Located in the Conclusion Chapter.
active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions for the overall quality of education’ (Biesta et al. 2015 p.624). Professional agency, in this process, was understood as teachers being empowered to have greater ‘curricular autonomy’ (Beane 2005) to exert judgement and control over the planning, teaching and assessment of their curriculum. Consequently, it has an opposite function of centralised organisational control (Coolahan 1981; Gleeson 2010). Teacher agency is an important dimension of teachers’ professionalism (Goodson 2003) as they support learners in their agentic engagement working towards the distribution of collective agency across the classroom (Priestley et al. 2012).

A central premise of NIC is the effective promotion and enhancement of teacher agency by providing teachers with a curricular process to apply a wider range of professional decision-making about their teaching. As detailed in section 6.3.5 of the findings chapter, teachers exercised greater agency as they made decisions about the content and order of how they delivered their curriculum and the assessment of students work. This aligns with Sachs’ (2000) principles of teacher professionalism which focus on teachers’ taking greater responsibility for defining the nature and content of their work. Through the NIC process, teachers designed and planned a curriculum that bridged learning and content with the expressed concerns of students. Utilising student concerns as the foundation of NIC elicited the authority for the participating teachers to address aspects of the traditional curriculum that students might not readily engage with in a more meaningful way and in doing so, effectively enacted their professional responsibilities as ‘curriculum makers’ (Clandinin 2012).

While student agency is being cultivated in the NIC process, there remains a need for the teacher to be directive and there had to be a consideration for curricular “non-negotiables”126. Across all three schools, there were aspects of curriculum content and pedagogical activities that teachers were not willing to concede on. For example, teachers exercised their professional agency when setting boundaries in relation to curriculum content that had to be covered. Constraints and “non-negotiables” were openly communicated with students which is an aspect of NIC that is planned for in Boomers (1992) ‘negotiated model’ where ‘negotiating also means making explicit, and then confronting, the constraints of the learning context and the non-negotiable requirements that apply’ (p.14).

---

126 Explored in section 6.3.5 of the Findings chapter
NIC gave teachers permission to exert higher degrees of control over their work, yet one may argue that teachers always had the capacity to make such decisions but have not traditionally done so. The OECD reported on the ‘legendary autonomy’ of Irish teachers (OECD 1991, p.4) but the extent to which teachers are able to achieve greater agency is hampered by current curricular structures which largely disenfranchise the role of the teacher. Both in Ireland, and internationally, decision-making concerning what is taught and how, largely resides with state control and policymakers (Trant 1998; Gleeson 2010). This centralised approach to curriculum has resulted in the ‘de-skilling’ of teachers where their profession has been redefined as ‘the implementation of others’ ideas and plans’ (Apple and Beane 2007, p.20). Furthermore, young people are largely led to believe that the purpose of education is to master or ‘collect’ (Bernstein 1975, p.41) facts, principles, and skills that have been selected for inclusion by policymakers.

Participating teachers in this process admitted that they often taught in the same way and selected curriculum content in the same order. Where before such routines were ‘ritualised’ (Nuthall 2007), NIC caused the teachers to reflect explicitly on new ways of working with students in response to the elected themes. The Beane and Brodhagen 10 step NIC model provided teachers with a clear structure which necessitated a bottom-up approach to curriculum planning. Furthermore, Boomers’ (1992) “Four Questions for Curriculum Negotiation” explicitly required teachers to select appropriate methods of teaching and assessment in collaboration with their students. This curricular intervention was not without its problems and regardless of the agency promoted within NIC, teachers were still largely disempowered by curriculum, and at a local level structural, restraints imposed on them. The main issues which affected the NIC process, particularly in the secondary school, emerged as time to plan, curriculum content, and exam pressures. Despite the initial anxieties expressed at the beginning of the process, teachers proved to be adaptable and the NIC structure gave them a new routine and structure to implement in their classrooms. Participating teachers at secondary level commented on how NIC made them more aware of the flexibility of the curriculum and how it can be taught\(^\text{127}\).

**7.2.4 Teacher Collaboration and Discipline Identity**

In the context of this study, the integrated aspect of NIC afforded greater opportunities for teacher collaboration at secondary level where collegiality was viewed by teachers and the principal as a key aspect of teacher professionalism and a vehicle to promote teacher agency.

\(^{127}\) As detailed in section 6.1.4 of the Findings Chapter.
Section 6.4.1 of the findings chapter detailed how NIC necessitated collaboration amongst 8 teachers on their combined 14 subjects in the secondary school to respond to the themes elected by students. NIC aspires to realise the Teaching Council’s ‘professional collegiality and collaboration’ requirements that are necessary to be considered as a professional. These requirements stipulate that teachers must actively engage in professional collaboration with teaching colleagues and pupils in seeking to ensure the highest quality of educational experiences for students to effectively meet their needs (2012). The collegiality portrayed by the 8 participating teachers in the secondary school in reaction to this initiative being introduced to their school is coherent with Hargreaves (2000) ‘age of collegial profession’ in a teacher’s professional development which focuses on creating strong professional cultures of collaboration to develop common purpose and respond effectively to reforms.

Professional collaboration amongst teachers in Ireland is quite rare when compared with other OECD countries (OECD 2009). Irish teachers seldom engage in: team-teaching; joint activities across different class groups; and observing other teachers to provide feedback (TALIS 2010). Schools have the capacity to be naturally cooperative environments providing many opportunities for professional collaboration (Gleeson 2012), yet the participating secondary school principal and teachers testified to a culture of low collegiality where existing collaboration only took place within subject groups (if at all). Hargreaves and MacMillian (1992) term this type of culture as a ‘balkanized culture’ where there is low permeability for teacher collaboration across subject departments. NIC as a form of integration need not be at the cost of a teacher’s disciplinary identity or expertise, as it offers a way for teachers to move beyond their subject areas and enhance the meaning associated with it through its requirement to integrate multiple subjects in response to elected themes.

This study found that NIC afforded greater professional collaboration across subject departments as participating teachers pooled their subjects together to plan and deliver the ‘water charges’ and ‘racism’ themes in the secondary school. Although teachers felt constrained by a lack of time to physically meet to plan the themes and review their progress, there were no concerns expressed by them that curricular integration came at the cost of their disciplinary epistemology. Instead, teachers became more adept at identifying where other teachers and their subject areas could be brought into themes. Furthermore, the coordinating teachers were comfortable working in an NIC class which often involved multiple subjects being taught. The type of integration achieved by this study is relatively limited compared to where it might go. It is currently at the
‘multidisciplinary’ level of integration (which will be explored in further detail in the context of ‘curriculum as praxis’ in section 7.3). However, the level of professional collegiality achieved by this study across numerous subject areas may lay the ground for more significant levels of integration as practitioners become more expert in the effective integration of interdisciplinary knowledge.

7.2.5 Teacher Beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs about their practices are listed as one of the key variables that can contribute to, or inhibit, an effective learning environment (OECD TALIS Report for Ireland 2009). Moreover, the professional knowledge base of teachers is largely grounded in their beliefs and values which need to be challenged in order for deep change to occur (Fullan 2007; Goodson 2008; Gleeson 2012). The role of beliefs in teacher agency is explored by Biesta et al. (2015) who examine what blocks, and drives, teacher agency in relation to the following three beliefs: Beliefs relating to children and young people; beliefs about the role of a teacher; and beliefs about educational purpose. In the context of this study, teachers expressed their beliefs relating to young people in terms of their expectations for: student ability, student learning, and the role of the student in a negotiated curriculum.

Section 6.3.4 of the findings chapter detailed how these expectations changed throughout the NIC process. For example, some teachers had set a ceiling of expectation for what they felt students could achieve, however, after engaging in a process of feedback with students, this resulted in their expectations being increased. The initial expectations expressed by teachers represent the hegemonic belief that ‘adults consistently underestimate young people’s ability to participate in and to think critically about the world in which they live’ (Hayward 2013, p.184) and is also coherent with findings from the Biesta et al. (2015) study which determined that teachers often see students’ abilities as ‘fixed’. Prior to engaging with NIC, teachers had fixed expectations about the learning taking place in NIC (including the social dimensions and behaviour management). This is evidenced by the two co-ordinating teachers in the secondary school admitting that they would ‘never’ do group work with any classes from 1st to 3rd year due to classroom management concerns.

With regard to the role of students in NIC, each of the participating teachers in the NIC process admitted to being surprised at how students responded to the autonomy granted to them. Final
interviews with teachers produced evidence of teachers re-examining their beliefs as they committed to changing their teaching practices and the expectations they held for students. Based on such evidence, this study argues that NIC is a curriculum structure that could possibly change teachers’ conception of student abilities with regard to students’ aptitude, behaviours, and roles in becoming agentic decision-makers. Moreover, NIC could promote a shift from teachers having a ‘fixed’ mind-set towards a more ‘growth’ orientated mind-set which is the idea that abilities and behaviours can be developed (Moser et al. 2011).

7.2.6 Conclusion of Teacher Professionalism Section

This work acknowledges the vital role played by teachers in the construction and support of student’s agentic engagement through a diminished power differential, trust, and supportive pedagogies. This supportive role did not come easily to participating teachers who had to make many concessions in order to create a curriculum that gave young people democratic experiences and allowed for greater student input in decision-making. Given that NIC necessitated a more social learning environment, teachers had to alter their traditional teaching habits to facilitate greater student interaction resulting in the need to make further concessions such as issues of noise levels in the classroom. In addition to promoting learner agency, NIC is a curriculum that can facilitate teacher agency. This study believes that teachers have the right to have their voices heard in creating the curriculum and in exercising control over curricular decisions. The dynamics of teacher agency facilitated by the NIC process included the opportunities for teachers to make professional decisions surrounding: curricular design; the selection of content; the selection of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies; and collaboration with fellow professionals. Furthermore, as teachers engaged with the process, it presented them with the opportunity to review their beliefs and expectations for their students and to reflect on how young people can learn through a more collaborative curriculum initiative. To support a greater balance of power in the classroom, the NIC approach aims to achieve ‘curriculum as praxis’ (Grundy 1987) which is supported by deep, conscious decisions made by somebody to change something.
7.3 Curriculum as Praxis

7.3.1 Introduction

The promotion of learner and teacher agency have been central to the NIC process where the agentic engagement promoted by NIC enabled both teachers and learners to engage with their learning situations as committed thinkers and actors (Maynard 2007). A “Curriculum as praxis” (Grundy 1987) can be understood as a curricular structure that provides conditions which allow for greater learner and teacher agency (ibid 1987; Giroux 1992). NIC is aspiring to curriculum as praxis by progressing issues of praxis such as empowerment, democracy, emancipation, dialogue, and trust; all of which will be explored within this theme. In addition, the ways in which current curricular structures are disempowering for learners and how the integration of subjects can challenge dominant approaches to curriculum design and teaching will be examined. In short, this study believes that NIC represents curriculum as praxis because it is a restructuring towards a more democratic curriculum attempting to advance the empowerment of learners and teachers.

7.3.2 How NIC Represents Curriculum as Praxis

Elements of praxis such as empowerment, emancipation, and democracy were interlinked throughout the NIC process. This study considers empowerment as a necessary condition for any genuine attempt at promoting issues of praxis. Praxis is about setting the conditions for empowerment (Gleeson 2010) whereby NIC provided both learners and teachers with the capacity for greater autonomy and empowerment through their increased participation in curricular decision making. Freire (1993) believed that the primary aim of an ‘empowering’ educational intervention should be to increase one's ability to think critically and act autonomously where an enhanced sense of self-efficacy occurs as a result of this process (Freire 1993; Anderson and Funnell 2010). NIC made learners more aware of their own power by setting the conditions for students to have a voice in decision making and to take on more responsibilities for their own learning and assessment emulating a move towards a more child-run approach to schooling.

Praxis also includes a commitment to human beings and their rights (Smith 1999) and through NIC, learners had the right to voice their opinions with regard to what they wanted to learn.
about, how they wanted to learn it, and how they were assessed. Freire (1993) viewed empowerment as a process where people listen to each other and engage in liberatory dialogue to construct new strategies for change. The education students received through NIC was empowering as it informed learners to make changes and better decisions about their daily life. For example, in the secondary school students made informed changes to their level of water consumption after conducting experiments on water wastage and students studying the ‘racism’ theme made informed, conscious decisions to revise the use of certain words and terms that could be perceived as racist. Through NIC, students were empowered to reflect on their own learning and reflections also presented them with the opportunity to voice their opinion on how they wanted to be taught by providing feedback to their teachers.

At the center of praxis is informed committed action (Grundy 1987; Smith 2000) and across all three schools, participating teachers testified to changing their teaching approaches based upon feedback they received from students in their reflections. Therefore, the curriculum was partly developed through the dynamic interaction of action and reflection which is a central tenet of curriculum as praxis (Grundy 1987). When teachers made the decision to become involved in NIC, they committed to a process that required them to make space in their curriculum for student concerns and to incorporate student opinions and suggestions (i.e. student voice) into their teaching experiences. The exclusion of student voice in curricular reform efforts has been widely documented (Hull and Rudduck 1980; Cook-Sather 2002), where the lack of consultation with students in decisions that affect them has been described as a ‘situation of violence’ (Freire 1972, p.58) and a possible breach of Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child which states that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account (Lundy 2007 cited in Hayward 2013).

In NIC, each participating teacher involved students in educational decisions which affected them and teachers were empowered to identify the content knowledge and skills that students needed to respond to their concerns. Teachers also acted upon their decisions by employing teaching methodologies coherent with the social constructivist approach of the NIC process. In the context of this study, praxis and empowerment in relation to teacher agency were about setting the conditions to increase the capacity of teachers to be involved in an agentic curriculum

128 As explored in section 6.3.2 of the Findings Chapter.
design process and to experiment with new teaching and assessment methods in a community of practice.

At secondary level, teachers could also be considered as committing to ‘curriculum as praxis’ by exploring their practice with their peers (Smith 2000), completing reflections, and reflecting upon the actions they took in NIC classes (Freire 1972) (for example, the selection of new assessment approaches). As discussed in section 6.3.4 of the findings chapter, teachers made the committed decision to support student agency by relinquishing a certain level of control and acted on this decision by affording students the responsibility to make key decisions surrounding their learning. Teachers grappled with some of the intricacies’ of NIC, for example, where a loss of control and power were perceived as noise. Teachers recognised that noise was a significant impediment but that it was also a necessary condition for students to learn effectively even though it was atypical from their normal teaching routine. The empowerment of individuals and agency are primary concerns of both praxis and the emancipatory interests of knowledge (Habermas 1974).

Curriculum as praxis makes an explicit commitment to emancipation (Carr and Kemmis 1986) and aspects of NIC can be viewed as liberating for teachers through their increased awareness of the flexibility of the curriculum and the ease at which they could incorporate their subject areas into the NIC themes. While the technical interest of knowledge (Habermas 1972) seeks to control environments and the practical interest of knowledge (Habermas 1972) seeks to understand environments, the emancipatory interest (Habermas 1974) has ‘a fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society’ (Grundy 1987, p.19). The greater freedom NIC afforded teachers and students surrounding their curricular decision-making empowered them to engage in more ‘autonomous action’ where students were scaffolded to assume extra responsibilities, eventually reducing teacher obligations in areas such as project assembly and assessment preparation.

Through an attempt at empowering teachers and students and via the act of ‘finding one’s voice’, NIC seeks to diminish repression and domination which are central factors of the emancipatory

129 As explored in section 6.2.6 of the Findings Chapter.
130 As explored in section 6.1.1 of the Findings Chapter.
131 Technical Interest of knowledge is explored in section 1.2 of the literature review
interest (Habermas 1974). Curricular processes where the central aim is to emancipate learners from oppressive structures by allowing them to participate in decision making can also contribute to the democratisation of individuals and schools (Biesta 2010; McKernan 2013). Furthermore, democratic learning experiences such as student voting and equal voice in decision making areas are aspects of NIC that can contribute to curriculum as praxis. Democratic learning environments were facilitated by teachers which involved enhancing student voice and vote as a collective to model the role of the student as citizen (Apple and Beane 2007). (See Fig. 7.1 for a graphical representation of NIC represented as curriculum as praxis).

![Diagram of NIC represented as curriculum as praxis]

**Fig. 7.1: NIC represented as ‘curriculum as praxis’**

In working towards a more democratic curriculum, this study found that the ‘Negotiation’ element of NIC, involving dialogue between teachers and students, was central to progressing issues of curriculum as praxis.
7.3.3 Praxis and Negotiation

Curriculum as praxis\(^{132}\) is said to be a social act where teaching and learning are seen as dialogical actions and knowledge is viewed as a meaningful, social construction (Grundy 1987). In the context of this work, teachers attempted to encourage negotiation and open dialogue with students, out of which came a more informed and committed action. Young people were supported by more capable adults to negotiate and take more responsibility for their learning in social and active learning environment representative of a community of learners. The issue of *noise* that emerged in this study was also indicative of dialogue in the classroom as students negotiated with their teachers and amongst themselves in their groups. The negotiation that took place in NIC attempted to be a reciprocal process between teachers and students who were considered equal partners in dialogue. Praxis can be understood as ‘dialogic’ (Taylor 1993) whereby Grundy (1987) and Freire (1972) consider negotiation between teachers and students a necessary tenet to achieve praxis. This study believes dialogue to be necessary but not wholly sufficient for praxis. Praxis operates in a world of interaction (Grundy 1987) and NIC is a curriculum structure that is centred on communication and interactions with other human beings. This study believes praxis aspires to the Habermas’ (1970b ) “ideal speech conditions” where there should be no imbalance of power between participants to a conversation and equal contribution to the discussion is afforded to all (ibid).

Through negotiating the planning and assessment of a curriculum around the expressed concerns of students, it satisfies the conception of curriculum as praxis as ‘an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated into the process’ (Grundy 1987, p.115). However, this process was founded on the need for greater trust to be established between the teachers and their students; ‘To achieve this praxis……..it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication’ (Freire 1970, p.66).

\(^{132}\) As explored in section 1.2.3 of the literature review
7.3.4 Praxis and Integration

The purpose of this section is to examine how and why current curricular structures are disempowering for students and teachers and how the integration of subjects can challenge hegemonic norms of teaching and learning. The level of integration achieved by the NIC initiative across the three participating schools will also be examined.

The concept of *praxis* and its underlying principles of empowerment and emancipation are largely incompatible with the technical interest of knowledge which centres on the control of individuals and society. The concept of technical rationality largely derives from the work of Habermas (1971, 1972) and makes the assumption that people and systems can be managed and controlled (Habermas 1971; Held 1980; Gibson 1986). The application of technical rationalism in education is demonstrated by an emphasis on control, conformity, and standardised curriculum packages where the curriculum is organised around separate, specific subjects or disciplines (Baldwin 1987). In the context of this study, the coordinating secondary school teachers stated that the integration aspect of NIC was their biggest challenge as they were only qualified to teach two subjects each. Furthermore, when students were voting for themes, one teacher stated that she felt limited by her qualification in only two subjects. The approach of organising education within recognised academic disciplines is the dominant approach internationally (Bruner 1960; Vars 1991) and the method utilised by each of the schools participating in this study. This work argues that segregation of subjects is disempowering for both students and teachers where learning is the ‘consumption of pre-packaged bits of information….. and success becomes teachers and students doing as directed’ (Bullough and Goldstein 1984, p.146).

The discipline-centred curriculum currently operating in Irish schools can be disempowering for teachers and students because even if they wanted to make more explicit connections between subjects that capacity is not currently supported (McKernan 1984). When students cannot establish links between subjects, it can be disempowering because their access to knowledge is restricted. Furthermore, when students are learning through discrete subjects that do not connect with each other, this can be to the detriment of student learning. Moreover, when the curriculum

---

133 As explored in section 1.2.1 of the Literature Review  
134 As explored in section 6.4.1 of the Findings Chapter
consists of silos of different subjects, it can lead to subjects becoming ‘divorced from any relevant contexts’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p.147) for both teachers and students. Furthermore, the hegemonic approach of teachers as experts in certain disciplines (particularly in post-primary schooling where their identity was defined by their disciplinary expertise) considers teachers as workers to be controlled, rather than as professionals to be empowered (Hodkinson and Harvard 1994).

The integration of subjects within NIC can be more empowering for teachers and students who can challenge the hegemonic norms of a subject-centred curriculum and the prevailing “culture of containment” (Callan 1997). When subjects were integrated, it was found that there was more scope for students to make meaningful connections and links with their learning. Section 3.7 of the findings detailed how students felt that learning via the integration of subjects made more sense to them and that their learning was more productive and meaningful as a result of the integrated aspect of NIC. This is coherent with the theories that the breakdown of discipline barriers in education can facilitate a more differentiated and meaningful curriculum for students (Bernstein 1971). Students also expressed a desire for NIC to become more widespread across the school so more teachers and their subjects could become involved. Participating teachers expressed initial concerns about the integration aspect of NIC regarding the need to cover the curriculum. This is indicative of the pressure felt by teachers internationally to ‘get through’ curriculum content which can often result in a decrease of time for learner input (Moss 2007). However, as the process developed, teachers realised that NIC only required them to re-sequence the curricula, not leave anything out\(^\text{135}\). Teachers admitted to being in a routine of delivering curricula in the same order but NIC empowered them to select relevant curriculum in response to elected themes.

Young (1971) argues that when students ‘inherit’ a curriculum from policymakers, it results in students acquiring knowledge that powerful people want them to attain as opposed to knowledge that holds significant meaning for them. NIC aims to challenge hegemonic norms that usually serve the most powerful within a certain society to the detriment of the less powerful. It is felt that by challenging these norms, NIC is helping to promote the empowerment and emancipation elements of praxis. Even within an overall segregated curriculum, NIC provided students with a space to assume ownership over their knowledge because the learning content of the curriculum

\(^{135}\) As detailed in section 6.3.4 of the Findings Chapter (Teacher Agency)
was determined by their expressed concerns. NIC can challenge some of the hegemonic norms of teaching within this curriculum. In the participating schools, the dominant, unquestioned approach surrounding classroom management was that if students were quiet, they were learning. NIC challenged this norm as it necessitated an interactive and collaborative learning environment with a focus on the social construction of knowledge (Boomer 1992; Vars 1991). The socio-cultural process of learning where curricular decisions were negotiated by young people and adults together in a collaborative, active environment resulted in an effective way of empowering students to engage with their learning and empowering teachers to support this learning in a community of learners approach. While there were some residual concerns from teachers regarding noise levels, each participating teacher was satisfied with the depth of content that was learned as detailed in section 6.1.3 of the findings chapter.

According to Brookfield (1995), paradigmatic assumptions are facts that are known to be true within a certain framework and a prescriptive assumption are the actions people take as a result of their paradigmatic assumptions. A paradigmatic assumption felt by participating teachers in the secondary school was that group work would not work with junior classes because if students were given the opportunity to converse in class, it would inevitably result in them going off task and misbehaving. The prescriptive assumption that extended from this was that the teachers set up their classroom in such a way that limited opportunities for dialogue and only allowed for group work in senior classes. Group work is one of the main methodologies side-stepped by teachers who prioritise classroom management (Bull and Solity 1987) where initial teacher education literature advises teachers to ‘avoid group work if you are having any classroom management problems’ as ‘too much time can be wasted if students are not on task’ (McLeod et al. 2003, p.163). NIC challenged these hegemonic assumptions by demonstrating that students could assume responsibility for their leaning and behaviour and work more autonomously and this was acknowledge by the participating teachers. Upon reflection at the end of the NIC process, the secondary teachers questioned their existing assumptions about the ability of younger students to work in groups and made explicit commitments change by incorporating more group work into all of their junior classes. Brookfield (1995) refers to the process of teachers uncovering their deeply set assumptions as ‘hunting assumptions’ and by asking teachers to engage with curriculum integration you are asking them to ‘reconstruct their professional self-concept’ (Beane 1997, p.74).

---

136 As explored in section 6.3.3 of the Findings Chapter (Agentic Engagement)
Transition and Integration

In Ireland, the primary and secondary curriculum is divided into segregated subjects, more explicitly so in second level education. The Irish ‘Primary Curriculum Outline’ makes numerous claims to being integrated and recognising the ‘integrated nature of knowledge’ (NCCA 1999, p.11), however, the participating primary teachers in this study revealed that they teach subjects in isolation and they timetable subjects, for example, Maths, English and Irish are covered every morning at the same time for one hour. Furthermore, thematic learning was not practiced in either of the primary schools that participated in this process study. Research conducted by the INTO\textsuperscript{137} on the transition from primary to secondary schooling in Ireland revealed that there is a significant level of ‘curriculum discontinuity’ between the two sectors (Nic Craith 2009). This lack of curriculum continuity was also explored by Smyth et al. (2004) who argued that both the curriculum and teaching methodologies at secondary level do not follow on naturally from primary level due to the broader range of subjects and the focus on rote learning secondary level. There are further inconsistencies across the schooling sectors with regard to professional interaction.

This study brought the teachers and principals of two primary schools and two secondary schools\textsuperscript{138} together for one full school day to discuss their professional concerns about their teaching and their students. One of the main reasons teachers agreed to take part in this day was because there is currently very few professional spaces in Ireland where primary and secondary teachers can come together in a professional capacity. The findings from this day regarding the challenges of transition for students echoed Topping’s (2011) findings that teachers concerns about students transitioning from primary to secondary school were focused predominantly on attainment (i.e. the subjects being too difficult for students at second level) while students concerns were often in relation to socio-emotional issues such as peer relations, bullying, and self-esteem (Kirkpatrick 1992; Topping 2011). While this study does not have enough bridging data to speak to the potential role of NIC as a bridging curriculum between primary and secondary school\textsuperscript{139} it may have some affordances in bridging that gap at a social level. As detailed in section 6.2.4 of the findings chapter, the focus on the social construction of knowledge within a participatory curriculum was observed by the parents and teachers of 1\textsuperscript{st} year

\textsuperscript{137} Irish National Teachers' Organisation
\textsuperscript{138} Two of the Primary schools and one of the secondary schools went on to be the participating schools in this study.
\textsuperscript{139} Only one student participating student in NIC in Primary school transitioned to the participating NIC class in Secondary school.
students as facilitating the transition process. NIC was found to be particularly beneficial in addressing some of the socio-emotional concerns addressed in research by Topping (2011) with regard to the building of peer relationships facilitated by group work which in turn, accelerated the process of students ‘settling in’ to secondary school.

This study raises questions surrounding the level of subject integration in the primary curriculum and accepts that there is rarely integration at secondary level beyond the promotion of an integrated, whole-school approach towards, for example, literacy and numeracy initiatives (DES 2011); however, there were also limitations to the levels of integration that occurred within this study.

*Level of integration achieved by this study*

The level of integration achieved by this study was allowed to emerge organically through the process. The aspiration of this work was for NIC to be located on the interdisciplinary end of the integration spectrum\(^\text{140}\) where there is full interaction between disciplines and subjects are not readily identifiable (Constanza 1990; Beane 1997; Drake 2007). However, in terms of what has been achieved, it can be viewed as multidisciplinary as throughout the NIC process across three schools, the subjects largely retained their identities. There were limitations to the levels of integration that occurred within this study but the NIC structure is flexible and is open to different levels of integration. The extent to which teachers and students get more accustomed to integration could possibly present opportunities for a more interdisciplinary approach to integration where subject identities begin to fade.

As detailed in section 3.1.5 of the literature review, an integrated curriculum has a spectrum across multiple variables such as ownership, democracy and agency (Drake 1993). There are cognitive elements within this spectrum as well as value-based elements, for instance, the level of student voice apparent in the process. The value-based position of this study is related to ownership of the work, meaningful learning, student voice, teacher professionalism, and skills developed by the students throughout the process. Integration has pervaded the entire NIC process across multiple dimensions and this study found that high levels of integration were

\(^{140}\) The integration spectrum is detailed in section 3.1.5 of the Literature Review.
achieved across areas such as ownership, voice, cognitive activity, and social skills. High levels of integration were achieved by this study in relation to these ‘value-based’ aspects of integration (Fogarty 1991; Beane 1995) however, from a cross-curricular position, it has been largely multidisciplinary.

7.3.5 Conclusion of Curriculum as Praxis Section

This initiative does not claim to have perfected a structure of ‘curriculum of praxis’ (Grundy 1987), however, there are aspects of NIC that attempted to promote praxis such as empowerment, emancipation, democratic learning, dialogue, and trust. Through the medium of NIC, this study set the conditions by which people had the capacity to make curricular decisions and act on them which made teachers and students more aware of their own power within a curriculum. The democratic principles of NIC contributed to increased emancipation for teachers in how they taught their classes and learners in how they selected learning themes for perusal. The negotiated aspect of NIC progressed issues of praxis through dialogue while the integrated aspect of NIC attempted to challenge hegemonic norms surrounding the isolation of subjects, learners’ access to knowledge and assumptions around teaching and learning which can be disempowering for both teachers and students.

The concept of NIC does not conform to the Habermasian concept of ‘technical rationality’ (1971) which is based on ideals of prediction and control. In the Irish context, this study considers the segregation of subject disciplines to conform to these ideals of control. The integration of subjects and learning experiences within NIC, although limited in some areas, are presented as a possible alternative to segregated learning and also have affordances in facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school. This NIC initiative aims to meaningfully move towards curriculum as praxis.
7.4 Conclusion of Discussion Chapter

This NIC initiative was a small scale study involving just three schools, however, the themes which emerged from the findings highlighted the possible implications NIC could have on the agentic engagement of learners, teacher professionalism, and the emergence of NIC as ‘curriculum as praxis’. This chapter served to highlight how struggles experienced during the NIC process such as the noise levels necessitated by the social learning setting of NIC impacted on each of the three themes explored. Furthermore, it analysed how the participation of teachers and students in curricular decisions impacted upon agentic engagement and teachers as professionals while contributing to aspects of praxis such as empowerment and emancipation. Throughout the process, teachers faced challenges from initially asking students to share their concerns to inviting students to become involved in curriculum design and assessment as well as adapting their existing professional practice to teach and manage a socially constructive learning environment. Learners also struggled with the increased agency they assumed throughout the process from learning to voice their opinion in the initial stages of the intervention, to struggling with not having enough agentic involvement by the end of the process.

While NIC promotes itself as ‘learner-centred’ (Boomer 1992; Beane 1995) and the apparent increased agentic engagement experienced by students is one of the key findings of this study; it was the participating teachers and their support for the students that lead to the many successes of this initiative. Teachers facilitated a diminished power differential in the classroom, committed to creating an environment of greater trust and provided pedagogical support to students to implement a more truthful representation of NIC as envisioned by Boomer (1992) and Beane (1995). In terms of professional agency, the local, collaborative planning involved in NIC suggests that teachers might reclaim some measure of control and power from the policymakers that currently dominate curriculum moving NIC increasingly towards curriculum as praxis.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This chapter will synthesise the work that has been carried out by this study by summarising the key findings of this work and the impact it has had on the three participating schools. Aspects of these findings will be further explicated to influence recommendations this study will make regarding how NIC could inform curriculum change within the current environment of educational change in Ireland. Specific attention will be given to the possible space for NIC within the new Junior Cycle Framework. The chapter will identify the limitations of the study which will be developed to make recommendations for further research. Teachers developing their professional capital will be set forward as a possible solution to achieving the desired goal of authentic learning within the NIC process before professional accountability is proposed as a necessary tenet to improving student learning and strengthening the teaching profession.

8.1 Impact of the NIC Initiative

NIC proposes a radical departure in structure from the traditional approach to schooling in Ireland which is built around a separate subject approach and an ‘inherited’ curriculum (Gleeson 2010) where teachers and students have relatively low autonomy (Trant 1998). This research piloted the NIC initiative as a small-scale, qualitative study conducted over two years across three schools (two primary and one secondary). A community of educational stakeholders informed this research including policymakers, the Irish inspectorate, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. NIC offered participating schools the opportunity to engage with a curricular initiative that had possible affordances for: The professional development of teachers; a more meaningful curriculum for students; increased agentic engagement for learners; and the opportunity for teachers to exercise greater professional agency.

A number of themes emerged from the findings of this study including: the high level of meaning students associated with their learning in a curriculum designed around their expressed concerns; how integration was easier to achieve at primary level than at secondary level; how NIC facilitated agency within teachers and students as they engaged in curricular decision making; and the positive impact NIC had on the classroom dynamic across the three participating schools with regard to classroom relationships and promoting a more inclusive learning environment. Parents and teachers also emphasised how the NIC process helped students adjust to their new secondary setting as the social learning environment necessitated by
NIC helped students to make friends and express their opinions in a safe environment. This has been especially significant in all boys secondary school. A number of challenges also emerged from the findings.

Teacher’s engagement with the process proved to be challenging with regard to relinquishing control when involving students in, for example, assessment structures and adapting to the noise levels necessitated by the social environment within which NIC is situated. Furthermore, participating teachers at post-primary level identified practical constraints of the NIC process such as a lack of time for professional planning with colleagues and not enough time for students to engage with NIC. Before engaging with the process, teachers expressed the concern over covering curriculum content. By the end of the process teachers identified that NIC does not abandon subject content but rather repositions it in the context of meaningful themes derived from student concerns. Participating students across all three schools also faced challenges throughout the process.

Learners struggled with instances where NIC afforded them greater autonomy, for example, the struggle of being held more accountable for their work through their involvement in self and peer assessment. Moreover, students initially struggled with the concept of making curricular decisions and trusting that their voice would be heard and acted upon. The social dynamics of group work also presented some challenges for students such as feelings of discomfort around noise levels in the classroom and frustrations surrounding fellow students going off-task or taking-over in group work. The supportive role played by each of the participating teachers was central to facilitating increased agentic engagement and overcoming many of the initial struggles faced by students. Teachers supported learner’s agentic engagement by: providing pedagogical support for their students; facilitating a diminished power differential in the classroom; and creating an environment of reciprocal trust between themselves and their students.

The results of this pilot indicate that NIC had significant positive effects on enhancing the enjoyment, meaning, self-efficacy, and learning in both primary and secondary settings. This work values meaningful learning, democracy, teacher, and student agency as well as learning environments that place a value on the importance of social interactions. NIC is offered as a practical curricular structure that can bring these values to life. NIC also fulfils many of the
principle values of the proposed Junior Cycle Framework and therefore feels suitably placed to make recommendations for how this initiative could inform curriculum change.

8.2 Recommendations for Curriculum Change

The current environment of educational change in Ireland is well positioned to leverage this work. For example, the Irish Inspectorate wish to empower, and support, school development through the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process. In addition, professional development agencies need practical structures to enable the aspirations of change. This represents an opportune moment for NIC to work with key agencies to effect change. Through the SSE process, NIC has the potential to allow for a complete alignment of the educative process from policy to practice supporting the lifelong learning of all those involved. The greatest space for NIC to enact curriculum change is within the proposed Junior Cycle Framework (JCF). The new JCF explicitly names student centeredness, democracy, and inclusion amongst its visions and principles (NCCA 2010). NIC is strongly coherent with the reforms of the JCF in realising the values and visions of the framework as the results of this pilot indicate that NIC has significant implications for increased democratic schooling. Furthermore, the curriculum in NIC is based on the expressed personal and world concerns of students and negotiated with students throughout the process, which redefines the ‘student centeredness’ aim of the JCF. This study recommends that the increased professional agency for teachers promoted within NIC, amongst other aspects of this study, could be best-realised through the short course aspect of the JCF.

The flexibility of the short courses could speak to findings from this study which shared expressed concerns from participating secondary teachers regarding the minimal level of engagement students had with NIC (one 40minute class per week). Furthermore, teachers and students were concerned that NIC took the place of SPHE and was therefore was carried out at the cost of other aspects of the curriculum. The 100 hours which are allocated to short courses would provide more suitable levels of contact time for students where NIC would not be taking the place of any other subjects. Furthermore, the NCCA are encouraging schools to design their own short courses which would provide teachers with the opportunity to become curriculum makers.

It is a widely held premise that teachers should play an active role in the development of curriculum and be at the heart of curriculum change (Stenhouse 1979; Fullan 1993; Hargreaves
and Shirley 2009). Short courses within the JCF provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in curriculum development and planning at local level in a manner that builds professional capital; human, social and decisional (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012), makes visible the purpose of education (Biesta et al. 2015) and speaks to Theo Dorgan’s core question ‘Why are you educating me like this and what for?’ (2014).

NIC offers a structured approach which aims to empower teachers as curriculum-makers in a partnership approach to curriculum change. This research will build on the ambitions of these locally designed short courses by supporting teachers in a curriculum development role to negotiate meaningful learning with their students. The collaboration of the NIC approach with the aspirations of the short courses will contribute to the establishment of an enhanced and innovative curriculum delivery programme that promotes active learning and a student-centred curriculum, an important aspect of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) and one of the Five National Outcomes for Children in the Agenda for Children’s Services (DCYA 2007). This collaboration will also attempt to empower teachers and students to take greater ownership of their curriculum (which is coherent with the aims of the JCF) by primarily improving teacher professionalism, student engagement, and agency. This study believes that NIC is best suited to the design of short courses, however, the negotiated and learning aspects of the initiative would still have a place and influence across the rest of the curriculum.

In relation to the integrated aspect of NIC, the primary criticisms of an integrated curriculum are concerns regarding the fate of separate-subject content and the ability to break from traditional academic disciplines (Erb 1996; Czerniak 1999). NIC is not proposing a dichotomous, ‘either-or’ approach to curriculum where schools deliver either an integrated curriculum or a separate subject curriculum. In the empirical work conducted by this study, it is shown that it is possible to have a part of the curriculum that is integrated within a traditional curriculum and short courses are the space within the JCF to realise this. This work does not have to conform to e.g. Beane's (1997) definition of NIC. There is a wide integration spectrum and numerous models of integration, for example, Fogarty’s (1991) 12 models of integration to which parts of NIC can be applied. Indeed as schools become more experienced and confident it is possible that the organic nature of NIC would lead to increased levels of integration. The process of NIC could be

141 Department of Children and Youth Affairs
particularly effective in helping to realise the JCF ‘Key Skills’, ‘Statements of Learning’ and the wellbeing requirements within short courses and subject disciplines.

There are 8 key skills\textsuperscript{142} outlined by the NCCA that the new JCF aims to deliver on and NIC has strong affordances within each of them. The collaborative learning necessitated by NIC satisfies each element of the ‘Communication’ and ‘Working with Others’ key skills\textsuperscript{143}. While the autonomy and ownership NIC promotes in learners speaks strongly to aspects of the ‘Managing Myself’ and ‘Managing Information and Thinking’ key skills, NIC could also be considered as a potential vehicle for delivering some of the NCCA’s 24 ‘Statements of Learning’\textsuperscript{144} (SOL), which describe the anticipated learning at the core of the new junior cycle (NCCA 2010).

The agentic engagement experienced by learners in NIC\textsuperscript{145} would be particularly effective in delivering the following two statements: ‘The student has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making’ and ‘the student values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts’ (NCCA 2012). A final space within the JCF where NIC could impact on policy further is through the NCCA’s (2015) specification for wellbeing. This study has produced findings purporting to the perceived increased levels of self-esteem in participating students as reported by teachers across all three schools and the parents in the participating secondary school\textsuperscript{146}. The JCF plans to include up to 400 hours for learning processes which ensure that young people feel confident, happy, healthy and connected where the junior cycle provides support for students to make positive responsible decisions relating to their health and wellbeing (NCCA 2015). This study recommends that NIC could take place within these allocated ‘wellbeing hours’ as a potentially insightful structure for achieving many of the aspirations of the NCCA. If NIC is to be realised within any aspect of the new junior cycle or the wider educational context, a number of provisions need to be introduced to support it.

\textsuperscript{142} The Key Skills are: Managing Myself; Staying Well; Communicating; Being Creative; Working with Others and; Managing Information and Thinking.
\textsuperscript{143} See Appendix 8 for a full breakdown of each of the Key Skills.
\textsuperscript{144} See Appendix 9 for full list of the Statements of Learning.
\textsuperscript{145} As detailed in Section 6.3.3 of the findings chapter
\textsuperscript{146} As detailed in Section 6.2.3 of the findings chapter
Critical supports necessary for the effective inaction of NIC

This study believes that curriculum change is possible but it needs a supporting context. A number of recommendations for the introduction and implementation of NIC to a school can be gleaned from the findings of this study.

At secondary level, there would need to be more consistent engagement with NIC from the students as this research found one 40 minute class of NIC a week to be limiting when compared to the engagement of students in participating primary schools where students had 3-4 hours of NIC contact time every week. Furthermore, participating teachers across all three schools commented on the extra workload involved in NIC and the lack of time they had for planning. For this to be more sustainable going forward, across both the primary and secondary sectors, teachers need to be provided with the time and space to plan for NIC. The integrated aspect of NIC, especially at secondary level, may often require the subject expertise of more than one teacher. In the participating secondary school, it was found that many teachers contributed to the various NIC themes but there was no system in place for the teachers to communicate with each other. Therefore, space and provision within the timetable needs to be created for teachers to collaborate, co-teach, and to co-plan with their fellow professionals. As purported by Biesta et al. (2015), teachers need to be able to ‘make sense’ of the curriculum and NIC will only work in schools if teachers are given enough time to discuss, plan, and make sense of it. Participating teachers in this study supported learners’ agentic engagement with pedagogical processes but this work recommends that teachers also receive the support they need.

Teachers need to be provided with professional development for the pedagogical processes they would be expected to implement through NIC. If NIC were to be implemented as part of the new junior cycle, professional support could be provided through the NCCA Key Skills Toolkits (2015) which contain guidance for teaching methodologies that will enhance each of the key skills and support the agentic and social approach to learning necessitated by NIC. Teachers would also need to receive professional development with regard to managing the classroom environment as students are working collaboratively. This recommendation is based on the findings of this study where both students and teachers were often uncomfortable with the noise levels in the NIC classroom. The findings of this study also showed that both teachers and

147 http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Key-Skills
students struggled significantly with the break from traditional assessment structures towards more student-involved assessment structures. This study recommends that professional development for Assessment for Learning (AFL) approaches would need to be provided for all participating teachers. This would build on the NCCA assessment toolkit (2015) which is designed to support and assist teachers in their work on junior cycle assessment.

In addition to the provisions necessary to support teachers in the practical implementation of NIC, this study also believes that NIC could be a potential vehicle for teacher re-professionalisation. Curricular change in schools is often extremely difficult to achieve (Gleeson 2010; Trant 1998). In the Irish context, teachers are often passive recipients of CPD that stick “band-aids” on structures that do not change. NIC was a completely new structure for teachers and within this structure; there were lots of moments of discomfort, vulnerability, difficulty, and uncertainty. Participating teachers made significant progress over the course of the process and this study can make claims to developments in professional knowledge in areas such as teaching methodologies and assessment. Furthermore, NIC requires teachers to trust in their students’ abilities to become leaders of their own learning (Cook 1992; Beane 1997) and the findings of this study showed that participating teachers admitting to having low expectations for student abilities. As teachers and students engaged with the process, these expectations gradually increased but this study recommends that the hegemonic conceptions of student ability need to be challenged and NIC has affordances in this area. NIC allows for some practical ideas as to how teachers can raise their expectations for students. By making the feedback process more explicit, through encouraging more open communication and negotiation involving dialogue, NIC could possibly contribute towards developing a more ‘growth mind-set’ (Moser et al. 2011) disposition in teachers.

While the challenges expressed by teachers and students primarily influenced these recommendations, it is the limitations of the study itself and how it was carried out that will direct the recommendations for further research.

---

148 http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Assessment

149 As explored in section 6.3.4 of the Findings chapter.

150 A growth orientated mind-set is the idea that abilities and behaviours can be developed (Moser et al. 2011)
8.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This research consisted of a small-scale longitudinal study involving three participating schools. The primary limitation of this study was time. Limited funding only permitted this study to be conducted over two academic school years and while there were many achievements during this time, this work believes that increasing the timeline of the longitudinal study would glean a more complex view of the process and the impact it had on participating schools. Increasing the length of time in longitudinal studies can provide richer information about individual behaviour and produce a more accurate picture of social dynamics (Mingione 1999; Ruspini 2000).

Only one participating student transitioned from 6th class to 1st year within the duration of this study. Therefore, it was difficult to monitor the possible affordances of NIC as a curriculum structure that could bridge the divide between upper primary and lower secondary schooling sectors. By increasing the duration of the longitudinal study in primary schools, this would increase the chances of following more students onto secondary school. This also highlights a further limitation of this study, that NIC only took place in three participating schools. By expanding the process into more primary and secondary schools, especially within the same catchment area, it would greatly increase the chances of monitoring students as they transitioned into a wider range of feeder secondary schools. Furthermore, an increased timeline would allow the students who participated in NIC in 1st year in secondary school to be followed into senior cycle. Insights into processes of change can be greatly enhanced by making more extensive use of longitudinal data (Gershuny 1998). Curriculum change is also taking place at senior cycle in Ireland, and an increased longitudinal study could explore whether NIC could inform the changes taking place at senior cycle as it has already done at junior cycle level.

There were limitations to the type of integration that occurred within this work where it was determined that a multidisciplinary level of integration was achieved151. One of the findings from this study was that teachers began to think in a more interdisciplinary way as the process developed152. A further limitation of this study, at secondary level, was that students only had

151 See section 7.3 of the Discussion Chapter for details
152 The second theme to be explored in the participating secondary school was ‘racism’ and this study found that teachers responded in a more interdisciplinary way to this theme. This theme was developed with much greater ease and teachers were more readily able to identify what teachers and their relevant subjects could become involved in
one 40-minute class of NIC a week. The combination of an extended longitudinal study and more structured, ring-fenced contact time for NIC could increase the levels of integration achieved. This work anticipates that a more transdisciplinary and eventually, interdisciplinary focus could emerge from the work as students and teachers became more proficient at this approach to teaching and learning.

An extended longitudinal study would involve repeated observations of the same variables over longer periods of time (Menard 1991). By increasing the timeline and allocating NIC, for example, 100 hours of contact time; this work could also begin to study the impact of NIC on other educational indicators in addition to agency, meaningful learning and social dynamics. An extended timeline would allow the study to follow the same group of respondents over a longer period of time to explore the long term effects of NIC on measureable skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. More time would allow this work to establish or allocate a relevant metric to determine whether NIC could have an impact on these skills in addition to the inherent value gained by participating in the process. The longitudinal element of following students could also be extended to following teachers throughout the process. This study found that teachers developed their professional practice and thinking after only a limited engagement with the process and more time to follow teachers over several years could better gauge how NIC could impact on the professional practice of teachers. One possible implication and an alternative research method that this study would recommend exploring would be to involve teachers in a process of Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is where a professional researcher invites the subjects of the study to participate actively in all phases of the research process, from the initial design of the project through data gathering and analysis to final conclusions and actions arising out of the research (Whyte 1995). This study recommends that participating teachers should engage in PAR as part of NIC to enhance their professional capacity and role in researching practice, designing curriculum, cooperating with colleagues and utilising evidence based approaches to inform their work. A central premise of NIC is the empowerment of teachers and students and the bottom-up approach to curriculum design. PAR is an activist research approach that is useful if considering an intervention and is associated with ownership of knowledge and empowering people (IISD 1995). By employing PAR, this could support and examine teachers' understanding the theme. See Chapter Five, Fig. 5.39: for a breakdown of the plan for the racism theme developed by teachers after one 40 minute meeting.
of NIC and develop their evaluative capacities. It could also be a reflexive learning process for teachers as they would be challenged to objectify their own experiences with the NIC.

One final limitation of this study was the lack of communication between participating teachers across the three schools. Apart from one day where this initiative brought together all of the participating teachers and principals from participating schools, there was no further opportunities to bring these practitioners together in a professional capacity due to a lack of time and resources. Given more of the latter, this research would recommend creating a Professional Learning Community (PLC) of teachers across both primary and secondary level to share their experiences, concerns and advice with regard to the NIC process. This PLC would encourage and facilitate increased teacher collaboration both within and across schools. Furthermore, the increased communication between primary and secondary professionals would also contribute to the aspirations of NIC to become a bridging curriculum between the upper primary and lower secondary schooling.

8.4 Authentic Learning and Professional Capital

Authentic learning involves students being actively engaged in exploration and inquiry where they meaningfully construct their learning around real-life problems (Donovan et al. 1999; Rule 2006). This study considers any educational process to be authentic when it delivers on what it promises. In the context of this research, that involves an authentic approach to incorporating student voice into the curriculum, to enhance the agency of learners and professionals and to model democratic processes within classrooms. When questioning if this curricular process was authentic, this study must establish to what degree these aims and objectives were delivered upon. Authenticity was enabled through the agentic engagement aspect of this work which modelled democratic processes in participating classrooms where students were given a significant voice, facilitated by a distribution of power around learning content that was meaningful.

In addition to considering how the process of learning in NIC can be meaningful for students, the capacity of professionals to deliver this meaningful curriculum must also be considered. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) frame this as ‘professional capital’, namely ‘…one’s own or

153 See section 4.2.5 of the methodology chapter
growth worth, particularly concerning assets that can be leveraged to accomplish desired goals’ (p.17). The following sections will consider the degree to which the learning was experienced by the students to be authentic (desired goal) and the actions that professionals took, leveraging assets facilitated by NIC in developing their professional capital alongside this. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p.22) describe ‘teaching like a pro’ in terms of ‘…undertaking difficult, inspiring work; constantly trying to improve practices and working with all the collective might and ingenuity of professional colleagues to do so’. Essential to this is the development of three dimensions of professional capital, namely human (the quality of the individual), social (the quality of the group), and decisional (the development of expertise and professional judgment of individuals and groups to make more and more effective decisions over time).

Human capital incorporates knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence to include habits of mind. It is strongly linked to teacher schema (Korthagen 2010) or their ways of ‘knowing how to act’ and reflects the necessary routines required to manage a full class. The NIC process described in this work explains how teachers developed new routines to realise authentic learning\(^{154}\) for their students to include experiences of professional vulnerability\(^{155}\) as individual teachers struggled with the anxieties of challenging traditional practice. Essentially NIC acted as a practical scaffold to support changes in practice and understanding of purpose. Social capital exists in the relationships between professionals and in this work the meaningful work of curriculum construction facilitated the development of purpose and trust, the sharing of human capital and resilience in the face of difficulties\(^{156}\). This work would argue that this represents true professional development where teachers take collective responsibility for change with significant autonomy and subsequent transformations in practice. Collectively human and social capital equips teachers with improved decisional capital that is the capacity to make good, discretionary judgements. This was evident in the acceleration of teacher planning capacity in the participating secondary school when developing the second ‘racism’ theme\(^{157}\) and changes in pedagogical practice that reflected significant changes in teacher expectations for the quality of

\(^{154}\) See section 6.3.3 of the Findings chapter which details how teachers made and made a conscious decision to reprofessionalise.

\(^{155}\) See section 6.3.3 of Findings chapter (page 233)

\(^{156}\) See section 6.3.3 (sub section ‘Assessment of NIC’), page 232 which details the difficulties faced by teachers with particular regard to their assessment of students and teacher expectations.

\(^{157}\) The second theme to be explored in the participating secondary school was ‘racism’ and this study found that teachers responded in a more interdisciplinary way to this theme. This theme was developed with much greater ease and teachers were more readily able to identify what teachers and their relevant subjects could become involved in the theme. See Chapter Five, Fig. 5.39: for a breakdown of the plan for the racism theme developed by teachers after one 40 minute meeting.
work students could produce, the significance of student voice and opinions and the changes in power relationships in the class.\textsuperscript{158}

Lawson and Lawson (2013) identified three socio-cultural indicators of agentic engagement; cultural relevance, cultural correspondence and cultural congruence. The learning in NIC was authentic and culturally relevant because students were learning about themes that were of immediate concern to them and curriculum content that mattered to them. Students experienced cultural correspondence where they were being allowed to learn in ways that drew upon their inherent capacities, capabilities and ways of working. Lastly, cultural congruence was achieved through the transformation of participation towards a more community approach to learning. Within this community, a new in-class culture was developed as students received support from teachers to work in ways that made sense to them in a democratic environment. Throughout the NIC process, learners emulated citizens in a democracy by voicing their concerns and opinions. Democratic schooling was experienced where young people were invited to contribute to decisions surrounding their learning facilitated by teachers who had to relinquish some control as greater agency was distributed across the class. The democratic processes that students engaged in throughout NIC ensured that ‘students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one today (Chanoff 1981 p.172). If we are to have an authentic, democratic process within the classroom, the next key consideration is the distribution of power.

This study recognises that power in Irish schools is traditionally held by teachers (Gleeson 2010; Granville 2004). In its design, NIC adopts what Bruner (1963) describes as a ‘courteous translation of knowledge’ where learners and teachers must be given time to make sense of learning and to come to terms with this new, more egalitarian approach to learning. This study believes that in order to realistically distribute power, it must be recognised that engagement within this distribution has cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Lawson and Lawson 2013). The cognitive dimension is where students and teachers alike are given the space to adapt to and make sense of this new approach to learning and the affective aspect concerns the ability of teachers to support learners agentic engagement by letting go of the reins of power. Within the behavioural dimension of agentic engagement, there was the interesting finding of

\textsuperscript{158} As detailed in Chapter 7, section 7.2.5 (‘Teacher Beliefs’) a teacher reflected on her expectations for students: ‘I went into NIC with my eyes closed. I thought: they are only 12, what are they going to know? But I find now that as a teacher, we don’t give them enough credit for the knowledge they have’ (Michelle, T, S, 1)
‘noise’ in the context of this study. Key to this finding were the different perceptions of noise held by teachers and students and how together, they established patterns of working that made sense where they learned to manage the necessary place of noise in NIC learning.

The development of teacher professional capital to enable authentic, democratic learning was critical where individual human and decisional capital to “allow” these social-cultural dimensions of learning to emerge was strongly dependent on the interactions that enhanced participants’ social capital and collective sense making\textsuperscript{159}. NIC therefore equally afforded teachers the opportunity to democratise their practice, enhancing collective autonomy through professional voice and decision making; sharing knowledge and distributing responsibility, all the time responsive to student learning needs.

### 8.5 Professional Accountability

The evidence is clear that current systems of external accountability in the U.S. are not producing increased student performance. It is also the case that most other countries that are more successful have a different approach in which accountability is much more tied to developing capacity and self and group responsibility at the level of implementation.  

\cite{fullan2015}

Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) claim that neoliberalism has led to a business capital view of schooling with a focus on lower investment for rapid returns. This has resulted in a young, flexible, temporary workforce, trained on the job with a high turnover, and with low levels of trust and autonomy. Coherent with this is a system of ‘external’ accountability where policy makers try to reassure the public through transparency, monitoring and selective intervention that the education system is performing well (Fullan et al., 2015).

Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) go on to argue for an alternative focus on internal accountability through a collective commitment and responsibility to improve student learning and strengthen the teaching profession. This involves developing an inclusive and inspiring vision of education that speaks to all stakeholders (students, teachers, communities) where learning is a shared responsibility developed through curriculum ownership. Moving the accountability focus from

\textsuperscript{159} See Chapter 7, Section 7.2 (‘Teacher Professionalism’) which details how teachers enhanced their professionalism throughout NIC by: Supporting learner agency; supporting the social dynamics of NIC; assuming greater curricular autonomy and; collaborating professionally with their colleagues
the individual to the collective is more likely to develop clarity about shared purpose and overall school improvement. Biesta et al. (2014) argue that this clarity of purpose is essential for professional agency and for true transformation in curriculum and learning.

The agentic engagement of students and professional agency of teachers evident in this work illustrates the potential of the NIC process to assist in the practical implementation of internal accountability in the JCF. Student learning through NIC realises all of the key skills and many of the statements of learning while also giving meaning to the principles of the JCF. This may result in a significant improvement in curricular coherence and the integration of these teaching and learning processes into the School Self-Evaluation process.

If schools are to deliver on the promise of the JCF, structures must be put in place to allow for the development of professional capital supported by a focus on internal accountability. This will require all participants within the educational process to authentically live the democratic principles and values that are outlined in the JCF if they are not to become hollow words. This work has illustrated the affordances of the NIC process in providing structure and scaffolding for a coherent curriculum to emerge that can clearly respond to Theo Dorgan’s question ‘Why are you educating me like this and what for?’ in a manner that provides meaning and purpose in the Irish education system for all.

8.6 Final Conclusion

NIC has huge affordances within the current educational change environment. NIC has the potential to make real and concrete some of the visions of the JCF such as democracy and ownership. This thesis has made the case that the moment for change is now but passing. Educational systems have struggled to support effective change because top-down direction has been the norm. The proposed JCF has involved a consultative process but a certain lack of structure to realise laudable aspirations. NIC has provided this structure and evidence that it can be a true catalyst for the practical realisation of the aspirations of the JCF. Now the question is whether the DES has the courage of its convictions to support the professional practice of teachers adequately to truly realise these aspirations and NIC has mapped the path for such an approach. The flexibility and guarantee of 100 hours of engagement offered by the short courses make them the most suitable space for NIC within current policy. These courses provide the opportunity for teachers to design curriculum locally and in consultation with their students.
A central aim of this study was to enhance the agency of learners by empowering them to make curricular decisions in active, social learning environments. However, this research did not set out to achieve the one-sided philosophy of a child-run learning environment where learners only acquired knowledge themselves. The agency of teachers was equally important to this work. Across the three participating schools, NIC transformed traditional, adult-run classrooms (where the teacher was the sole distributor of knowledge (Rogoff et al. 1996)) into collaborative, active and meaningful learning environments under the guidance of a ‘community of learners’ approach (Ibid). A community approach to learning was achieved as traditional roles in the classroom were transformed where both teachers and students assumed responsibility and control over their learning through a socio-cultural focus on participation, engagement and agency. Furthermore, the adult and child directed curriculum co-construction necessitated by NIC facilitated a community style of curriculum design. Central to this process was how teachers supported agentic capacities in students to become curricular decision makers. In turn, this impacted on the professional agency of teachers as they experimented with alternative ways of making knowledge more meaningful for their students.

The desired goal of this work is authentic learning and it so happens that this develops learning that is coherent with the principles, visions and skills of the JCF. Based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations have been made regarding the critical supports necessary for the successful implementation of NIC into Irish schools. The primary supports identified are centred on ‘time’. Students and teachers alike must be given time to come to terms with Theo Dorgans’ question in a courteous translation of knowledge. Increased time is needed for teachers to plan, teach and collaborate with colleagues. Also, teachers will require professional development with regard to the diverse teaching methodologies and assessment structures that will enhance the NIC experience for teachers and learners. The findings of this study have shown that NIC has purchase but schools, teachers and students must be afforded time to make sense of this new way of teaching and learning as leveraging emerging professional capital is not a trivial exercise.
Bibliography


understanding of agency-as-achievement’, *Learning Lives: Learning, Identity, and Agency in the 
Life Course*.

*Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 21(6), 624-640.

Education Project. (Draft internal report.)


Assessment*, London, Department of Education and Professional Studies: King's College London.

Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bloor, M. (1978) ‘On the analysis of observational data: a discussion of the worth and uses of 
inductive techniques and respondent validation’, *Sociology*, 12(3), 545-552.


Theory and Methods*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Theories and Methods*, Boston: Mass, Pearson A and B.


Brophy, D. (2014) ‘First it was ‘The Inter’, then it was the Junior Cert… now it’s got a new name…’ *thejournal.ie* [online], 15 Jan, available at: http://www.thejournal.ie/junior-cert-new-name-1265550-Jan2014/ [accessed 20 Jan 2015].


Habermas, J. (1972) Knowledge and Human Interests, Boston: Beacon Press.


Irish National Teachers Organisation (2011) *Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People*, Dublin: INTO.


Kitzinger, J. (1994) ‘The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants’, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 16(1), 103-121.


National Adult Literacy Agency (2013) ‘Literacy in Ireland’


Rogoff, B. (1994) ‘Developing understanding of the idea of communities of learners’, [La Jolla, CA], [Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, University of California, San Diego].


Educational.


Appendices
Appendix 1: Primary Researchers Response to the NCCA ‘Short Course Development Guide’

Short Courses Briefing Document

http://www.juniorcycle.ie/Planning/Short-Course-Development.aspx

In February, 2013 the NCCA released a short course guide to assist and advise teachers in developing short courses as part of the new Junior Cycle framework. In response to the release of the short course guide, the following briefing document will analyse the potentials and shortcomings of this document in relation to our research project entitled ‘Integrating the curriculum: negotiating meaningful learning to support social regeneration in Limerick’. The introductory note to this guide is positively in line with our research placing and immediate emphasis on the involvement and collaboration of teachers along with mentioning integrated curriculum methods such as interdisciplinary teaching which is the parallel thematic study of two or more subjects.

The short courses guide is built around the following five phases involved in developing a short course:

1. Pre-development Phase
2. Scoping Phase
3. Consultation Phase
4. Completing the short course template
5. Review and Evaluation

Phase One: Pre-development Phase

From the outset, this stage requires interdisciplinary, collaborative groups of teachers to come together to take a critical, self-evaluating look at; how things are, what is currently working well, what needs to change and how will we change them? Teachers are asked to consider discursive questions such as ‘What areas of learning might be of interest to and worthwhile for your learners?’ and ‘What is working well in Junior Cycle?’ These questions are in line with the questions we propose asking the teachers on the CPD day for our research to initiate discourse around a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC). Also, this emphasis on collaboration is in line with the Teaching Councils views of the ‘teacher as a professional’. This phase promotes and encourages teachers to look at how short courses might provide more meaningful, deeper learning for students by asking: ‘Could you use a short course to deepen or extend learners’ learning in a junior cycle subject?’ Here is an opening and an opportunity for student concerns to be introduced from the outset of this process, however, no reference to student concerns is made.

Phase Two: Scoping Phase

The short course development group is now established and the group’s first task is to complete a scoping document for each proposed short course. The scoping document asks the question: ‘What skills, values and attitudes can learners develop in this course?’ Beane and Brodhagen (2001) identified two themes that emerged from curriculum reviews; coherence and permeability. The ‘coherence’ element refers to
developing a curriculum that presents a holistic picture of education rather than a set of fragmented, unrelated topics. Robin Ann Martin (2003, p.11) describes holistic education as follows: “At its most general level, what distinguishes holistic education from other forms of education are its goals, its attention to experiential learning, and the significance that it places on relationships and primary human values within the learning environment.” This scoping document asks the short course developing groups about the attitudes and values this course will develop in students. This doesn’t include every element of holistic education but it is definitely in line with our research.

The second theme identified by Beane and Brodhagen (2001) is ‘permeability’, which refers to providing room for student voice and choice. Unfortunately, this phase does not incorporate any permeability nor is it coherent with our research when, for the first of three times in this short document, teachers are asked to put themselves into the shoes of students. The guide explicitly states ‘When answering the following questions, the student should always be the central consideration.’ The paper immediately contradicts this ‘central consideration’ when the teachers are then asked ‘In what ways will students see this course as being: enjoyable, relevant– in school, outside school, interesting and challenging, connected to prior learning and linking to possible future learning?’

Are the teachers going to attempt to put themselves in the position of the students here? Are they going to contribute educated answers to these questions based on their experience with students and what they think students would like? Or are they going to consult and negotiate with students to get first hand feedback on these questions? This area of the short course design process is crying out for collaboration between teachers and students. Put simply, it is asking questions of students but they are being answered by teachers. It seems obvious that students should be involved in every stage of the design process but especially here when seeking answers to the above questions. Also, these questions appeals to student interests which is in line with Boomers (1992) Motivation Model. The questions posed could be developed just that bit further and relate more to student concerns to bring them more in line with Boomers model of Negotiated Integrated Curriculum.

The Scoping phase outlines possible learning methodologies such as researching, creating, presenting, performing, discussing, designing, debating, group work, pair work, project work and research. This satisfies the mandated requirement from the NCCA that short courses incorporate “key skills” defined by the framework, but also these learning styles are promoted by Boomers (1992) Four Questions approach to NIC and the Beane and Brodhagen Model of NIC (2001). After this positive note, the scoping phase then finishes by asking teachers to consider ‘What will learners be telling their parents/peers about what they are doing in this course?’ Again, why not just ask the learners straight out instead of being speculative?

Phase Three: Consultation Phase
This phase begins by stating ‘The short course scoping document can now be used as a basis for discussion about the proposed short course. Consider consulting with teaching colleagues, learners, parents and others relevant individuals/groups.’ (NCCA 2013)

A stage too late but a recommendation is given to discuss with learners. This should be a pre-requisite, a stage in itself, a given and not an afterthought. This is the only area on the short course guide where it recommends/mentions the possibility of student involvement in the design of these courses. Even at that, the collaboration with students is after the course, its aims, and outcomes have been designed in phase two. The guide recommends a ‘discussion’ with students but does not say anything about incorporating feedback from the students into any modifications to the designed course. I was hopeful that this would be mentioned in the fifth phase of this process – the ‘Review and Evaluation’ phase.

**Phase Four: Completing the short course template**

The introductory line in this phase states that ‘This template will be completed with information from the scoping document’ (NCCA, 2013). Phase three, the consultation phase, involved discussing the scoping document with the various interested parties. I believe the first step in this fourth phase should be to modify the information from the scoping document, taking into account feedback from these discussions, and then enter this amended information into the template. The opening line makes it out to be a direct transfer of information from the scoping document to the template, so what has happened to phase three?

This stage goes on to recommend that the template ‘should be written from the writer’s perspective’. While it is staying true to the theme that the learner should be the central consideration in this process, it is again asking teachers to approach the design process from a student’s point of view instead of asking students themselves. Is this a power issue?

**Phase Five: Review and Evaluation**

There are no details provided in the guide as to what is involved in the fifth and final phase.

**Assessment**

The guide states that ‘It is important that the assessment approaches selected have a positive effect on learners’ learning and level of engagement.’ Many forward thinking, integrated assessment approaches are suggested such as formative, summative, peer and self-assessment and it is suggested that completed work be displayed in the format of reports, interviews, models and portfolios. All of these approaches are in line with Boomers (1992) model of NIC.

**Recommendations:**

In order for this short courses guide to be in line with our research, I would recommend that there should be four stages to this design process. The first stage would be the consultation phase where students, parents, teachers and community representatives would be included in a focus group environment where all ideas and concerns are voiced and taken into consideration. The second phase would see the pre-development and scoping phase combined involving collaborative groups of students and teachers. In
addition to looking at key skills and student values, student concerns would be the central guiding theme the short course would then be designed around. The third phase would be completing the short course template based on the results of the consultation and collaboration with all relevant parties. Lastly, a huge emphasis would be placed on the fourth and final phase; the ‘Review and Evaluation’ phase where an iterative nature of review and modification of the course would take place based on the ideas of all groups.

To summarise, I have developed a table showing how the efforts of this guide will dovetail into our research and have also highlighted areas where it is incoherent with our research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coherent Elements</th>
<th>Incoherent Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers as curriculum makers is a revolutionary move away from top down policy reform where policy makers decide what curriculum content is important enough to feature in students learning.</td>
<td>Student involvement in the co-construction of curriculum from start to finish is central to a negotiated curriculum. This approach is not portrayed in the Short Courses guide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High levels of collaboration are encouraged and promoted between teachers. This will enhance the collaborative nature of a school and see many educated views and opinions shared not just within subject disciplines as has been the case in the past.</td>
<td>At no point in the guide are student concerns mentioned let alone being the central focus of the short courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short courses must incorporate measures to contribute to the development of literacy and numeracy.</td>
<td>At three stages teachers are asked to look at short course design through the eyes of a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Junior Cycle short course framework allows for some stages of Boomers (1992) negotiated model particularly the students being involved in the assessment stage which is a revolutionary part of this model.</td>
<td>The design process appeals to student interests in certain areas i.e. Boomers (1992) Motivation Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment:</strong> Feedback, summative and self-assessment are the essence of assessing the negotiated curriculum model.</td>
<td><strong>Assessment:</strong> Students are assessed based on the aims and learning outcomes of each of the short courses but the students were not involved in designing these.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One student, one vote: democracy at work in the classroom

Students are given power to direct their own learning under a pilot scheme

Wed, May 27, 2015, 06:00

Kathryn Hayes

The NIC pilot in action: Coláiste Mhicíl students Aaron Blackhall, Andrew Quinn, Jakub Kaczmarek and Alex Hartlep
A boat that “raises all tides” is how one secondary school principal describes an innovative programme aimed at enhancing student engagement by giving children a say in what they want to learn about. The Negotiated Integrated Curriculum initiative sees teachers inviting students to help construct their learning journey by negotiating a curriculum around their expressed personal and world concerns.

The programme, run by a team from the University of Limerick under Dr John O’Reilly, is being piloted at Coláiste Mhicíl in Limerick, where 28 first-year students have had a 40-minute weekly class since the beginning of the year.

“The purpose of the programme is to see how students react when they are asked what they want to learn about,” says PhD student Joanne Fitzpatrick who is involved in leading the programme at the school. She admits the initiative – previously piloted at Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy and Galvone National School, both in Limerick – is more challenging at post-primary level than in primary schools, where there is a naturally integrated curriculum. But CBS secondary school has already signed up to run NIC again next year. “This is an innovative way of learning, where the students vote on a theme they want to learn about, based on concerns they have,” says Fitzpatrick. Water charges was the theme chosen by the first years at CBS, which they studied in other classes, from examining water meters in technology class to learning about methods of payments in business studies. “We looked at things like where water comes from in geography,
and did experiments in science examining how much water we use when we brush our teeth,” says student Josh Meehan (12).

“We also did questionnaires asking people what they thought of water charges. At the start I thought this is really bad, a new tax for my parents, but then I learned that we are one of the cheapest in Europe, so that changed my opinion.”

**Deep engagement**

Suzanne Browne, one of the teachers championing the initiative at CBS, admits she was surprised at how engaged the students became. “There were a lot of areas it fed into, so instead of starting with chapter one and going all the way to chapter 30, we could pick out different areas of the curriculum and apply them to what they were studying at the moment, so they were still studying the curriculum but in a way more relevant way,” says the German and business studies teacher.

“I went into it with my eyes closed. I thought: they are only 12, what are they going to know? But I find now as a teacher we don’t give them enough benefit for the knowledge they have. “In the old curriculum you teach them in a particular way; you don’t allow them to lead the learning. I have found, in both my business and my German classes, that they lead the way. They ask me, ‘Can we do that chapter now?’ So it’s kind of a process we have learned. We are still doing the curriculum but they are choosing it so they are more inclined to go on with it.” Tom Prendergast, principal of Coláiste Mhichíl, sees the NIC initiative as a departure from a model where the teacher is the only person responsible for disseminating information to one where the student must go out and find the information.

“One of the unexpected byproducts was how the programme aided the transition for our students from primary to secondary, especially when they are working in groups. They are not sitting in a classroom as passive learners but they are engaged, they are leading the learning, and the skill set they have is broad. “Ultimately as a teacher you want your students to be engaged . . . They are not teaching anything different, the curriculum sits there, but you might just change the sequence.”

**Strength of idealism**
Prendergast sats there will be challenges, but that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has been supportive in how the school manages the programme. “The challenge is to bring this to more teachers. It is possibly a little bit idealistic, but I think it’s good to be idealistic. I would like to get to a stage where we use this more and more. “For me, NIC is a boat that raises all tides. It raises student engagement, it improves student attainment, reduces teacher fatigue – the teacher is no longer the only disseminator of information. It also helps build socialisation skills, and aids the transition from primary into secondary school.”

If junior cycle reform goes ahead, John O’Reilly is keen to develop NIC into short courses. “At the very least we will do so within the existing restrictions, but ideally, if it becomes possible to deliver on short courses within the new framework, then we will. “The students have shown they are more than capable of embracing that opportunity to actually design their own short course. That would give enough time in the curriculum for them to thoroughly engage with issues like this to the depth that they are clearly capable of.”

Among those at a recent parents’ night to showcase what has been achieved so far through the NIC programme in CBS was Ger Halbert, education officer with the NCCA. She believes that while the NIC shows important themes that would suit a short course, it is only the beginning of a process. The new junior cycle, she adds, will give schools much greater autonomy to develop their own short courses. “We are really interested in schools taking developing something really meaningful for their particular students.”

In this pilot, “the learning is meaningful, but just as important is the process. This has been negotiated every step of the way, so there will be massive buy-in from young people.”
Munster's Mike Sherry was interviewed by the students of Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy. Munster players are interviewed by the students of Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy.

Munster stars Mike Sherry and Niall Ronan, along with Munster development officer Ken O'Connell, recently visited some very excited fifth and sixth-class of students in Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy, Southill, Limerick. The players were in the school to be interviewed by a group of students studying physical health. The students and their teacher, John Copely, are taking part...
in a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) initiative run by a team from the University of Limerick in collaboration with the Limerick Diocesan office and the NCCA.

NIC involves teachers and students rewriting the curriculum collaboratively in response to their concerns through classroom practice. Put simply, NIC involves the students having a say in what they wish to learn about and how they will learn in a curriculum initially devised from their life concerns, all the while adhering to syllabus standards.

The students chose to learn about physical, emotional and mental health. Students came up with questions they had about health and then decided on learning activities to pursue in order to find out the information they needed to answer these questions.

After conducting internet, newspaper, magazine and book research, the students suggested interviewing professionals in the field of health – and what better experts to answer questions on the subject than two Munster rugby players?

The students spent a lot of time coming up with and refining 12 interview questions around the topic of physical health, and Niall and Mike answered each one expertly, offering excellent advice to the students about eating habits and the importance of exercise to maintain good physical health. Niall and Mike put so much thought into each answer they gave and took the time to sign autographs and take pictures with the class afterwards.

The students had a fantastic day and, as part of the NIC process, students keep a journal in which they write about their experiences to date with this curriculum approach. Students wrote in their journals:

"I had so much fun today, in fact, this has been the best day of the year."

"Today I interviewed a Munster rugby player, I was nervous at first but then when I saw them come in I was bubbling with excitement."

"We practiced so much and I hope we all did our interviewing jobs properly to impress the rugby players."

"We got to meet Munster rugby players today and get pictures and autographs; nothing could make this day any better."
Different groups of students went on to interview a psychologist, a university lecturer, a secondary school SPHE teacher and a beautician about topics such as depression, emotional health and adolescence. NIC provides the opportunity for greater pupil engagement with their teachers and each other. This work has taken a collaborative approach with students and as a result has developed deeper learning, problem solving and critical thinking skills in the participating students. The cooperative learning methodologies developed in this work have also made explicit the teaching of social and communication skills, thus increasing student's self-esteem.

Munster Rugby would like to thank Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy for a great day and wish them well with their research.

Indo Sport
Appendix 4: Member Checking Survey and Questions

1 Basil\textsuperscript{160} Anonymous Survey

Q1. What are \textbf{three} things you remember about your NIC classes last year?
  \begin{itemize}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \end{itemize}

Q2. What were the three main things you \textbf{learned about} last year?
  \begin{itemize}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \end{itemize}

Q3. What were the three main things you \textbf{enjoyed} about NIC?
  \begin{itemize}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \end{itemize}

Q4. What were the three main things you \textbf{did not enjoy} about NIC last year?
  \begin{itemize}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \item \underline{__________________________________________}
  \end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{160} Pseudonym
Member Checking Mind Map Questions for Groups

Q1. What do you remember most about your NIC classes last year?

Q2. What are the main things you learned about last year?

Q3. What were the main things you enjoyed about NIC?

Q4. What were the main things you did not enjoy about NIC?
Appendix 5: Ethics Forms

Teacher Focus Group Question Guide

How have you found working with a NIC? Why? Can you give me some examples?

What has surprised you about working with a NIC? Why? Can you give me some examples?

What do you think are the benefits of using a NIC? Why?

What do you think are the challenges of using a NIC? Why?
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PARTICIPANTS

Prompting interview questions for teachers during the Continuous Professional Development Seminars

Q1. What are your professional concerns about your work in the school?

Q2. What concerns, if any, do you have around levels of student engagement?*

Q3. What concerns, if any, do you have about the alignment of the current Junior Cycle curriculum and student interests?*

Q4. How do you feel about being given the extra responsibility to assess your students from 2\textsuperscript{nd} year onwards for 40\% of their final grade?

Q5. To what degree does the current Junior Certificate assessment system influence your teaching style? Why?

Q6. **Primary Teachers:** What do you think are the expectations of 6\textsuperscript{th} class students about to make the transition to second level? Why?

Q7. **Secondary Teachers:** In September of every year, how would you describe the emotions experienced by 1\textsuperscript{st} year students at entry level? Why?

Q8. What do you see as the key difficulties experienced by the students during the transition from primary to secondary schooling?

Q9. What do you feel are the main driving factors for the low retention levels in your school? Why?

Q10. Can you describe any teaching difficulties you experience working in a regeneration school? Why?

*Questions 2 & 3 are prompting questions if further information is required from the interviewee after answering question 1.*
Questions for Policy Makers

Q1. What do you think is the main aim behind the new Junior Cycle framework? Why?

Q2. Do you think the new Junior Cycle a curriculum more responsive to student needs and concerns? How?*

Q3. How do you think this reform addresses failings in the current educational system? Why?*

Q4. In general, what assumptions about teaching and learning may be challenged by the new framework? Why?

Q5. To what degree, do you think, are the short courses capable of responding to student concerns? What role do you see students playing in the design of the short courses? How?

If the policy maker does not refer to the issue of ‘student concerns’ close with the following question:

Q6. Do you envisage any ways in which the new framework, short courses in particular, can help to ease the transition for students from primary to secondary school?

If the policy maker does not refer to the issue of ‘student concerns’ close with the following question:

Q7. How are student concerns addressed in the new Junior Cycle Framework?

*Questions 2 & 3 are prompting questions if further information is required from the interviewee after answering question 1.
Questions for Principals

Q1. What are your professional concerns about your work in the school?

Q2. What concerns, if any, do you have around levels of student engagement?

Q3. What concerns, if any, do you have about the alignment of the current Junior Cycle curriculum and student interests?

Q4. What do you see as the key difficulties experienced by the students during the transition from primary to secondary schooling?

Q5. What do you feel are the main driving factors for the low retention levels in your school? Why?

Q6. Can you describe the challenges you face working in an educational leadership position in a regeneration school? Why?
Questions for Teachers and Students during 4 Week NIC implementation Period

Teachers - 2 weeks in

General Opening Questions

Q1. What has been your overall experience of this design process over the last 2 weeks?
Q2. How do you feel about this process half way through?

Changing Roles

Q3. What have you noticed about how your role has changed over the last 2 weeks? Why?

Engagement

Q4. Have you noticed any differences in the levels of student engagement over the last 2 weeks? how?

Motivation

Q5. Can you please comment on the student’s motivation levels?

Evaluation/Assessment

Q6. What has been the experience of involving students in the assessment of their own work?

Ownership

Q7. To what degree have students taken more ownership over their learning? how?
Q8. Has the students intention to learn changed over the last 2 weeks? how?

Power

Q9. To what degree has the control in the classroom been distributed between teacher and students? how? Why?
Q10. Do you feel you have more freedom and opportunity for decision-making they this process? Why?
Q11. Have you experienced any difficulties in relinquishing some level of control to your students in the classroom? Why?
Q12. Has the level of trust between you and your students changed over the last 2 weeks? how?

Planning

Q13. Can you describe any differences in how you plan for these classes compared to your usual routine?

Time

Q14. Can you please comment on the length of time it has taken to implement the NIC model?

Closing General Questions

Q15. What have you found to be the most beneficial element of the negotiated curriculum model?
Q16. What thing(s) would you think about changing in the negotiated approach to curriculum so far?

**Teachers – after 4 weeks**

Q1. What has been your overall experience of this design process over the last 4 weeks? Why?

Q2. Do you think you will continue to use aspects of this process in your teaching? What aspects and why?

Q3. What have you noticed about how your role has changed over the last 4 weeks? Why?

Q4. Have you noticed any differences in the levels of student engagement over the last 4 weeks?

Q5. What has been the experience of involving the students in the assessment of their own work?

Q6. To what degree, do you think, have students taken more ownership for their learning?

Q7. To what degree has the control and decision-making in the classroom been distributed between teacher and students?

Q8. Has the level of trust between you and your students changed over the last 4 weeks? How?

Q9. Can you describe any differences in how you plan for these classes compared to your usual routine?

Q10. How have you been reflecting upon your practice over the last 4 weeks? Do you think this reflection has effected your practice? How?

Q11. Can you please comment on the length of time it has taken to implement the NIC model?

Q12. What have you found to be the most beneficial element(s) of the negotiated curriculum model? Why?

Q13. What thing(s) would you change about the negotiated approach to curriculum? Why?
Students – 2 weeks in

Learning
Q1. Can you describe for me the key ways in which you have learned over the last 2 weeks?
Q2. How has your learning during the last 2 weeks been different from how you normally learn?
Q3. What have been your favourite parts to your learning over the last 2 weeks? Why?
Q4. What have been the hardest parts for you for this new way of learning? why?

Decision Making
Q5. Have you been making more decisions than normal in the classroom in the last 2 weeks? Can you give me some examples? How have you found that?

Motivation
Q6. Have you been more motivated to learn over the last two weeks? Why?

Students – after 4 weeks

Learning
Q1. Can you describe for me the key ways in which you have learned over the last 4 weeks?
Q2. How has your learning during the last 4 weeks been different from how you normally learn?
Q3. What have been your favourite parts to your learning over the last 4 weeks? Why?
Q4. What have been the hardest parts for you for this new way of learning? why?

Decision Making
Q5. Have you been making more decisions than normal in the classroom in the last 4 weeks? Can you give me some examples? How have you found that?

Motivation
Q6. Have you been more motivated to learn over the last four weeks? Why?

Decision Making
Q7. Have you been making more decisions than normal in the classroom in the last 4 weeks? Can you give me some examples? How have you found that?

Co-operative Learning
Q8. Do you enjoy learning with your friends? Why is that?
Parent/Carer Information Leaflet

Integrating the curriculum: negotiating meaningful learning to support social regeneration in Limerick

The purpose of this research is to look at the implementation of a "Negotiated Integrated Curriculum" (NIC) pilot in terms of students moving from primary to secondary school and to examine the challenges of implementing a NIC in an Irish urban primary to secondary school setting. We are working with the St. Kierán’s initiative to support schools in the Limerick regeneration areas by looking at ways to make learning more enjoyable by helping students and teachers work together to decide what they will learn.

A research team from the University of Limerick are conducting a study into a curriculum design process involving both students and teachers. The research team will develop a two year plan, working with students in 6th class and through the move to Junior Cycle (focusing on short courses), to significantly increase student participation and retention in school life by negotiating a curriculum based on their concerns. The research will be greatly enhanced by the participation of students in 6th class and 1st year. This type of process has been shown to help students enjoy their learning more and take more from their classroom experiences.

Participation in this research will involve your child being observed in their classroom for two four-week periods monitoring and observing their learning through the use of audio recording and occasional video recording. Students do not have to take part in this project. Should you agree for your child to be included, you can change your mind and remove your child from the study at any stage. Data will be stored securely and anonymously in the University of Limerick and all publications from the project will be presented in a way that ensures no individual participant is identifiable. The findings from this research will be presented as part of a dissertation and possibly as report, conference papers, and other academic publications. This research is covered by Data Protection legislation.

If you have any further questions about the project or clarification of terms contained within this leaflet please do not hesitate to contact the project researchers, John O’ Reilly (email: john.oreilly@ul.ie), Emmanuel O’Grady (email: emmanuel.ogrady@ul.ie), Joanne Fitzpatrick (email: joanne.fitzpatrick@ul.ie) or the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick. This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number*). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences
Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

*The approval number will be supplied to the researcher/student by the EHS Ethics Committee and is to be inserted to all documentation disseminated once the study has been fully approved.

Your child’s participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your kind attention.

Policymaker Informed Consent form

I have read the relevant information sheet and I am satisfied that I understand the scope and remit of this project.

I understand that anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times during this study.

I understand that in signing I am giving my consent to be involved in this study.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Print name: ___________________________
Principal Informed Consent form

I have read the relevant information sheet and I am satisfied that I understand the scope and remit of this project.

I understand that anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times during this study.

I understand that in signing I am giving my consent to be involved in this study.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice

Signature: ___________________________________________ Date: __________________

Print name: ___________________________________________
Parent/Carer Consent form

I have read the relevant information sheet and I am satisfied that I understand the scope and remit of this project.

I understand that anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times during this study.

I understand that in signing I am giving my consent to be involved in this study.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice

Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________________________

Print name: _______________________________

---

Recruitment letter to principal

An invitation to engage in professional development

Curriculum, research and short courses bridging the primary/secondary transition.

Dear Principal and Teachers,
We are working with the St. Kieran’s initiative with Fr. Paul Finnerty and Mr. Jerry Cronin to support schools in the Limerick regeneration areas in responding to challenges in relation to student engagement, motivation and leaning. We wish to stress that this is a facilitative and developmental process which will build on existing school initiatives and strengths.

We are experiencing a time of significant change in Irish education and this is an opportunity for you to take a lead in how it is shaped. We would like to invite interested teachers to participate in a professional development workshop to explore these issues and opportunities. The ideal participants will be interested in enhancing their professional capacity in terms of research to improve practice; curriculum design to facilitate greater student engagement, responsibility and ownership; liaising with primary and secondary colleagues; developing educational leadership.

Following this workshop we will develop a two year plan to work with students in 6th class and through the transition to Junior Cycle (focusing on short courses) to significantly enhance their participation and retention in school life by negotiating a curriculum based on student concerns. This type of curriculum is a practical approach to progress the rich and ambitious aims of the Primary Curriculum. We can draw on a large body of evidence in the research literature that can offer rigorous practical approaches to realise the principles, aspirations and issues identified in the workshop and we can link this effort to the proposed changes to the Junior Cycle Framework.

We have the opportunity to involve national and international experts (to include classroom teachers and academics) and we will look to permanently sustain this developmental work through a strong school-university partnership.

For the initial one-day workshop, which will take place during the Easter break, we would hope to attract 2 to 4 teachers from each of the primary schools involved in the St. Kieran’s initiative and the same number of teachers from two secondary schools. We look forward to hearing from you.

Dr John O’Reilly
Dr Emmanuel O’Grady
Ms. Joanne Fitzpatrick

Student Informed Consent Form

I have read the information sheet and I understand why this project is taking place.
I understand that I don’t have to take part if I don’t want to and that my name (or any other way of being identified) will not be mentioned in any reports resulting from this research.

I understand that in signing this form I am giving my permission to be involved in this study.

Signature: ______________________________________  Date: ______________________________________

Print name: ______________________________________

Student Informed Consent Form

I have read the information sheet and I understand why this project is taking place.

I understand that I will be video taped as part of this project.

I understand that I don’t have to take part in the video taping if I don’t want to and that my name (or any other way of being identified) will not be mentioned in any reports resulting from this research.

I understand that in signing this form I am giving my permission to be involved in this study.

Signature: ______________________________________  Date: ______________________________________

Print name: ______________________________________
Teacher Informed Consent form

I have read the relevant information sheet and I am satisfied that I understand the scope and remit of this project.

I understand that anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times during this study.

I understand that in signing I am giving my consent to be involved in this study.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice

Signature: ______________________________________  Date: ______________________

Print name: ______________________________________
Acceptance of the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines

I have read the University of Limerick Child Protection Guidelines and agree to abide by its contents. There is no reason why I would be considered unsuitable to work with children or young people.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: __11/2/2013

Print Name: __John O’Reilly_____________

Department: _Education and Professional Studies

This form must be retained by the signatory’s University Department
Integrating the curriculum: negotiating meaningful learning to support social regeneration in Limerick

The purpose of this research is to assist with, and investigate, the implementation of an innovative "Negotiated Integrated Curriculum" (NIC) pilot in a primary to secondary school transition setting and to examine the challenges of implementing a NIC in an Irish urban disadvantaged primary to secondary school setting. We are working with the St. Kierán’s initiative to support schools in the Limerick regeneration areas in responding to challenges in relation to student engagement, retention and learning.

A research team the University of Limerick are conducting a study into a curriculum design process involving both students and principals. The research team will develop a two year plan, working with students in 6th class and through the transition to Junior Cycle (focusing on short courses), to significantly enhance student participation and retention in school life by negotiating a curriculum based on their concerns. This research will be greatly enhanced by the input from those involved in curriculum policy at a local and national level. Participation in this research would involve being interviewed about your understanding of the process and belief about the policy implications of this process. no invasive questions will be asked.

You are under no obligation to take part in this project. Should you agree to be included, your school may withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice. Data will be stored securely and anonymously in the University of Limerick and all publications from the project will be presented in a way that ensures no individual participant is identifiable. The findings from this research will be presented as part of a dissertation and possibly as report, conference papers, and other academic publications. This research is covered by Data Protection legislation.

If you have any further questions about the project or clarification of terms contained within this leaflet please do not hesitate to contact the project researchers, John O’ Reilly(email: john.oreilly@ul.ie),Emmanuel O’Grady (email: emmanuel.ogrady@ul.ie), Joanne Fitzpatrick (email: joanne.fitzpatrick@ul.ie). This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email : ehsresearchethics@ul.ie.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your kind attention.
Integrating the curriculum: negotiating meaningful learning to support social regeneration in Limerick

This project looks at ways to make learning more enjoyable by helping students and teachers work together to decide what they will learn. We are a research team from the University of Limerick that want to record this as it happens, but we need some students to help.

In the project we will need to record what you talk about in the classroom and, if you wish, sometimes video-record you at work in your classrooms for two four-week sessions. We will be the only ones that will listen to, and watch, these recordings and they will be stored securely in the University of Limerick.

You don’t have to take part if you don’t want to. But if you do decide to take part and change your mind in the future you can pull out at any time and your recordings will be destroyed. Results from this project may be shown to other people but your name (or any other way of knowing who you are) will not be mentioned.

If you have any questions about this project, or want any words mentioned above to be explained, please contact us, John O’ Reilly (email: john.oreilly@ul.ie), Emmanuel O’Grady (email: emmanuel.ogrady@ul.ie), Joanne Fitzpatrick (email: joanne.fitzpatrick@ul.ie) or the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email : ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

*The approval number will be supplied to the researcher/student by the EHS Ethics Committee and is to be inserted to all documentation disseminated once the study has been fully approved.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your kind attention.
Integrating the curriculum: negotiating meaningful learning to support social regeneration in Limerick

The purpose of this research is to assist with, and investigate, the implementation of an innovative "Negotiated Integrated Curriculum" (NIC) pilot in a primary to secondary school transition setting and to examine the challenges of implementing a NIC in an Irish urban disadvantaged primary to secondary school setting. We are working with the St. Kieran’s initiative to support schools in the Limerick regeneration areas in responding to challenges in relation to student engagement, retention and learning.

A research team from the University of Limerick are conducting a study into a curriculum design process involving both students and teachers. The research team will develop a two year plan, working with students in 6th class and through the transition to Junior Cycle (focusing on short courses), to significantly enhance student participation and retention in school life by negotiating a curriculum based on their concerns. This research will be greatly enhanced by the participation of teachers who are interested in professional development, curriculum design to facilitate greater student engagement, responsibility and ownership, liaising with primary and secondary colleagues, and developing educational leadership.

Professional development seminars for this process will be provided for all participants as well as continual support from the research team. Participation in this research will involve being observed in your classroom for two four-week periods monitoring and observing student learning through the use of audio recording and occasional video recording (only with the consent of your principal, students and their parents). You would also be observed and recorded for any professional development seminars run by this project. You would also be interviewed a number of times about your experience of the process and no invasive questions would be asked.
Teachers are under no obligation to take part in this project. Should you agree to be included, you may withdraw from the study at any stage without prejudice. Data will be stored securely and anonymously in the University of Limerick and all publications from the project will be presented in a way that ensures no individual participant is identifiable. The findings from this research will be presented as part of a dissertation and possibly as report, conference papers, and other academic publications. This research is covered by Data Protection legislation.

If you have any further questions about the project or clarification of terms contained within this leaflet please do not hesitate to contact the project researchers, John O’ Reilly (email: john.oreilly@ul.ie), Emmanuel O’Grady (email: emmanuel.ogrady@ul.ie), Joanne Fitzpatrick (email: joanne.fitzpatrick@ul.ie). This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your kind attention.
Appendix 6: Posters before and after Feedback

One group’s poster before the feedback process

The same group’s poster after the feedback process
# Appendix 7: NCCA Key Skills

## Key Skills of Junior Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MANAGING MYSELF</th>
<th>STAYING WELL</th>
<th>COMMUNICATING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Knowing myself</td>
<td>- Being healthy, physical and active&lt;br&gt;- Being social&lt;br&gt;- Being safe&lt;br&gt;- Being spiritual&lt;br&gt;- Being confident&lt;br&gt;- Being positive about learning&lt;br&gt;- Being responsible, safe and ethical in using digital technology</td>
<td>- Listening and expressing myself&lt;br&gt;- Performing and presenting&lt;br&gt;- Discussing and debating&lt;br&gt;- Using language&lt;br&gt;- Using numbers and data&lt;br&gt;- Using digital technology to communicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Making considered decisions&lt;br&gt;- Setting and achieving personal goals&lt;br&gt;- Being able to reflect on my own learning&lt;br&gt;- Using digital technology to manage myself and my learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEING CREATIVE</th>
<th>WORKING WITH OTHERS</th>
<th>MANAGING INFORMATION AND THINKING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Imagining&lt;br&gt;- Exploring options and alternatives&lt;br&gt;- Implementing ideas and taking action&lt;br&gt;- Learning creatively&lt;br&gt;- Stimulating creativity using digital technology</td>
<td>- Developing good relationships and dealing with conflict&lt;br&gt;- Co-operating&lt;br&gt;- Respecting difference&lt;br&gt;- Contributing to making the world a better place&lt;br&gt;- Learning with others&lt;br&gt;- Working with others through digital technology</td>
<td>- Being curious&lt;br&gt;- Gathering, recording, organising, and evaluating information and data&lt;br&gt;- Thinking creatively and critically&lt;br&gt;- Reflecting on and evaluating my learning&lt;br&gt;- Using digital technology to access, manage and share</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 8: NCCA Statements of Learning

### Statements of Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The student</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2* and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. creates and presents artistic works and appreciates the process and skills involved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. understands the origins and impacts of social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world around her/him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. is a confident and competent participant in physical activity and is motivated to be physically active</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. devises and evaluates strategies for investigating and solving problems using mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. observes and evaluates empirical events and processes and draws valid deductions and conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. values the role and contribution of science and technology to society, and their personal, social and global importance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. applies practical skills as she/he develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. brings an idea from conception to realisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*L1 is the language medium of the school (Irish in Irish-medium schools). L2 is the second language (English in Irish-medium schools).*