Living Literacy:
An Exploration of Post-Primary Teachers’ Understandings of Literacy during the Implementation Stage of a National Literacy Strategy in Ireland

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Education)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to gain an insight into post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy at both conceptual and practical levels, during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy. It is timely given the fact that literacy is currently delineated in international and national policy documents as a priority in education, and this exploration of teachers’ understandings of literacy is understood in light of the introduction and implementation of the Irish national literacy strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, 2011-2020. The research objectives that underpin this study aim to explore how teachers understand literacy as a concept, how they promote literacy in their practice and what they have experienced as part of the process of implementing a national literacy strategy.

Central to this study is the acceptance that ‘literacy’ is a complex and contested concept. The findings reveal how largely, teachers’ conceptual understanding of literacy is quite traditional and narrowly understood as primarily reading, and to a lesser extent writing. Therefore, this study points to a gap between policy and practice, between what is outlined in policy rhetoric and what is experienced in teachers’ lived realities. Furthermore, it highlights that the range of literacy strategies adopted by teachers in this study to promote literacy at both classroom and whole-school level is narrow, raising questions around teachers’ capacity to fully support adolescent literacy development and implement the curriculum as envisaged in policy documents. Finally, it presents some of the opportunities, as well as obstacles, to education policy implementation in Ireland, focusing on the implementation of one national strategy.

As a result, this study builds on the knowledge generated by previous national and international studies and contributes to the existing body of research concerning both literacy and policy. However, it also offers a number of insights that have the potential to inform teachers’ classroom practices pertaining to literacy while also raising questions concerning how teachers can successfully enact policies in Irish education.
Declaration

I, Rachel Lenihan, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own work. Where the work of others has been used, it is fully and appropriately acknowledged and referenced. This work has not been submitted, in part or whole, to any institution for any other academic award.

____________________
Rachel Lenihan
November 2019

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Ms. Carmel Hinchion

____________________
Professor Marie Parker-Jenkins
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To my colleagues from whom I learned so much, I owe you a great debt that I can never repay. Thank you to my colleagues in SMI and in UL where this research was first imagined and developed; your encouragement kept me going. To my ‘work family’ in JCT who asked the right questions, challenged assumptions and provided a platform to share my research. My time spent in the support services and this research endeavor afforded me opportunities to work with colleagues from the NCCA, DES Inspectorate, SEC, PDST and Education Centre personnel; you will never know how much our encounters and conversations influenced this work.

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Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................i
Declaration ..........................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................... iii
Conference and Journal Contributions ..........................................................xii
List of Figures ................................................................................................... xiii
List of Tables ......................................................................................................xiv
List of Abbreviations .........................................................................................xv
Legend ................................................................................................................xvi
1 Introduction ......................................................................................................1
  1.1 Introducing the Study ..................................................................................1
  1.2 Professional Autobiography as a Prologue: Identifying an Area of Study ...2
  1.3 Contextualising this Research: A Statement of the Problem ....................4
    1.3.1 Globalisation and Education Policy ....................................................4
    1.3.2 The EU, OECD and PISA .................................................................5
    1.3.3 Literacy Policies Internationally ......................................................7
    1.3.4 Policy and Ideology ........................................................................9
    1.3.5 Literacy Policy and Literacy Development in Irish Education .......12
  1.4 Research Questions and Objectives ..........................................................25
  1.5 Significance of this Study ..........................................................................26
  1.6 Organisation of this Thesis .......................................................................28
  1.7 Summary ....................................................................................................29
2 Literature Review: Exploring Literacy .........................................................30
  2.1 Chapter Introduction: Literacy as an Evolving Concept .........................30
  2.2 Traditional Understandings of Literacy ....................................................30
  2.3 Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy ......................................................32
2.3.1 New Literacy Studies ........................................................................................................... 32
2.3.2 From the ‘New Literacy Studies’ to the ‘New Literacies Studies’ Movement ........................................................................................................................................................................... 35
2.3.3 ‘Mindsets’: Contemporary Meaning of Learning, Literacy and Text..36
2.4 Freire and Critical Literacy ........................................................................................................... 37
2.5 How Literacy is Understood in the National Literacy Strategy ..................39
   2.5.1 Traditional Understandings of Literacy as Reading..........................41
   2.5.2 Traditional Understandings of Literacy as Writing .........................45
   2.5.3 Literacy and Oral Language .............................................................47
   2.5.4 Digital Literacy ..................................................................................54
   2.5.5 Contemporary Understandings of Literacies and Texts...............60
   2.5.6 Critique ..............................................................................................70
   2.5.7 Chapter Summary ................................................................................71
2.5.8 Chapter Summary ......................................................................................71
3 Literature Review: Beliefs, Knowledge and Experiences of Policy Implementation ........................................................................................................................................................................... 73
   3.1 Chapter Introduction......................................................................................73
   3.2 Teachers’ Beliefs: Conceptual Understandings of Literacy .................73
      3.2.1 Introduction ..........................................................................................73
      3.2.2 The Beliefs Examined in this Study.....................................................74
      3.2.3 Beliefs as a Concept .............................................................................74
   3.3 Professional Knowledge Regarding Literacy ........................................84
      3.3.1 Teachers’ Professional Knowledge ....................................................84
      3.3.2 Responsibility for Literacy Development ..........................................86
      3.3.3 Teacher Confidence and Literacy Strategies ....................................87
      3.3.4 Models to Promote Literacy Development ......................................89
      3.3.5 The Irish Position in relation to CAL and DL.................................107
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3.6</td>
<td>Section Summary</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Teachers’ Professional Experiences of Policy Implementation</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1</td>
<td>Policy Implementation</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2</td>
<td>The Vision for Implementation of LNLL</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.3</td>
<td>Teachers Enact Policies</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.4</td>
<td>Section Summary</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chapter 4: Research Design and Approach</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Chapter Introduction</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Philosophical, Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in this Study</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Philosophical Perspectives</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1</td>
<td>Research Paradigms; Positivism and Interpretivism</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2</td>
<td>Ontology</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3</td>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4</td>
<td>Philosophical Stance in this Study</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1</td>
<td>Sociocultural Theories</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2</td>
<td>Sociocultural Theories of Literacy</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3</td>
<td>The Application of Sociocultural Theories in this Study</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.4</td>
<td>Implications of the Theoretical Framework for Adolescent Literacy Development</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>An Emerging Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Answering the Research Question: The Research Approach Adopted in this Study</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1</td>
<td>Adopting a Quantitative or Qualitative Design</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2</td>
<td>Justifying Qualitative Research</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.7 The Research Question ........................................................................................................ 147

4.8 Choosing Appropriate Data Collection Methods ............................................................. 148

4.8.1 Interview as a Data Collection Tool ............................................................................... 150

4.8.2 Piloting the Data Collection Instrument ......................................................................... 151

4.8.3 Interview Process ............................................................................................................ 155

4.8.4 Participant Sample ........................................................................................................... 158

4.8.5 Determining an Appropriate Number of Interviews ....................................................... 162

4.8.6 Challenging Generalisability ......................................................................................... 162

4.9 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Inquiry .................................................................. 163

4.9.1 Rigour and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research ...................................................... 164

4.9.2 Member Checking .......................................................................................................... 165

4.9.3 The Audit Trail ............................................................................................................... 166

4.9.4 Thick Description ............................................................................................................ 167

4.9.5 Researcher Reflexivity .................................................................................................... 167

4.9.6 A Check-list for Credibility ............................................................................................ 175

4.10 Data Analysis .................................................................................................................... 176

4.10.1 Stage One: Transcription of Interviews ..................................................................... 177

4.10.2 Stage Two: Reading and Familiarisation ..................................................................... 178

4.10.3 Stage Three: Coding (Complete) across the Dataset ................................................. 180

4.10.4 Stage Four and Five: Searching for and Reviewing Themes ..................................... 187

4.10.5 Stage Six: Defining and Naming Themes .................................................................. 195

4.10.6 Stage Seven: Writing as the Final Analysis ................................................................. 196

4.11 Ethical Considerations ...................................................................................................... 197

4.11.1 The Research Participants .......................................................................................... 198

4.11.2 The Research Community: Being a Responsible Researcher .................................. 200

4.12 Limitations of the Research Design in this Study ........................................................... 201
4.12.1 Limitations of Qualitative Studies ......................................................... 201
4.12.2 Limitations due to Researcher Positioning ........................................ 202
4.12.3 Limitations of Interviews ...................................................................... 202
4.12.4 Limitations of Thematic Analysis .......................................................... 204
4.12.5 Limitations of Purposive Sampling ....................................................... 204
4.13 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................... 205

5 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Beliefs about Literacy ............. 206
5.1 Presenting the Discussion of the Findings in this Study ......................... 206
5.2 Chapter Introduction ................................................................................. 207
5.3 A Preface: Vignettes that Offer Insight into Teachers’ Beliefs ............... 208
  5.3.1 Eimear Draws from her ‘Well of Personal Experience’ .................... 209
  5.3.2 Bronagh Reflects on her ‘Negative Experience with Literacy’ .......... 210
5.4 Teachers’ Beliefs: Conceptual Understandings of Literacy .................... 211
  5.4.1 Traditional Understandings of Literacy .............................................. 215
  5.4.2 Literacy as Speaking and Listening .................................................. 230
  5.4.3 Digital Literacy .................................................................................. 234
  5.4.4 Literacy for Life; Holistic Understandings of Literacy .................... 243
5.5 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................... 245

6 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Knowledge of Literacy .......... 249
6.1 Chapter Introduction ................................................................................. 249
6.2 Some Insights from LNLL ........................................................................ 250
6.3 Whole-school Strategies to Promote Literacy Development ................. 251
  6.3.1 Keywords as the Dominant Literacy Strategy .................................... 251
  6.3.2 Reading Initiatives ........................................................................... 255
  6.3.3 Making Literacy Visible .................................................................... 259
  6.3.4 Whole-school Reading Comprehension Strategies ......................... 260
6.4 Classroom Strategies to Promote Literacy Development .................261
   6.4.1 Pedagogical Knowledge .............................................262
   6.4.2 Teacher Confidence Regarding Literacy Development ............263
   6.4.3 Keyword Strategies ..................................................267
   6.4.4 Reading Strategies ...................................................276
   6.4.5 Writing Strategies ...................................................281
   6.4.6 ‘Freedom and Latitude’: Seeking out Space for Oracy ..............285
   6.4.7 Legitimate Spaces for Literacy Development .......................287
   6.4.8 Rote-Learning and Exam Focused Strategies ........................289
   6.4.9 The Backwash Effect: Examinations and Classroom Practice ....290
   6.4.10 A Notable Lack of Digital Strategies ...............................292
6.5 A Model of Practice Emerging from this Study ..........................295
   6.5.1 The Literacy Mechanic ................................................295
   6.5.2 The Typical Literacy Teacher ......................................297
   6.5.3 The Literacy Advocate ..............................................299
   6.5.4 The Literacy Expert ..................................................301
6.6 Considering Teachers’ Literacy Practices and Examinations: Ideological Dilemmas .................................................................306
6.7 Chapter Summary ...................................................................307
7 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Experiences of Policy Implementation ........................................................................314
   7.1 Chapter Introduction ......................................................314
   7.2 Teachers’ Perceptions of Policy .......................................315
      7.2.1 Positive Perceptions of Policy ......................................315
      7.2.2 Negative Perceptions of Policy ......................................316
   7.3 Opportunities Experienced During the Implementation Process ....320
7.3.1 A Platform for ‘Champions of Literacy’ ................................................. 320
7.3.2 Awareness Regarding Literacy ............................................................. 320
7.3.3 A Shared Responsibility to Promote Literacy ....................................... 322
7.3.4 Making Literacy Visible ........................................................................ 323
7.3.5 Supports for Teachers to Implementing Change .................................... 324
7.3.6 Working Together as a Support ............................................................ 326
7.3.7 The Potential of Professional Dialogue ................................................. 329

7.4 Challenges Experienced During the Implementation Process ................. 331
7.4.1 The Policy Context: Teachers’ ‘Reality’ in the Current ‘System’ .......... 331
7.4.2 An Era of Accountability ........................................................................ 333
7.4.3 Literacy or the Leaving Certificate: The Impact of High-Stakes Assessment on the Implementation of LNLL .................................................. 337
7.4.4 ‘Time is our Greatest Enemy’ ............................................................... 339
7.4.5 Collaboration versus Isolation ............................................................. 340
7.4.6 Meaningful Collaboration and Getting ‘Buy-in’ .................................... 343
7.4.7 Professional Learning to Support Literacy Learning ............................ 345

7.5 Policy Implementation and Practice: Rhetoric and Reality ..................... 349
7.5.1 Teachers as Policy Enactors ................................................................. 349
7.5.2 Spectrum of Change ............................................................................ 352

7.6 Chapter Summary .................................................................................... 355

8 Conclusion ............................................................................................... 357
8.1 Introduction .............................................................................................. 357
8.2 How this Research Contributes to Knowledge about Literacy and Policy 359
8.3 Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research .......................... 364
8.3.1 Implications for Practice ...................................................................... 364
8.3.2 Implications for Policy ......................................................................... 369
8.3.3 Limitations of this Study and Recommendations for Future Research 375

8.4 Closing Remarks ........................................................................................................... 377

9 Appendices.................................................................................................................... 378

9.1 Appendix A: Ethical Approval to Conduct Research........................................... 378

9.2 Appendix B: Recruitment Letter to Schools Seeking Participation ............... 379

9.3 Appendix C: Participants’ Consent Form, Information Sheet and Oral
Debriefing Sheet.............................................................................................................. 380

9.4 Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule ............................................ 384

9.5 Appendix E: Member-Checking Email Communication ..................................... 385

9.6 Appendix F: Immersion and Familiarisation through Manual Coding ....... 386

9.7 Appendix G: Evolving Concept Maps ................................................................. 387

9.8 Appendix H: Coding with a Critical Friend........................................................... 390

9.9 Appendix I: Node Structure Report...................................................................... 391

10 Bibliography................................................................................................................. 392
Conference and Journal Contributions


Lenihan, R. (2016) ‘We treasure what we measure: Data analysis in one doctoral study’ (Interactive workshop), Research Centre for Education and Professional Practice (RCEPP) 4\textsuperscript{th} International Winter School: From Philosophy to Practice through Educational Research’, University of Limerick, Ireland, 19-21 February 2016.

Lenihan, R. (2016) ‘We treasure what we measure; Literacy initiatives and Professional Dilemmas in Irish Post-Primary Education’, 6\textsuperscript{th} Annual Clare & Limerick Education Centre’s Education Research Conference: Reflective Practitioners Sharing the Learning’, Clare Education Centre, Ennis, Ireland, 5 March 2016.


List of Figures

Figure 1: Contextual Concepts..............................................................................................................4
Figure 2: The Increasing Specialisation of Literacy Development (Adapted from Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). .................................................................................................................18
Figure 3: Conceptual Framework utilised in this Study .....................................................................73
Figure 4: Kalantzis and Cope's Approaches to Literacy Teaching and Learning ......92
Figure 5: Circular Model of the Change Process ..................................................................................111
Figure 6: Evolving Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................142
Figure 7: Evolving Conceptual Framework; Considering the Research Context ....142
Figure 8: An Illustration of the Research Design Adopted in this Study ..........144
Figure 9: The Four Coding Methods Adopted at this Stage in the Study ........181
Figure 10: Applying Saldana's Coding Approaches to the Data ........................................182
Figure 11: Some Emerging Codes as a Result of Coding with the Four Chosen Coding ........................................................................................................................................................................182
Figure 12: Organising the Data in NVivo .........................................................................................184
Figure 13: Selecting Nodes to Code Data .........................................................................................185
Figure 14: How Nodes were Organised and How References to Nodes were Easily Accessible ..........................................................................................................................................................186
Figure 15: Retrieving Data for Nodes ...............................................................................................187
Figure 16: Grouping Codes and Categories to Arrive at Themes ....................................................189
Figure 17: Most Frequently Occurring Nodes in the Dataset .........................................................189
Figure 18: Arriving at a Theme in this Study ....................................................................................191
Figure 19: Thematic Map illustrating Potential Themes Aligning with Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................................................193
Figure 20: Central Concepts in this Study .......................................................................................211
Figure 21: A Word-Cloud Illustrating Reading Materials Discussed by Participants ..................................................................................................................................................................217
List of Tables

Table 1: Overarching Principles of Constructivist Pedagogy ........................................... 77
Table 2: Contrasting Characteristics of General Content Area Literacy (CAL) and Disciplinary CAL Instruction .......................................................................................... 106
Table 3: Five Dimensions of Implementation Concerning Curriculum Change in Practice .......................................................................................................................... 113
Table 4: Methodological Issues to be Considered when Conducting Doctoral Research .................................................................................................................................. 129
Table 5: The Research Objectives and Research Sub-Questions .................................... 148
Table 6: The Research Participants .................................................................................. 161
Table 7: Eight 'Big Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research; Ensuring Validity and Reliability ........................................................................................................ 176
Table 8: The Seven Stages of Thematic Analysis .............................................................. 177
Table 9: Developing a Coding Frame .............................................................................. 183
Table 10: Potential Themes and Rationale Relating to the Research Question ............. 194
Table 11: Defining Themes in this Study ......................................................................... 196
Table 12: How the Research Concepts, Research Objectives and Research Sub-Questions are Addressed in this Study ................................................................. 207
Table 13: How Participants Describe their Understanding of Literacy ......................... 214
Table 14: Whole-School Strategies Reported in this Study ........................................... 251
Table 15: Strategies Reported by Participants ............................................................... 266
Table 16: Reading Strategies and Reading Resources Reported by Participants ....... 277
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BERA</td>
<td>British Education Research Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>CADQAS</td>
<td>Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAL</td>
<td>Content Area Literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Community of Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuing Professional Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCG</td>
<td>Design and Communication Graphics</td>
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<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
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<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools</td>
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<td>Economic and Social Research Institute</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institution</td>
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<td>IRA</td>
<td>International Reading Association</td>
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<td>ITE</td>
<td>Initial Teacher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCSP</td>
<td>Junior Certificate School Programme</td>
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<td>JCT</td>
<td>Junior Cycle for Teachers</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Looking At Our School</td>
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<td>LL</td>
<td>Literacy Link Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>LNLL</td>
<td>Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (Policy document)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MFL</td>
<td>Modern Foreign Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>MKO</td>
<td>More Knowledgeable Other</td>
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<td>MTW</td>
<td>Materials Technology (Wood)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
NCTE  National Council of Teachers of English (US)
NLS  New Literacy Studies- New Literacies Studies
NQT  Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD  Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCK  Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PDST  Professional Development Service for Teachers
PISA  Programme for International Student Assessment
PLC  Professional Learning Community
PPLS  Post Primary Longitudinal Study
PST  Pre-service Teacher
RRSG  RAND Reading Study Group
SEN  Special Educational Needs
SIP  School Improvement Plan
SSE  School Self-Evaluation
TA  Thematic Analysis
TALIS  Teaching and Learning International Survey
TY  Transition Year
ZPD  Zone of Proximal Development

Legend

This is how citations from the literature are presented

This is how the words of participants are presented

This is how extracts from my reflective research journal are presented.
1 Introduction

‘We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own’.

(Ben Sweetland)

1.1 Introducing the Study

In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020’ (hereafter, LNLL) (DES 2011). The context from which LNLL emerged is explored in subsequent paragraphs but what is central to this study is the contention in the strategy that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47). This sentiment is not a new one. It can be traced back as far as Sampson’s famous edict in 1921 that ‘every teacher in English is a teacher of English’ (Barton 2013, p.15). However, literacy is a complex and contested concept and studies have highlighted how post-primary teachers might not position themselves as ‘teachers of literacy’.

The concept at the centre of this research is literacy and the study seeks to explore teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept, but also as a practice and a policy. Therefore, this study takes a dual or ‘binocular’ approach in terms its objectives. Firstly, it focuses on post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy at a conceptual level, how they define literacy as a concept, before examining their professional knowledge regarding literacy at a practice level, relating to the strategies they employ in their classrooms to promote adolescent literacy development. On the other hand, this study explores how we ‘do policy’ in Irish post-primary education, with a particular focus on how we implement a literacy policy.
1.2 Professional Autobiography as a Prologue: Identifying an Area of Study

‘Teachers are a product in many ways of the systems in which and by means of which they work, and their professional languages and their professional practices are heavily shaped by their working environments’.

(Priestley 2015)

In 2005, my career as a post-primary teacher of English and History commenced in a fee-paying private school and two years later, I began working in a mainstream voluntary secondary post-primary school. I was teaching students aged between 12-19, at Junior Cycle (the first three years of post-primary education) and Senior Cycle (the two year cycle following Junior Cycle), as well as during Transition Year (TY) (a one year optional programme between junior and senior cycles). In 2007, I completed a Masters in Christian Spirituality, and my engagement in that programme provided deeper insight into philosophy and world-views. My thesis explored ‘The Role of the Post-Primary School in the Faith Development of Adolescents’, something I feel points to one of my core philosophies as an educator; that the purpose of education is for holistic development, considering not just academic but physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual development.

Teaching in my current school has presented me with many professional development opportunities, but of particular importance was my engagement in a ‘Learning Schools’ project in 2010/11. The project aimed to foster a Community of Practice (COP), where the culture was one of ‘continuing reflection and inquiry, commitment to the process of review and self-evaluation and participation in ongoing development’ (The Learning School Project 2017). It introduced me to the idea of a school as a ‘learning organisation’ where teachers’ professional learning is essential if we are to provide rich, meaningful and timely learning experiences for our students. It afforded me the opportunity to develop my own reflective practice as well as to develop my data gathering and analysis skills, while also providing me with an insight into the complexity of school reform and of leading learning with my colleagues.

Encouraged by my experiences of school-based research, I enrolled on the Structured PhD programme in September 2012. In 2013, I was appointed as Literacy Link (LL)
teacher in my school, a role that involved leading learning regarding literacy in my own school and implementing LNLL. My involvement in the exploratory, adoption, initiation and implementation stages of the reform (Hord 1987) raised questions regarding the complexity of educational reform. Reflecting on one of our early core team meetings, I considered our discussions regarding literacy. I recorded my thoughts in a reflective journal. One such recording noted:

‘ARE ‘all teachers literacy teachers’? Since when? Has this always been implied and is only now being made explicit? More importantly, how? Do teachers feel adequately prepared to teach literacy? Surely, doesn’t it all depend on their understanding of ‘literacy’?’

(Reflective Journal, 30th April 2013)

Was my experience similar to that of other teachers? Confronted with challenges regarding literacy and policy implementation, this was a critical moment for me; I reflected how my experience, albeit merely one example, could be the impetus to explore other teachers’ experiences, as well as their attitudes, beliefs, values and knowledge concerning literacy and the implementation of a national literacy strategy. As Priestley says, ‘teachers enact policies’ (NCCA 2016), but I was interested in knowing how teachers enact policies. Such questions acted as a springboard for this study and ultimately, the overarching aim when designing this research was to capture the voice of teachers; to explore their understandings, knowledge and experiences, to bring these to the fore when considering how the LNLL was introduced and implemented. Indeed, since teachers are the policy ‘enactors’, working at the ‘chalk-face’, I began to consider how an exploration of teachers’ experiences could potentially have implications for and inform how we ‘do’ education policy in Ireland today and in the broadest sense, to examine how policies work in practice.

In the last three years, I have worked in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), teaching English Pedagogy as well as working in School Placement at a Higher Education Institution (HEI). I have also worked with Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), a support service for teachers, supporting teachers of English on their curriculum reform journey. These roles afforded me new insights into the complexity of professional learning and made me more aware of the importance of context in educational research. Undoubtedly, these experiences in different sectors of Irish education have influenced my beliefs and knowledge, the lenses that I bring to this
study. The purpose of sharing this professional autobiography is to make explicit the experiences that have shaped my philosophical, epistemological and ontological beliefs.

1.3 **Contextualising this Research: A Statement of the Problem**

As explored in chapter four, this research is approached from interpretivist, relativist and socio-constructivist positions. I hold that knowledge is constructed and that learning happens against a particular social, cultural and political backdrop. Therefore, this section describes the international and national policy landscape in which this study is situated, and considers the policies and ideologies that influenced the introduction of LNLL.

![Figure 1: Contextual Concepts](image-url)

### 1.3.1 Globalisation and Education Policy

The emergence of a ‘global community’ (Noddings 2013, p.2), where ‘the social, political and economic connections which cross-cut borders between countries decisively condition the fate of those living within each of them’ (Giddens 1998, p.64), means education systems are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. A dominant view of globalisation is concerned with ‘a preference for a minimalist state, concerned to promote the instrumental values of competition, efficiency and choice, to deregulate and privatisate state functions’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.31). This impacts on how and why policies are formulated, and the very manner in which policy is made ‘is changing in line with a world that is changing rapidly’ (Galvin 2009, p.268) as education policy ‘is increasingly made within the context of the ‘pressures’ and requirements of globalisation’ (Ball 2008, p.1).
The pervasiveness of this attitude, coupled with a willingness to ‘borrow’ policies (Ball 2008; Galvin 2009; Lingard 2010), has led to a situation where ‘most of the world’s governments discuss similar educational agendas that include investing in education to develop human capital or better workers and to promote economic growth’ (Spring 2008, p.332). In fact, it is clear that international organisations affect how policy-making in nation states, perhaps best illustrated by the manner in which European Union (EU) membership, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have significantly influenced education policy in Ireland, particularly in relation to LNLL.

1.3.2 The EU, OECD and PISA

One consequence of globalisation is that the EU is shaping policy-making in Ireland. While education was once viewed as ‘an exclusively national responsibility’ (Dale 2005 cited in Spring 2008, p.338) the Lisbon Agenda (2000) aimed to make the EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (Directorate-General for Internal Policies 2010, p.13) by 2020. This resulted in an onus on member states to ensure that all EU schools would ‘educate their students to be high skilled workers who would ensure success in global economic competition’ (Spring 2008, p.338). What is suggested then is ‘a European education policy in all but name’ (Livingston 2003, p.588) and failure of a member state to comply with shared policies might be viewed as a blot on their ‘European report card’ (Livingston 2003, p.593).

Perhaps more evident in the context of this study concerning literacy, however, is the impact of the OECD, ‘a policy player in its own right, influencing, cajoling and directing member states towards a predetermined social imaginary’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.38). Since the mid-1990s, the OECD started creating the now well-known PISA, a triennial international survey that aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students who are nearing the end of their compulsory education. Since the OECD published its first set of PISA rankings in 2001, PISA has become ‘a brand which most regard as indisputable’ (Grek 2009, p.25) or ‘the global gold standard for educational quality’ (Sjøberg 2016, p.102) with more than 65 participating countries and cities. The rise
in prominence of the OECD and PISA has led to the shackling of educational outcomes with economic interests, as ‘high test scores on PISA reading, mathematics and science are predictor’s for the country’s future economic competitiveness’ (Sjøberg 2016, p.102). Therefore, when a set of PISA results are less than satisfactory, the rankings often

‘create panic and discomfort among policy-makers... (and) urge politicians and bureaucrats to do something to rectify the situation that they believe the results describe. However, because PISA does not tell much about cause and effect, creative educational reforms that are not at all empirically founded are introduced, often overnight’.

(Sjøberg 2016, p.103)

There has been much critique of the PISA project as a test construct, as well as how the results are analysed, (Livingston 2003; Williams 2005; Ó Breacháin and O’Toole 2013; Sjøberg 2016; Murphy 2018) but such critique goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, the purpose of discussing PISA here is to explain the context from which LNLL emerged.

Results of such international tests tend to ‘attract media attention and stimulate public interest’ (Coolahan 2017, p. 181). The ‘disappointing results’ of PISA 2009 have been compared to ‘salt on the wounds of an already smarting nation’ (Education Matters, 2010) as they were regarded as ‘ominous signals’ (Sjøberg 2016, p.102) for Ireland’s economic future. The fourth international survey of the achievement of 15-year-old students in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy carried out by PISA, previous assessments took place in 2000, 2003 and 2006. However, it was the damning results of PISA 2009 that triggered reform regarding literacy in Ireland. In 2006, Irish fifteen-year-old students performed at the ‘above average’ level in PISA but in the 2009 round of the assessment, Irish students performed at the ‘average’ level ranking 17th and 26th out of 34 OECD countries in literacy and numeracy tests respectively. Concerning literacy, Ireland’s overall rank was 21st among 65 participating countries and 17th of 34 OECD countries. Ireland’s mean score in 2009 is some 31 points lower than in 2000…the largest (decline) across all 39 countries that participated in both PISA 2000 and PISA 2009 (Perkins et al., 2011, p.2).

In 2011, the government responded with ‘the almost immediate publication’ (Murphy 2018) of LNLL, aiming to ‘increase the percentage of 15-year old students
performing at or above Level 4 (i.e. at the highest levels) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by at least 5 percentage points by 2020 (DES 2011, p.18). These ‘targets’ would be met through the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) framework that would be simultaneously implemented, as explored in the following sections. As an aside, it is worth noting that PISA 2015 reported that Irish 15 year olds ranked second among EU countries, third of 35 OECD countries and fifth out of all 70 countries/economies who participated in PISA regarding reading literacy. However, girls continue to significantly outperform boys regarding reading literacy (Shiel et al., 2016) and 10.2% of students perform at the lowest level of proficiency (i.e., below Level 2), demonstrating insufficient reading skills to deal with future needs in real life or in further learning (Sheil et al., 2016, p.87).

Gleeson contends that for much of the twentieth century, Irish policy-making might have been characterised as ‘reactive, centrist, bureaucratic and fragmented’ (2009, p.65) and this trend appears to have continued with LNLL regarded as ‘a reactionary measure’ (Murphy 2018) to PISA 2009. As is explored in the next section, events on the international stage and international education indicators enable ‘local policy actors (to use) PISA as a form of domestic policy legitimation’ (Grek 2009, p.35). I now turn to examine how international literacy policies had an impact on the literacy policy that was introduced in Ireland.

1.3.3 Literacy Policies Internationally

Schön argues that ideas associated with rising levels of public support are often ‘ideas in good currency’, and are regularly ‘a primary determinant in public policy’ (Schön 1971 in Galvin 2009, p.271). Certainly, many countries have introduced literacy policies in recent years as a result of concerns about declining levels in literacy and a belief that ‘low literacy is a global crisis that affects all of us’ (Proliteracy.org 2013). Critics of this view deny such a crisis. They point to how, as explored in chapter two, literacy is an evolving concept (Heath 1986; Knobel 2001; Cope and Kalantzis 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010), and contend that summative assessments and standardised tests are not necessarily suitable methods to measure literacy levels (Ó Breacháin and O’ Toole 2013; Murphy 2018). Nonetheless, in 2011 literacy was an idea ‘in good currency’ as it had become a buzzword in education policy-making. Since ‘Ireland operates within the Anglo-American zone of influence for reasons of history, culture, language, colonisation and trade’ (Lynch
et al., 2012, p.5), it is interesting to note the influence of these jurisdictions regarding literacy policy making.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the ‘National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy’ (NLNS) was introduced when Blair was elected to government in England in 1997 and there was a renewed emphasis on large-scale education reform. NLNS provided a rigid framework for instruction, specifying pedagogies and practices with a focus on the much debated ‘Literacy Hour’, phonics, spelling and specific vocabulary instruction. The strategy aimed to improve the achievement of 11-year olds in relation to literacy and numeracy targets in its 20,000 primary schools. By 2002, the percentage of 11 year-olds achieving high proficiency increased from 63% in 1997 to 75% in literacy (Fullan 2009). NLNS has been criticised for a number of reasons, namely that results were problematic with much of the gain resulting from pre 1997 trends, and that NLNS had promoted a narrow focus on testing in the areas of literacy and numeracy without being fully embraced by school leaders and teachers (Fullan 2009). Nonetheless it led other countries to focus on the literacy attainment of students. For example, in the United States (US), ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) was introduced under the Bush administration in 2002. In relation to this study, NCLB marked an increased federal role in education which regulated education policies relating to literacy, and access to federal funding became closely associated with meeting proficiency targets (Guilfoyle 2006; Lee et al., 2011). It has been criticised for a focus on its associated accountability measures as well as for narrow standardised testing mechanisms (Guilfoyle 2006).

‘Policy borrowing’ is not a new phenomenon. Ball contends that ‘a process of bricolage… drawing on and amending locally tried and tested approaches’ (Ball 2008, p.30) is inevitable, some advocating learning from other countries (Galvin 2009, p275). However, there is an important distinction to be made between policy borrowing and ‘policy transfer’, understood as the import and imposition of policy (Ball et al., 2012). Cultural and contextual differences must be considered when planning policy reform; what works in one state will not necessarily work elsewhere. However, there is little doubt that the UK’s NLNS was influential in the drafting of Ireland’s LNLL. NLNS argued that literacy should be ‘made a central priority for the education service as a whole’ (Beard 2000, p.421) and this is also echoed by LNLL with its assertion that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (2011, p.47).
Comparative analysis of the NLNS and LNLL also reveals an interesting parallel in terms of data collection. Ozga’s discussion of the move from ‘Regulation to Self-Evaluation’ in England (2009) gives a detailed account of the self-evaluation framework that is almost identical to the SSE Framework that is utilised to implement LNLL (Ozga 2009, pp.153-155). There is also a similar focus on targets and testing, and as already discussed, ambitious aims for literacy achievement.

In LNLL, literacy and numeracy are regarded as ‘urgent national priorities’ (DES 2011, p.14) as ‘world-class literacy and numeracy skills will be essential for the rebuilding of our economic prosperity’ (DES 2011, p.15), justifying the claim that ‘educational policies are collapsed into economic and industry policy’ (Ball 1999, p.201). Literacy is repeatedly positioned within strongly economistic discourses of learning and meeting the needs of the Irish economy. Literacy is inextricably linked to Ireland’s ‘indigenous knowledge economy’ (DES 2011, p.8), ‘economic prosperity’ (DES 2011, p.9) and presented as a way to ‘break the cycle of poverty’ (DES 2011, p.62), thereby linking education in general and literacy in particular to the labour market. LNLL might be viewed as a panacea to avoid being ‘unemployed or in (a) low skilled job (or) to have limited earning power’ (DES 2011, p.9). However, critics contend that ‘education is not primarily for national growth or productivity, it is for personal development and the release of unique potential…to encourage initiative and teamwork and not simply individual achievement’ (Hederman 2012, p.133).

1.3.4 Policy and Ideology

‘Policy happens when there is a convergence of a problem articulated by societal interests, with a set of ‘solutions’ in the form of policy proposals, with a window of opportunity in which policymakers see the pairing of the problem with the solution will produce political credit’.

(Elmore 2016, p.532)

Policy has been defined as the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ (Easton 1953 in Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.11) making it inherently ideological, often acting as a ‘vehicle for one or other dominant ‘ism’ (Coolahan et al., 2017, p.4). It is argued that the global move towards a homogenous education sector, at least in the developed world, means education policies are closely aligned with the lexicon and values of neoliberalism (Ball 1999, 2003, 2011, 2012; Lakes and Carter 2011; Rizvi and
Lingard 2010; Lynch et al., 2012). The inter-relating principles that appear to characterise educational provision internationally are ‘commodification, consumerisation, managerialism, commercialisation, centralisation and prescription’ (Ball 1999 pp.196-197). Therefore the language of the market economy has become synonymous with the language of education policy and terms such as choice, competition, privatisation, coupled with market-like arrangement of schools has led to an increased need to employ marketing activities in schools (Lubienski and Myers 2016). There is an argument that Irish schools have not escaped the influence of neoliberal policy (Finnegan 2008; Lynch et al., 2012; McDermott 2012; Hennessy and Mannix-McNamara 2013, p.7) evidenced by increasing accountability in performativity regimes.

Due to investment in education particularly in the last three decades, Guskey argues that ‘education accountability in one form or other is likely here to stay’ (2007, p.29). While he presents accountability as ‘looking at evidence, analysing results and assigning or attributing responsibility, all seemingly neutral activities’, Guskey highlights how many teachers view ‘an imposed accountability agenda’ as ‘a straitjacket that hinders teaching’ (2007, p.31-33). This is often attributed to the argument that ‘accountability is not about learning but about controlling what we teach to our children… Teachers are reduced to technicians, managing student productivity. The school is no longer a school, but a business’ (Pinar 2004 in Gleeson 2009, p.27). Accountability measures often result in the creation of a culture of audit and performance, where teachers are potentially subjected to the ‘terrors of performativity’ (Ball 2003), sometimes leading to them feeling marginalised and experiencing professional anxieties (McDermott 2012). In the Irish context, Hennessy and Mannix-McNamara argue that

‘performativity has emerged as a dominant goalpost in modern schooling, often at the cost of more critical educational encounters. In cultures of performativity, value, as represented through grades, points and quantifiable targets, holds the potential to supersede values (Ball, 2003)... This is most clearly evident in the points system in Ireland, which is the manner by which access to higher education is decided. This points system has in effect raised the stakes of the terminal exam, making it the dominant focal point in the latter years of post-primary schooling’.

(2013, pp.6-8)

Performativity promotes a highly competitive system, a narrowing of the curriculum and pedagogically, has created a ‘culture of cramming and commodification of
knowledge’ (Hennessy and Mannix-McNamara 2013, p.8) due to the fact that there is a perception that ‘part of good examination class teaching is to be a successful spotter of what is likely to be asked. At its worst, this means… a rote-learning approach to examinations’ (Stobart 2008, p.105). Furthermore a move towards a business model of education with the emergence of ‘a performance-orientated ‘customer-facing’ service that is shifting from an ethic based on managing inputs such as personnel and funding to one driven by performance and results’ (Galvin 2009, p.278) and a system where ‘value replaces values’ (Ball 2003, p.217).

Indeed, LNLL was introduced during a time of significant curricular reform in Irish education. In post-primary schools, for example, the introduction of the proposed ‘Framework for Junior Cycle’ (NCCA 2011) marked significant change with the staggered introduction of new syllabi or specifications for all subjects at junior cycle, as well as new subjects and assessment methods. Furthermore, a new process of internal auditing called ‘School Self-Evaluation’ (SSE) (explored in more detail later in this study) was introduced as part of the Government’s Programme for National Recovery 2011-2016, whereby one of the eleven objectives pertaining to education was ‘empowering schools to improve standards’ (Stack 2013, p.28). Such changes were taking place amidst mounting calls by both government and the public for increased accountability in the teaching profession, evident in the media with articles such as ‘Underperforming teachers face censure’ (Ahlstrom 2014). New measures regarding professional roles and responsibilities as a result of the Teaching Council Act (2001) prompted then education minister, Ruairi Quinn, to comment that ‘for the small minority (of teachers) who do not (perform well), I believe that the Teaching Council will now have at its disposal the right tools to deal with cases of serious misconduct and to improve and assist poorly performing teachers’ (Ahlstrom 2014). This was supported by the President of the National Parents’ Council (Post Primary) who argued that introducing sanctions was a way to introduce “accountability and compliance” in the profession (Ahlstrom 2014). Reform efforts were further complicated by the fact that they were introduced in an era of much-document ed austerity when teachers were ultimately told to ‘do more with less’ (O’Toole 2013, p.7) and experienced significant cutbacks in their salaries as well as a moratorium on posts of responsibility, reducing opportunities for career progression. An article that
featured in ‘The Irish Times’ during this period is a telling account of how policy was perceived as having a negative impact on the professional identity of teachers:

Supposing you (the Minister for Education) wanted to implement important changes in a very large and dispersed organisation. Would you opt to do it at a time when there are almost no resources available to carry out that change? Would you do it when your workforce are weary, undermined and demoralised, having had several years of seeing vital supports for the people they serve disappear, and also having suffered wage cuts and increased hours and responsibilities? Would you demand it after piling new initiative after new initiative on them, while job security for new workers virtually disappears?

(O’ Brien, 2013)

This contextualisation offered here seeks to highlight the impact of globalisation and ideology on education policy but also on the professional experiences of teachers in post-primary classrooms in Ireland. Furthermore, it explains the context from which LNLL emerged and sets the scene for this study. However, it is also important to consider the very specific, local context explored in this study, that being post-primary education in Ireland. I present a discussion of this context now as the stage where literacy, and more specifically, adolescent literacy, is developed.

1.3.5 Literacy Policy and Literacy Development in Irish Education

The review of the literature presented in chapter two presents a detailed discussion of the changing conceptualisations of literacy in recent decades. Literacy, once narrowly conceived as reading, and to a lesser extent, as writing (Lankshear and Knobel 2006) is now understood in a much broader and holistic sense. Furthermore, and of particular significance in the context of this study, relevant literature, policies and research presented in chapter two dismiss a generalist notion of literacy learning; that ‘the basic skills’ attained during primary education will automatically evolve into advanced skills that equip students for literacy-related tasks later in life. Rather, this study presents a continuum of literacy learning (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008), contending that students have different needs at different stages of their development in relation to literacy learning. The early literacy practices that students develop in primary school differ from the literacy practices of adolescents. In their Position Statement, the International Reading Association (IRA) shines a ‘spotlight’ on adolescent literacy as a unique stage in literacy development, focusing on how adolescents in particular engage with text, and the IRA argue that adolescent students need continued support in reading in post-primary school (2012).
In light of these changing understandings, the following paragraphs briefly explore the position of literacy in primary education in Ireland, before turning to adolescence as the stage for literacy development in the context for this study, post-primary education in Ireland. Following consideration of a number of key points, this discussion sets the scene for the research presented in this study regarding post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy.

1.3.5.1 **Literacy in Primary Education in Ireland**

Traditionally, there has been a strong focus on literacy development in Ireland at primary school level. The centrality of literacy is evident in different curricula, determined by the Minister for Education and Skills and advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The curriculum sets out what is taught, as well as how learning is to be assessed, across the different programmes. In recent decades in particular, there have been a number of significant developments in the primary curriculum in Ireland pertaining to literacy development. In 1999, a new curriculum was introduced that was praised for its ‘breadth and balance’, its recognition of the role of language and arts, and its commitment to each child’s potential and holistic development’ (O’Breacháin and O’Toole 2013, p. 401). There was an emphasis on the importance of a broad understanding of literacy as reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as the promotion of ‘a rich and varied range of texts’ (NCCA 1999, p. 46). As part of this reform, the revised English curriculum aimed to provide an integrated approach to language, treating oral language, reading and writing as ‘inseparable’ (NCCA 1999, p. 45). In 2009, an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme *Aistear* (meaning ‘journey’ in Irish) was launched, and was ‘designed for use in a range of settings including children’s own homes, child-minding and day-care settings, as well as infant classes in primary school’ (Kennedy 2013, p. 512). This policy adopts a broad definition of literacy arguing that being literate is ‘more than having the ability to read and write’:

> *it is about helping children to communicate with others and to make sense of the world. It includes oral and written language and other sign systems, such as mathematics, art, sound, pictures, Braille, sign-language and music. Literacy also acknowledges the changing nature of Information Communication Technology and the many forms of representation relevant to children including screen-based (electronic games, computers, the internet, television).*

(NCCA 2009, p. 56)
Following the introduction of LNLL, as already mentioned in this chapter, there was a renewed ‘strong focus in schools on development and monitoring of students’ literacy... skills’ (DES 2011, p. 44). It is important to note that while this renewed emphasis on literacy was laudable, concerns were raised over this ‘visible shift in priority’ (Burke and Welsch 2018), the potential of curriculum narrowing (O’Breacháin and O’Toole 2013) and the impact of greater performativity and accountability regimes (Kennedy 2013). More recently, a new Primary Language Curriculum, introduced in 2015, makes repeated reference to links between language and literacy skills development and it makes renewed efforts to highlight the responsibility of the primary teacher for literacy development:

‘The teacher plays a critical role in organising and providing a rich language-learning environment for children: modelling language, observing and tuning into children’s language and literacy across a range of experiences and activities with different text genres’.

(DES 2015b, p. 101)

What is evident from these primary policy documents, and of significance for this study concerning literacy development in the post-primary setting, is the repeated emphasis on the centrality of literacy as part of the primary school learning experience. There is clearly an onus on those involved in primary education to develop the foundational skills and literacy knowledge (Barone 2015) that students need to become literate. Some of the pedagogical approaches advocated as part of emerging literacy instruction (NCCA 2009) or basic literacy instruction (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) might include the following considerations; make-believe play as a springboard to literacy, story book reading and discussion, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, vocabulary instruction, fluency, comprehension, discussions of texts, process writing, spelling, handwriting and digital literacy skills (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 117-170). I now turn to examine the position of literacy in the post-primary context.

1.3.5.2 Post-Primary Education and Literacy in Ireland

While analysis and commentary on the national literacy strategy policy is threaded and embedded throughout this thesis, (section 2.5 as well as 6.2 offer a number of important insights regarding same), it is important to note here that LNLL has been hailed as ‘a milestone’ in Irish education. The assertion that ‘all teachers should be
teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p. 47) meant that ‘for possibly the first time in official policy... literacy was part of the official remit of the post-primary teacher’ (Murphy 2018). This is a significant development in terms of post-primary literacy education in Ireland as, like in other jurisdictions, literacy has traditionally been the remit of the primary teacher, but not viewed as the responsibility of the post-primary teacher. As explored in greater detail in chapter three, historically the case has been that it was the English teacher who was deemed responsible for literacy development in the post-primary sector, particularly when ‘literacy’ is narrowly conceived as reading and writing, and ‘text’ is understood as print and alphabetic. However, broader understandings of what it means to be literate, as well as what constitutes text, mean that all teachers in all subjects need to explicitly instruct students how to navigate the texts that they encounter (Wray 2001; Draper et al., 2005; Siebert et al., 2016) and necessitates that all teachers are teachers of literacy. Nonetheless, the integration of literacy within subjects other than English is a ‘significant culture-shift in Irish post-primary schools’ (Burke and Welsch 2018, p. 36). This is attributable to the fact that, internationally, post-primary subject teachers traditionally position themselves as teachers of content rather than teachers of literacy (Draper et al. 2005; Fisher and Ivey 2005; Park and Osborne 2006; McCoss-Yerigan and Krepps 2010; Hipwell and Klenowski 2011; MacMahon 2012; Fang and Coatham 2013; Didau 2017).

In relation to post-primary syllabi and curricula, there is certainly recognition in education policy documents that literacy not only continues to be important, but also that it continues to develop during adolescence. A framework of ‘Key Skills’ has been developed to underpin subject specifications and syllabi, thereby influencing teaching and learning at both Junior and Senior Cycles, and literacy is identified in both frameworks. This is most evident in the Framework for Junior Cycle, where ‘Being Literate’ is identified as one of eight key skills (DES 2015). At Senior Cycle, the key skill identified as ‘Communicating’ incorporates ‘competence and confidence in literacy as an essential basic skill for all learners’ (NCCA 2009, p. 5).

However, there are arguments that the a disproportionate emphasis on state examinations in the post-primary context results in a situation whereby the aims and objectives of policies and curricular documents are often viewed as ‘secondary concerns’ (NCCA 2002, p. 43). Indeed, the ‘major shift’ in the culture of teaching...
and learning at primary level in Ireland, with less emphasis on exam-led teaching and more on the quality of the students’ educational experiences, has ‘not been mirrored at post-primary level’ (Coolahan et al., 2017 p. 2). The following paragraphs offer some insight into the post-primary context in Ireland, with a particular focus on some of the implications for adolescent literacy development.

Certainly, one of the marked differences between primary and post-primary education in Ireland concerns assessment. While there is currently no system of national testing or assessment in primary schools, there is a focus on summative assessment in terms of how post-primary students engage with State Examinations at the end of junior and senior cycles (Looney 2006). Students begin post-primary education with the three-year Junior Cycle programme, usually at the age of 12. Junior Certificate/Junior Cycle examinations are taken nationally after three years. The main objective of the Junior Cycle is for students ‘to complete a broad and balanced curriculum, and to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to proceed to Senior Cycle education’ (DES 2019). Senior Cycle typically caters for students aged between 15 and 18. It includes an optional Transition Year (TY), which follows immediately after Junior Cycle, providing an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs including work experience, over the course of a year that is free from formal examinations. During the final two years of Senior Cycle, students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State Examination: the traditional Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) (DES 2019).

Even in organisational terms, it is clear that that ‘the secondary school landscape is dominated by two formal written examinations for certification’ (Looney 2001, p. 155). In particular, the ‘shadow cast by the towering presence of the Leaving Certificate’ means that oftentimes the focus of upper post-primary schooling in Ireland is on ‘getting the leaving’ (NCCA 2002, iii). The Leaving Certificate is regarded as ‘high stakes’ in the sense that it is a ‘gateway examination’ (Looney 2006, p. 349) whereby the ‘points’ attained through achievement in the examinations are used by the Central Applications Office (CAO) to allocate places at university and other third-level institutions. The high stakes nature of the exams is evident in the level of public and media scrutiny that is evident annually, in June and August in particular (O’ Donoghue et al., 2017). While not as ‘high stakes’ in the sense that it
is not a gateway examination, there also remains a perception that Junior Certificate/Junior cycle examinations act as a ‘dry run’ for the Leaving Certificate examinations (Looney 2006). As a result, many adolescents’ experience of school is one where ‘the teacher and students are locked in a content-covering curriculum relationship as it careers towards an end of cycle terminal examination’ (Cahill et al. 2017, p. 35).

The transition from primary to post-primary school can be challenging for adolescent students for other reasons also. Post-primary schools in Ireland are generally bigger and students move from typically working with one teacher to meeting a number of teachers on a daily basis. Adolescent students are challenged by the formation of new peer groups, by increasing levels of responsibility to manage a timetable and negotiate unfamiliar school buildings, as well as by greater amounts of homework. In the post-primary school, ‘achievement becomes more serious business and academic challenges increase’ (Santrock 2007, p. 19). Post-primary education in Ireland is also dramatically different to primary education as a result of the formal subject divisions between different subject areas (Looney 2006) and as a result, adolescents’ learning ‘experiences are unnaturally segmented into silos of information’ (Fisher and Frey 2014, p.138). This is something that characterises secondary or post-primary education in many jurisdictions internationally, and it poses a significant challenge for adolescents learning in general but in the content of this study, for literacy development in particular. This is explored in the following paragraphs.

1.3.5.3 Changing Understandings of Literacy Instruction

As aforementioned, literacy researchers point to how literacy development becomes increasingly specialised as students move through formal education. Rather than subscribe to the generalist notion of literacy learning, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) present a model of literacy progression, illustrated in Figure 2.
The Basic Literacy stage of development encompasses the basic skills that are involved in all, or most, reading tasks. These skills include decoding, understanding various print and literacy conventions, recognition of high-frequency words, and some basic fluency routines. Students become familiar with the structure and organisation of different types of texts and ‘most children master these kinds of basic reading skills and conventions during the primary grades’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 43-44). It is important to note that success in this stage of literacy development continues to be essential (Elkins and Luke 1999; IRA 2012) and that ‘failing to support literacy during the early school years is hard to make up in adolescence’ (Sulkunen 2013, p. 535). Nonetheless, while these are ‘major accomplishments’, they are only the first steps of growth into full literacy’ (Moore et al., 1999, p. 3).

As students move upwards through primary education, their reading becomes more sophisticated. They respond differently as they learn how to ‘decode multisyllabic words quickly and easily, and they learn to respond with automaticity to words that do not appear with high frequency in text’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 44), they become more familiar with a larger vocabulary and with less commonly used punctuation. They can maintain focus on longer texts for longer periods, as well as employ a number of different comprehension strategies to navigate texts. Students also encounter more complex texts during this Intermediate Literacy stage. However, as students transition into post-primary education, they encounter very specialised
vocabularies, text types, reading routines and language uses that are unique to each subject area or ‘discipline’. ‘Each discipline has a unique knowledge structure’ (IRA 2012, p. 6) and exerts its own unique literacy demands on students in terms of how they read, write, speak and listen in a subject. Cumming and colleagues (1999) conducted research regarding the multiple literacy demands of the upper secondary curriculum in Australia for students in grade 11 and 12. Their project highlights how students face shifting literacy demands both within and across subjects where they must coordinate multiple literacies simultaneously. They argue that in order to support students’ literacy development, post-primary teachers must understand the literacy requirements of their subject, but also derive better understanding of the literacy demands across subjects and within their own by discussions with other teachers from different discipline areas. The language and literacy practices of each subject becomes more technical and specific, and less generalisable. Therefore, a student in post-primary school

‘who can do a reasonably good job of reading a story in English class might not be able to make much sense of biology or algebra books, and vice versa. Although most students manage to master basic and even intermediate literacy skills, many never gain proficiency with the more advanced skills that would enable them to read challenging texts in science, history, literature, mathematics, or technology’.

(Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 45)

This is partly attributable to the vast array of texts that adolescent students typically encounter in post-primary education. (A detailed discussion of broader and contemporary understandings of ‘text’, particularly the texts with which adolescents typically engage, is presented in chapter two). Expository text is the most prevalent text structure in the post-primary context and in primary school, students may have had less exposure to expository text than to narrative texts.

‘Common categories of expository text are cause/effect, problem/solution, comparison/contrast, chronological order or sequence, concept idea with examples, and proposition with support. The prevalence of expository text categories varies by discipline... For example, chronological order and cause/effect are common in history texts. Geography texts make frequent use of description and comparison/contrast’.

(National Institute for Reading 2007, p. 20)

If students are not familiar with a broad range of text-types that are used across subject areas in post-primary schools, they may experience challenges in
comprehending what they read. This necessitates explicit instruction of reading in each subject area, as well as writing and oral language skills. While Shanahan and Shanahan’s model (2008) illustrates the increasing specialisation of reading skills as part of the continuum of literacy development, ‘a similar structure could be used to accurately illustrate the declining amount of instructional support and assistance that is usually provided to students’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 46) as they move upwards through primary and post-primary education. For instance, research in several European countries highlights how the range of reading comprehension strategies in teaching reading reduces significantly between primary and secondary school (Sulkunen 2013, p. 536). This is a result of the prevailing subscription to the ‘vaccination model’ of literacy instruction, underpinned by the assumption that students’ literacy needs are met in the early stages of education, and that students are ‘literate’ upon completion of primary education. While LNLL states in its subtitle that it is a national strategy to promote literacy ‘among children and young people’ (DES 2011), it is interesting to note that the policy document makes no acknowledgement of the continuum of literacy development, nor does it distinguish between the needs of younger learners and those of adolescent learners. This is indicative of a vaccination model approach to literacy development and must be acknowledged as a major shortcoming in the policy document and something that requires greater attention for those involved in adolescent literacy development. Therefore, there have been calls for less emphasis on ‘early intervention’ and more focus on the sustained and incremental approach that is needed to support adolescents (Elkins and Luke 1999) in basic and intermediate literacy development where necessary, but also in disciplinary literacy. This is something explored further in chapter three with a detailed discussion of how a disciplinary literacy approach can support literacy development in the post-primary context. However, there are a number of considerations unique to adolescence that are important for those involved in adolescent literacy development, and I turn to those now in an effort to highlight the very particular needs of adolescents and how awareness of those needs could support effective literacy development.
Considering Adolescence: Implications for Adolescent Literacy Development

Adolescence is defined as ‘the period of transition between childhood and adulthood that involves biological, cognitive, and socioemotional changes’ (Santrock 2007, p. 16-17). It is often described as ‘confusing’ and a ‘dramatic challenge’ due to its accompanying ‘excitement and anxiety, happiness and troubles, discovery and bewilderment’ (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 3-4). As a result, it is crucial that ‘educators of young adolescents understand that students in this age group have unique cognitive, social, emotional and physical needs’ (Daniels et al., 2015, p. 9) and some of these are briefly explored here in an effort to highlight some of the specific needs of adolescent literacy learners. These considerations concern adolescent learning, identity development, motivation and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Understanding the implications of these considerations offers greater insight into how post-primary teachers can best support adolescent literacy learners.

Cognitively, adolescents are more likely to engage in thinking that is abstract, ideological and idealistic. As a result, adolescence is a particularly important time for the development of critical thinking skills, where students build on fundamental or basic skills already developed to think reflectively and productively while evaluating evidence (Sanstrock 2007, p. 113). Older students are also more likely to develop metacognitive ability (Kuhn 2006), understood as ‘cognition about cognition’ or ‘knowing about one’s own knowing’ (Kuhn 1999, p. 17). It is important that teachers are aware of this and present adolescent learners with texts that offer opportunities to reflect and think in such ways. As outlined in the International Reading Association’s (IRA) Position Statement on adolescent literacy (2012), students need explicit instruction and support to predict, to make connections between texts, to summarise, synthesise and organise information, but also to monitor and judge their own understanding, as well as evaluate authors’ ideas and perspectives (IRA 2012, p. 5). This is of particular significance for advocates of critical literacy, explored in further detail in chapter two, who contend that critical media literacy is the new ‘basic’ (Elkins and Luke 1999) for the students of today. Since adolescents spend an increasing amount online where a quick search ‘may result in as much misinformation as there is information…., teachers (need) to help adolescents develop the critical comprehension strategies necessary for determining the validity
of information’ (IRA 2012, p. 10). Of course, critical thinking and critical literacy skills can prove difficult to promote if students are passive rather than active in their learning. However, teachers can stimulate students to think critically in instances where they pose problems rather than offer solutions, and by presenting conflicting or controversial arguments and debates that encourage students to discuss, debate and offer insights and opinions (Santrock 2007, p. 114). Indeed ‘the valuing of intellectual engagement is a critical dimension to be supported by people who work with young adolescents’ (Kuhn 2006, p. 65).

Another issue worthy of consideration is identity development. In fact, Erikson (1968) contends that the key developmental task of the adolescent is identity formation as adolescents are ‘confronted with new roles and statuses’, leading them to find out ‘who they are, what they are all about and where they are going in life’ (Santrock 2007, p. 41). As a result, it is during this stage that adolescents may seek to establish their self-portrait, comprising of career, political, religious, relationship, intellectual, sexual, cultural identity/ies et cetera (Erikson 1968). Because this development of identities and self-concepts includes ‘media preferences and practices (media identity)’, it is essential that teachers, among others, offer adolescents

'rich opportunities to encounter the culture of reading and develop a stable self-concept as a reader/writer and member of a literary culture. This includes providing access to a broad variety of reading materials (in print and electronic forms) and stimulating literate environments in and outside of schools; it also includes opportunities to get actively involved in engaging with texts, and communicating, reflecting on and exchanging ideas about texts with peers and ‘competent others’.

(ELINET 2016, p. 32-33)

Thus, literacy is a critical link for students to begin to understand their developing identities and their ‘emerging independence in relation to the world around them’ (IRA 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, as explored in chapter two, adolescents engage in multiple and varied literacy practices on a daily basis, involving many different print and non-print materials and media. In particular, ‘the advent of social networking is transforming how adolescents use literacy to construct both their online and offline identities’ (IRA 2012, p. 7). This is something that should be considered regarding literacy instruction in classrooms. Indeed, bringing the two points together, Kuhn contends that identity development and cognitive competence should receive
concurrent consideration by those supporting the cognitive development of adolescents. A student’s disposition -for example, ‘this is who I am’, ‘this is what I’m good at’ or ‘this is what I’m not good at’- needs to be considered as much, if not more than competence, because ‘teens attribute meaning and value (both positive and negative) to what they do and draw on this meaning to define a self’ (Kuhn 2006, p. 65). For instance, Sulkunen’s research points to how many struggling adolescent readers have a history of repeated negative experiences as readers and as a result, ‘have a low perception of themselves as readers and are not motivated to read’ (2013, p. 537). Finding opportunities to support healthy identity development, as well as literacy development, by tapping into students’ preferred literacy practices clearly has a number of benefits.

Engaging with students’ out of school literacies, explored in more detail in chapter two, also has the potential to promote motivation and engagement in literacy learning (IRA 2012; Sulkunen 2013). Since adolescence is a period of increasing freedom and personal control (Kuhn 2006, p. 65), motivation and engagement can decline as students transition into, and progress through, post-primary education (Daniels 2010; Daniels et al., 2015). A number of ESRI reports explore the impact of examinations on student participation and achievement in the Irish context (Smyth and Calvert 2011; Smyth 2016a), highlighting how many students become disengaged in the very early stages of Junior Cycle in post-primary education. As students get older and progress beyond the primary school where gold stars and rewards charts might have encouraged learning, external prizes and rewards may be less effective. Adolescents need to be internally motivated (Santrock 2007, p. 115) through creative learning experiences that they can meaningfully engage in. While ‘no one can force student motivation … teachers must create a learning environment conducive to motivation’ (Darrington and Dousay 2015, p. 29) and two factors that can contribute to a motivating classroom environment for adolescents are autonomy and relatedness (Daniels 2010). Encouraging students to choose the texts that they engage with in class promotes their feelings of autonomy and agency, while being able to relate to recent and relevant young adult literature may motivate interest (IRA 2012; Sulkunen 2013). As Daniels argues, ‘teenagers both need and want to know how their academic learning connects to their lives and to have the background knowledge to make sense of that content’ (2010, p. 27). Because adolescents ‘engage
in multiple forms of literacy throughout their day (IRA 2012, p. 2), teachers need to be aware of choosing a broad range of relevant material (ELINET 2016) and creating appropriate learning experiences to engage adolescents in literacy learning. Establishing a clear purpose for learning, where students can see connections between classroom learning and their later lives is also motivating (Fisher and Frey 2014). In fact, it is imperative that adolescent students can see connections between their ‘life worlds’ (Cahill et al., 2017, p. 33) and their experiences in school, including the texts that they encounter. As students increasingly engage in new literacies such as reading fan-fiction, graphic novels and videogames or writing through instant message, text messages, Snaps, Tweets and emails, we need to resist forcing them to live ‘double lives’ (Williams 2005) and aim to blend social and acknowledge knowledge (IRA 2012, p. 8).

Finally, returning to the definition of adolescence presented at the beginning of this section, adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adult responsibility and civic duty. Students need to be able to read, write, speak and listen in a way that will help them to become workers, consumers and citizens (Elkins and Luke 1999). In the past, schools were in a position to produce ‘a sufficiently educated population’ to satisfy the economic needs of society (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 41). Certain jobs required greater levels of literacy than other jobs, but many people were in a position to work in secure positions without attaining the highest, most specialised levels of literacy. However, ‘a shrinking pool of blue-collar jobs’ coupled with the expansion of information-based technologies (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p. 41) mean that increasingly, jobs require more sophisticated levels of literacy. The capacity to ‘handle, manipulate, control and work with text and discourses- in print, verbal, visual and multimedia forms- is increasingly replacing the capacity to work with our hands as our primary mode of production’ (Elkins and Luke 1999, p. 213) and as educators, this is something we need to consider. Post-primary teachers also have a duty in supporting students to take their place in society as informed, critical and discerning citizens. Two decades ago, ‘critical literacy’ was referred to as the ‘new basic’, particularly for adolescents who, in their ever-increasing engagement with online and digital texts,

‘need to be taught how to second-guess, analyse and weigh, critique and rewrite the texts, not just of literary culture, but of popular culture, online culture, corporate
Effective literacy development can support students in this transitional life-stage as they begin to ‘take their own stances, express their own opinions and establish their own identities’ (IRA 2012, p. 11) but also because literacy has also been described as a key competence for lifelong learning (Sulkunen 2013). Therefore effective literacy development can support adolescents in taking their place in their online and offline communities in an independent, responsible and ethical manner.

It is evident, therefore, that literacy education for adolescents has a number of ‘significant social and cultural outcomes, as well as cognitive and behavioural ones’ (Elkins and Luke 1999, p. 215). It is crucial that the unique characteristics of adolescent literacy development, as well as the characteristics of post-primary education in Ireland, were both afforded some discussion here, in addition to the earlier exploration of literacy policies internationally, in an effort to contextualise this study. In light of this discussion, I now present the questions and objectives that are central to this research.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

The central question this research seeks to answer is:

‘What are Irish post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy and of implementing a literacy policy?’

The research question and research objectives emerged in response to my philosophical positioning, curiosity and research interests but also as a result of a dilemma that I encountered in my professional practice. They were informed by what I identified as gaps in existing knowledge in the area following a scoping review of pertinent literature and thus, the questions evolved and were refined over time. Ultimately, this research study explores post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy at conceptual, practice and policy levels and is guided by the following questions and objectives:
Research Questions:

I. What are teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept?
II. What literacy strategies do teachers utilise in their classroom practice, as well as in a whole-school approach?
III. What are the opportunities and challenges experienced by teachers at the early stage of the implementation process regarding the national literacy strategy?

Research Objectives:

I. To explore teachers’ beliefs about literacy as a concept
II. To examine teachers’ knowledge about literacy as a practice
III. To examine teachers’ experiences of implementing a literacy policy.

1.5 Significance of this Study

Having considered the aims of this research, the value of this study is immediately clear as this research can offer insights into how we view literacy, but also, how we ‘do’ policy in Ireland. There is a dearth of research concerning both teachers’ beliefs regarding literacy and their experiences of policy implementation in the Irish context. This study aims to draw on relevant literature nationally and internationally and to offer insight into teachers’ understandings of literacy during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy.

By drawing on the most recent and relevant literature in relation to literacy, this study offers a comprehensive synthesis of work in this area and provides a detailed exploration of literacy, with a particular focus on adolescent literacy. It highlights its complexity as a concept and explores a number of literacy models and approaches in an effort to equip teachers with the knowledge base necessary to support their students’ literacy needs.

This study seeks to build on earlier studies that explored understandings of literacy in the Irish context (MacMahon 2012; Murphy et al., 2013; Reidy 2013). The conceptual framework utilised in this study is a theoretical refinement of the sociocultural approach adopted in the Learning to Teach Study (LETS) (Conway et al., 2011). However, this study is unique in the Irish context because its data was collected after the introduction of LNLL. Furthermore, it examines teachers’
understandings of literacy at a particular moment, during the early implementation stage of the policy, and implementation is often regarded as the ‘likeliest point at which the innovation process breaks down’ (Hord 1987, p.78).

This study seeks to make explicit the beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge relating to literacy and literacy development held by the research participants. While the study is situated in the context of four schools and does not make any grand claims or generalisations, its descriptive and exploratory nature has the potential to generate greater understanding for literacy practitioners, as well as to contribute towards the literature on teachers’ beliefs and knowledge regarding literacy.

A further rationale for this study stems from the fact that while the DES is responsible for introducing education policies that form part of the official state curriculum, the ‘enacted curriculum’ (Barrett-Tatum and Dooley 2015), or what is actually taught, is determined by teachers’ philosophical and pedagogical beliefs and assumptions. An exploration of how teachers’ understand literacy could provide insight into why they choose to implement or reject education policy. While ‘academics may increase, and report on, knowledge about how things work … teachers are the practitioners who actually make things work’ (Black 2015, p.174). However, teacher voice is often an ‘untapped’ (Snow 2001, p.9) source of knowledge in educational research. Furthermore, there is an argument that literacy research can only have the potential to contribute to meaningful and lasting change when literacy researchers include the main actors and their beliefs in that process (Moje 2010), when researchers focus on participants as well as strategies (O Brien et al., 1995). This study seeks to give voice to teachers by ‘tapping into’ their understandings of literacy as well as their experiences of the process of policy implementation.

Furthermore by examining how policy is implemented in schools from the perspective of the policy enactors, this study highlights the reality and complexity of policy implementation in the Irish context from first-hand perspectives of teachers.

Finally this study seeks to articulate some of the particularities of the Irish context as a stage for education reform. It illustrates the uniqueness of the culture of Irish post-primary schools and highlights some potential explanations for resistance to educational reform and the recurrent failure of the policy implementation process.
This is an under-researched area and the study offers suggestions that have the potential to inform policy moving forward.

1.6 Organisation of this Thesis

In this introductory chapter, I have briefly outlined the background to this study and offered a rationale for this research. I have provided some insight into my own journey as an educator and researcher in an effort to outline my professional motivations to engage in this study. I have offered some insight into the context from which LNLL emerged, a context that also acts as a backdrop to this research, with a particular focus on how ideological concepts have an impact on literacy and literacy policy. I have introduced the terms of the study, the research question, sub-questions and objectives. Finally, I provided a rationale for this research by highlighting how it has implications for practice and for policy, as well as how it contributes to existing knowledge about literacy as a concept and a practice.

Chapters two and three offer a comprehensive review of pertinent literature that relates to the four conceptual areas discussed in this study; literacy, beliefs, knowledge and policy implementation. I explore the complexity of literacy as a concept, one that has evolved over time in chapter two, before turning to examine the literature around teachers’ beliefs, contending they have a powerful impact on professional practice in chapter three. Chapter three concludes with an examination of the arguments that will provide useful theoretical lenses to explore teachers’ experiences of policy implementation in this study.

Chapter four presents the research design and the approach adopted in this study. The chapter begins by exploring the different philosophical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin this study. It is crucial such positions are made explicit as they offer insight into the rationale underpinning my methodological choices, but moreover, they act as lenses through which I analyse my data and discuss my findings. Indeed, Smagorinsky describes the methodology as ‘the conceptual epicentre’ of social science research (2008, p. 389). Thus, chapter four outlines the methodological considerations in this study and explains why my approach is appropriate in answering the research questions. Data collection, analysis and reporting processes are described in detail, as are considerations regarding
validity and reliability, to assure the research community that this study is trustworthy and credible.

Chapters five, six and seven present and discuss the findings of this research in relation to teachers’ beliefs, professional knowledge and experiences of implementation in relation to literacy in the post-primary context respectively. While these central concepts are given separate treatment across three chapters for the purpose of clarity, it is acknowledged from the outset that there is considerable overlap and interdependence between them. Each chapter presents an analysis of the findings under thematic headings that were created during the data-analysis phase. A guiding principle underpinning this study is my commitment, as a colleague and researcher, to honouring the voice of the research participants-those teachers who were so generous with their time and thoughts, so open to sharing their beliefs, knowledge and experiences- and the findings and discussion chapters seek to capture their voice.

Chapter eight concludes the study and presents a summary of the key findings, with a focus on how this study can contribute to the field of adolescent by outlining implications for practice, for policy and for further research regarding literacy and policy in Ireland.

1.7 Summary

This chapter sought to set the scene for this study by examining the national and international context-crucial as it offers insights into how LNLL emerged but also because it is the context in which teachers operate-, by presenting the research questions and objectives that guide this research and by offering a rationale for this study. In the next chapter, I examine pertinent literature that will provide an insight into the central concept in this study, literacy.
2 Literature Review: Exploring Literacy

2.1 Chapter Introduction: Literacy as an Evolving Concept

In the 1980s, Scribner described the ‘definitional controversy’ that surrounds literacy, contending that ‘we have yet to discover or set its boundaries’ (1984, p.6). In fact, differing perspectives and philosophies have led those involved in literacy research to generate a myriad of different, sometimes competing, definitions. Leu and colleagues (2011) describe literacy as ‘deictic’. Deixis is a linguistic construct that is used to describe words where their meaning is dependent on the context in which it is used and so, what it meant to be literate in the past is different today and will be undoubtedly different in the future. As a result, it is accepted in the literature that literacy is not static (Hipwell and Klenowski 2011) but dynamic (Duncum 2004) so ‘there is no one fixed definition of literacy; rather, literacy is redefined every day’ (Barone 2015, p.7) and that literacy is a ‘mischievous concept’ (Knoblauch 1990, p.74) that has multiple meanings (Moje and Luke 2009). Hipwell and Klenowski (2011) argue that the changing nature of literacy presents an issue for teachers as they attempt to align their practices with the agenda of reform outlined in policy documents.

As explored later in this chapter, one definition utilised here to make sense of teachers’ understandings of literacy is the definition outlined in LNLL. While critiqued as narrow in scope (Murphy 2018), it is regarded as an appropriate lens to discuss the findings in this study because it is the definition that has been presented to teachers to inform their practice. However, in an attempt to gain an insight into how policymakers arrived at this understanding, I now examine how definitions of literacy are constantly shifting in reaction to changing understandings of literacy.

2.2 Traditional Understandings of Literacy

Prior to the 1970s, literacy was a term used commonly in education but was more closely associated with non-formal instruction and education programmes that aimed to tackle illiteracy. ‘Literacy’ was closely linked to employment and economics and ‘what was talked about, researched, debated and so on was not literacy but, rather, reading, and to a lesser extent, writing’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.8). Such an
understanding is now regarded as a ‘traditional’ or ‘technical’ (Street 2001) conceptualisation of literacy. It presents language as a neutral set of skills (Lambirth 2011) and literacy is understood as a ‘mental’ or ‘cognitive phenomenon’ (Gee 2015b, p.35) as a result of a focus on isolated, individual cognitive skills and abilities (Scribner 1984; Fang 2012; Leander and Boldt 2012).

As a result of being perceived in terms of cognitive competencies and abilities, literacy was measured by examining what literacy could help individuals to ‘do’ (Scribner 1984). The desire to measure literacy emerged following various ‘literacy crises’ (Heath 1986) experienced by societies and gave rise to what has been termed a ‘functional’ view of literacy (UNESCO 2006), one that positions literacy in terms of what it allows individuals to do, in both formal education settings and in wider social settings. This also resulted in the emergence of a ‘deficit model’ of literacy (Lea and Street 2006) where some individuals do not acquire the literacy skills that others deem necessary in a particular context.

A functional view of literacy is often underpinned by conservative ideologies with an objective of ‘social reproduction’ (Lambirth 2011) or ‘cultural transmission’ (Scribner 1984). It is presented as a neutral and universal (Street 1984) skill-set passed from one generation to the next through engagement with printed text, without any individual interpretation or meaning-making, thereby upholding the values and practices of the status-quo. Street refers to such understandings of literacy as an ‘autonomous model of literacy’ (1984). This view of literacy is buttressed by the belief that

‘people need to be taught how to decode letters and they can do what they like with their newly acquired literacy after that… the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself-autonomously-will have effects on other social and cognitive practices’.

(Street 2001, p.7)

Thus, traditional understandings of literacy align with cognitive, technical, functional and deficit models of literacy. However ‘the dominant view of literacy as a universal, autonomous and monolithic entity is at best dated and in need of reconsideration’ (Jewitt 2008, p.244). From the middle of the twentieth century onwards, emerging perspectives gave greater attention to the social, cultural,
contextual and critical nature of literacy and these aspects are explored in greater detail in the following sections of this chapter.

2.3 **Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy**

The work of academics from wide-ranging disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, sociology, economics, psychology, philosophy and history regarding literacy means that conceptualisations have moved from the traditional focus to a much broader understanding of literacy. This has broadly been referred to as the ‘sociocultural turn’ in literacy studies, where ‘the study of literacy is about how talk and text are socially distributed as founding elements of our social lives and institutions’ (Gee 2015, p.13). Indeed, advocates of a sociocultural understanding of literacy contend that all human practices and meaning systems are socially constructed (Apple 1993; Gee 1989, 2015; Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2006). These arguments led to the emergence of sociocultural approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, where a view of literacy as individual and cognitive expanded and came to be viewed as something that happens in interaction with others in our communities and societies, and crucially, recognising that literacy cannot be divorced from its social context (Gee 1989; Duncum 2004). A number of literacy theorists and studies have been influential in shaping current understandings of literacy and these are briefly explored here.

2.3.1 **New Literacy Studies**

It was the ground-breaking ethnographies of Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Street (1984) that led to the emergence of New Literacy Studies (hereafter NLS). The authors involved in NLS came from diverse backgrounds but shared a similar understanding about the nature of literacy; that ‘literacy was something people did in the world and in society, not just inside their heads, and should be studied as such’ (Gee 2015b, p.35).

Scribner and Cole’s empirical study (1981) of the indigenous literacy of the Vai people of Liberia in West Africa made a significant contribution to the sociocultural movement. By providing rich descriptions of literacy-use in this community, their ethnography illustrated a rich world of literacy practices that described three sorts of literacy; English literacy acquired in a formal school setting, an indigenous Vai
script that was learned in home settings and a form of literacy in Arabic used for religious purposes and acquired in Islamic religious schools. Some members of the Vai community had none while others had all three forms of literacy. Each ‘literacy’ had a different function in this world and Scribner and Cole concluded that the purposes and types of literacy were different to the accepted beliefs about literacy in Western society, where there was a belief that ‘reading and writing’ led to higher cognitive functioning. Their study revealed that after some time passed and they no longer used that literacy, those community members who learned literacy in school were no more proficient in problem-solving than their counterparts who had not attended school. Thus the study highlighted how literacy varies in its functions and uses across history, cultures and communities (Heath 1986 p.19) and also disrupted accepted notions ‘that literacy gives rise to higher-order cognitive abilities’ (Gee 2015, p.25). The study suggests that ‘people learn by practice and what they learn by practice are specific skills embedded in the practice’ (Gee 2015, p.27). However, if a particular literacy is not valued and not used, it no longer benefits people. Scribner and Cole’s work highlights the situated nature of literacy practices but also challenges the values and ideologies that guide traditional understandings of literacy.

Similarly, Heath argues that literacy varies in its ‘functions and uses across history, cultures and communities’ (1986, p.19) in her ethnographic study of two communities in the US, Roadville (a white community) and Trackton (a black community) (Heath 1983). Her ethnography explores how the language structures used in home and community life impact learners in their interactions in classrooms and work settings, and how language structures that function in one language setting can be potentially incomprehensible outside of it as a result of cultural assumptions and values. Schools are positioned as communities, as a specific context with a particular set of assumptions, norms and values. As Street argues, what school children do has been learned as a standard convention and practice of one particular social group within a school system (1984). In the literature, these are referred to as ‘ schooled literacies’ (Blake and Blake 2005), ‘academic literacies’ (Lea and Street 2006) or ‘essay-text’ literacy (Gee 2015b). School values may align with those of home communities but there may also be a clash of values. Heath’s study highlighted how students struggled to fully integrate in school due to exposure to a different ‘literacy’ at home and in their community outside school.
In an effort to explain the ways in which values are held by different groups to
distinguish literacy from traditional understandings of language that were closely
aligned with grammar and more functional views of literacy, Gee introduced the
concept of ‘Discourse’ with a capital ‘D’:

‘Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are the forms of life that integrate
words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities as well as gestures,
glances, body positions and clothes’.

(Gee 1989, pp.6-7)

If ‘Discourses’ are ways of being, ways of expressing ourselves and ways of
communicating, one can immediately recognise the social and cultural nature of
communication, of how it is much more than a neutral or cognitive skill. A person
can occupy many different Discourses at any point in life; they could include being a
particular nationality, being a member of a particular socioeconomic class, or
holding a qualification as a member of a profession. We become masters of each
Discourse through enculturation, through the interactions and social practices that we
engage in as part of that Discourse, rather than through overt instruction;
participation in and apprenticeship into the Discourse is crucial. Gee goes on to
differentiate between Primary Discourse, the Discourse into which we are socialised
from birth and secondary Discourses, the ‘identity kit’ (Gee 1989, p.7) that
delineates one social group or organisation from another. Finally he explores the
differences between dominant Discourses, mastery of which furnishes the user with
social capital, and non-dominant Discourses, secondary Discourses that can mean an
individual is enculturated into a group but they do not experience the same social
gains as they might as a member in a dominant Discourse. For example, one
Discourse may value oral literacy to a greater extent than the written word. Ultimately,
Gee argues that

‘any socially useful definition of ‘literacy’ must be couched in terms of the notion of
Discourse. Thus, I define ‘literacy’ as the mastery of or fluent control over a
secondary Discourse. Therefore, literacy is always plural: literacies’.

(1989, p.9)

There are many parallels noted between Gee’s work and that of Heath (1983), where
students from Roadville and Trackton found that their primary Discourse was at
odds with the dominant and (to them) secondary Discourse of the classroom.
Furthermore Gee contends that there are many Discourses and therefore many ‘literacies’, further supporting the work of Scribner and Cole (1981). Taken collectively, these studies highlight how literacy practices are conceived as constructions of particular social groups and cannot be attributed to cognition alone, that literacy is always a social act (Street 2001). Street’s alternative to the autonomous model is the ideological model of literacy, so called since it assumes literacy is ‘belief-laden and value-laden’ (Gee 2015, p.39):

‘These are issues about power, assumptions about one particular set of ideas, conceptions, cultural group, being in some way taken on by another group... Instead of privileging the particular literacy practices familiar in their own culture, researchers now suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they are able to understand what it means to the people themselves, and which social contexts reading and writing derive their meaning from’.  

(Street 2001, p.9)

‘Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives’ (Street 2001) presents a collection of ethnographic case studies concerning literacy from around the world. These empirical studies highlight how many of the communities studied might have been labelled ‘illiterate’ within the traditional or autonomous model of literacy, or from the perspective of Gee, if their non-dominant Discourse was positioned beside a dominant Discourse. However, ‘from a more culturally sensitive viewpoint, (these people) can be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts’ (Street 2001, p.9). Therefore, notions of power and ideology are integral to sociocultural understandings of literacy.

2.3.2 From the ‘New Literacy Studies’ to the ‘New Literacies Studies’ Movement

Indeed, such theories concerning how literacy practices change in response to a specific context is something that is central in the New Literacy Studies (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007; Lewis 2007; Gee and Hayes 2011; Gee 2015), referred to in a later and related field as ‘The New Literacies Studies' movement. In 1996, The New London Group supported the understandings of literacy already presented here by arguing that ‘the human mind is embodied, situated and social (and) … human knowledge … is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts’ (Cazden et al., 1996, p.82). Their manifesto for the future of literacy pedagogy entitled ‘A Pedagogy
of Multiliteracies’ called for a move from the study of ‘literacy’, singularly conceived to a study of ‘literacies’ in the plural, to reflect and include the broad range of literacy practices that were emerging. Supporters of the New Literacies Movement highlighted the need to research new uses of oral and written language, new formats that are often multimodal (with more than one mode of representation, explored in detail later in this chapter), as well as new forms of decoding and producing meaning from symbols or representations. Emerging theories exploring how contemporary society was increasingly pluralist, multicultural, globalised and heterogeneous, accompanied by a move from the unconditional acceptance of printed texts, led to a need for literacy studies that examined digital tools as a technology for communication. It is argued that there was such a significant evolution in thinking about literacy that people began to subscribe to one of two ‘Mindsets’, understood as ‘sets of assumptions, beliefs, values and ways of doing things that orient us toward what we experience and incline us to understand and respond in some ways more than others’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.31).

2.3.3 ‘Mindsets’: Contemporary Meaning of Learning, Literacy and Text

Lankshear and Knobel present the first Mindset, or ‘Mindset 1’, as being closely aligned with conventional views of the world and learning. Proponents of this Mindset view products as material artefacts, focus on individual intelligence, see expertise as located in individuals and institutions, perceive space as enclosed and purposeful and value the importance of the written word, of ‘book-space’ or stable textual order. Proponents of this world-view contend that society is essentially the same as the modern-industrial period; simply more technologised. On the contrary, the second Mindset, or ‘Mindset 2’, purports that the world has changed fundamentally; products are seen as tools or enabling services, there is focus on collective and collaborative intelligence, expertise is distributed and collective, space is open and fluid and texts are something that are changing in a digital media space (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). Moreover, technology is seen to not just have changed the world but is presented as a tool to change the world even more as it can change what we do, not just how we do things. An example that Lankshear and Knobel offer to illustrate differences between Mindset 1 and Mindset 2, even within the digital space, is the approach one might take when considering ‘Britannica Online’ or ‘Wikipedia’ as a learning tool. Britannica Online, albeit a digital text,
positions knowledge as fixed, contributors as experts and users as consumers. Wikipedia, in contrast, places knowledge production in the open domain, promotes ideas of collective and collaborative expertise and empowers users as creators of text as well as consumers (Lankshear and Knobel 2007, p.16-17). Therefore, it is not simply the type of text or literacy we are engaging with, but how we engage with it, that is paramount. Although certainly not an exhaustive list, some common examples of ‘new literacies’ that adolescents might engage with include video-gaming, fan fiction writing, weblogging, using websites to participate in social practices involving mobile computing (Lankshear and Knobel 2007), the circulation of memes (Lewis 2007), communicating through Short Message Service (SMS) or text messaging (Plester and Wood 2009; Powell and Dixon 2011). A discussion of the contemporary meaning of ‘text’ and new literacies is explored in further detail in sections 2.5.4 and 2.5.5.

2.4 Freire and Critical Literacy

Paulo Freire is perhaps one of the foremost literacy educators who noted the importance of the situated meaning of literacy and learning. In ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Freire argues that

‘knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’.

(1996, p.53)

Freire’s conceptualisation of literacy as ‘reading the word and the world’ positioned literacy as much more than ‘decoding and encoding print’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.9). Highly critical of the transmission model of education, what he refers to as ‘the banking concept of education’ (1996, p.53), Freire argues for the reconceptualisation of the relationship between the teacher and student as one of reciprocity, where communication and dialogue are essential if we are to be able to ‘name the world’ (1996, p.63). It is only through an ability to name and read the world that learners can effectively ‘read the word’, a process that will ultimately lead to a deep and critical ‘rereading’ of the world. For Freire, becoming literate is a process that has many different but inter-connected parts and cannot be conceived in
a linear way, as a set of skills or removed from its context. His theories transformed a narrow view of literacy to a view of literacy as empowering and transformational.

Drawing on the work of Gramsci who contended that literacy is a ‘double edged-sword’ (Giroux 2016, p.147), Freire highlighted how literacy has the potential to be either liberating or repressive. Such a view is also explored more recently by Gee and Hayes who argue that literacy and texts can be ‘tools for duping people, controlling them or supervising them, or they can be tools for informing people, liberating them and giving them a sense of control and self- worth’ (2011, p.22). Such perspectives highlight the importance of developing critical literacy.

Critical literacy is an evolving concept that has come to the fore in literacy studies in recent decades (McLaren 1988; Freebody and Luke 1990; Freebody 1992; Freire 1996; Molden 2007; Lambirth 2011; Rogers and O’ Daniels 2015; Jones and Woglom 2016). It is understood as ‘the practice of using technologies (from print to digital technologies) to analyse, critique, and redesign structures that influence daily life (Rogers and O’ Daniels 2015, p.62). Molden contends that critical literacy’s synonym is ‘analytical reading’ (2007, p.50), as it encourages the reader to engage in the act of questioning the components of any text, encouraging meaningful analysis and evaluation of texts. This is very much in keeping with Freire’s (1996) concept of literacy as ‘reading the word and the world’. Critical literacy approaches highlight how knowledge is selected and partial, and never neutral (Knobel 2001) and that students need to understand the influence of ‘different discourses and ideologies’ (Walsh 2006, p.25). Instead of accepting the authority of ‘text’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2006), ‘critical literacy helps pull the power away from the author and makes it an equal relationship between the author and the reader by allowing us to see the text from all angles, not just believing what is written down’ (Molden 2007, p.51).

Thus it is evident that literacy is a complex concept, one that has changed and been reconceptualised in recent decades bringing us to a point where ‘knowledge and literacy practices are primarily seen as constructions of particular social groups, rather than attributed to individual cognition alone’ (Mills 2010, p.247). The evolution of literacy as a concept has been widely acknowledged in international policy documents:
The international policy community, led by UNESCO has moved from interpretations of literacy and illiteracy as autonomous skills to an emphasis on literacy as functional, incorporating Freirean principles, and, more recently, embracing the notions of multiple literacies, literacy as a continuum, and literate environments and societies’.

(UNESCO 2006, p.155)

While the literature points to how it is impossible to have a single definition of literacy, I now turn to explore the definition of literacy offered in LNLL.

2.5 How Literacy is Understood in the National Literacy Strategy

LNLL, the national policy to promote literacy among children and young people (DES 2011), presents the following understanding of literacy:

‘Traditionally we have thought about literacy as the skills of reading and writing; but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media. Throughout this document, when we refer to “literacy” we mean this broader understanding of the skill, including speaking and listening, as well as communication using not only traditional writing and print but also digital media’.

(DES 2011, p.8)

While there is no explicit reference to the situated and contextualised understandings of literacy as highlighted by sociocultural understandings of the concept, the understanding of literacy in the policy document does appear to suggest that literacy is more than technical and cognitive. It clearly states that contemporary understandings of literacy ‘encompass much more than’ the ‘traditional’ understanding of literacy as ‘reading and writing’ (DES 2011, p. 8). Reading is positioned as a skill that is needed not only to read and ‘decode’, but also to understand and ‘critically appreciate’ texts. The definition also highlights the importance of speaking and listening. However, close analysis of the policy document lacks any further exploration of the complexity of literacy, nor does it offer any insight into how effective literacy supports change as ‘children and young people’ (DES 2011) transition through different stages of their education. Furthermore, scrutiny of the policy reveals an overwhelming emphasis on reading, and to a lesser extent, on writing, with little reference made to speaking and listening beyond the reference to oral language development in the definition above. Certainly, LNLL been critiqued for its narrow conceptualisation (Ó Breacháin and O’ Toole 2013) of literacy, that it ‘pertains to one type of literacy to the exclusion of
others’ (Reidy 2013, p.24) and that there is very much a cognitive focus with an overt and disproportionate emphasis on reading (Murphy 2018).

In relation to the contemporary understanding of text discussed in section 2.5.5, the policy definition does not make explicit reference to ‘multimodal’ texts. However, it does seem to suggest that students need to be exposed to and equipped to navigate a variety of different text types, not just ‘traditional writing and print’. Furthermore, it makes unambiguous reference to the inclusion of new literacy practices that include digital media. It states how syllabi should also provide ‘for the development of literacy in a range of texts (literary and non-literary) and a range of media including digital media’ (DES 2011, p. 54). Such efforts to ‘include visual and digital literacies in conjunction with the written word’ (Murphy et al., 2013, p.331) is suggestive of a broader understanding of literacy. However, it is noteworthy that beyond this, there is no effort within the document to acknowledge contemporary understandings of text as understood in this study. Rather, there are a number of explicit references to books; to ‘the amount of books… in the home’ (DES 2011, p. 19), to how libraries need to select and provide ‘a wide range of books and other materials’ (DES 2011, p. 21) and to the ‘joy and excitement of getting lost in a book’ (DES 2011, p. 43). These examples coupled with the lack of reference to a broader understanding of text suggests that LNLL privileges a particular type of reading, a key consideration explored in further detail in section 2.5.4 and 2.5.5.

Therefore questions arise about whether or not the definition of literacy offered in LNLL is fit for purpose, particularly when we consider subsequent discussion of the complexity and specificity of adolescent literacy in the paragraphs that follow. However, this is the definition presented in the policy that guides teachers’ professional practice in post-primary classrooms in Ireland. As a result, it is used as a lens to analyse and discuss the findings of this study. At various points, I offer insights based on analysis of the discourse used in the document. For instance, I consider teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy in light of what is outlined in the definition in LNLL throughout chapter five. In chapter six, I consider the fact that LNLL offers little guidance to teachers in relation to their professional practices pertaining to literacy. In chapter seven, I offer some insights that emerged from an interrogation of LNLL in relation to the discussion of teachers’ perceptions of policy
(section 7.2) and how these perceptions influence how teachers engage with education reform in Ireland.

Thus, the remainder of section 2.5 of the literature review focuses on the different constituent parts of this definition and each sub-section presents pertinent literature regarding literacy as reading and writing, literacy as speaking and listening, critical literacy, multimodal literacy and digital literacy. While acutely aware of the wholeness of the concept of literacy, this approach is taken in an effort to explore the different aspects of the definition in as clear a manner as possible with a view to how these considerations are crucial if we are to develop adolescent literacy.

2.5.1 **Traditional Understandings of Literacy as Reading**

‘Literacy and reading, though related, are neither synonymous nor unambiguous terms’ (Alvermann 2002, p.189) yet reading is typically subsumed and considered to be part of literacy. Indeed, when the media and research refer to literacy in light of PISA studies, they are in fact looking at ‘reading literacy’. Indeed, traditional understandings of literacy align with the practice of reading printed texts. The ‘Education For All Global Monitoring Report’ commits to making literacy a reality for all people in the world and highlights how traditional understandings resulted in a focus on a set of tangible and cognitive skills that are independent of the context in which they are acquired and the background of the person who acquires them (UNESCO 2006). As a result, much literature explores reading strategies for adolescents that focus on the skills they need to be proficient readers. Since it is generally accepted that a text is ‘a configuration of signs’ (Smagorinsky 2001, p.137) and that we need to be able to understand a text to make meaning (Walsh 2006), reading requires skills to decode and encode (Duncum 2004). A skill such as decoding necessitates competencies in pronunciation, phonological and morphological awareness (Deacon and Kirby 2004; Moats 1994), word recognition and vocabulary knowledge (McKeown *et al.*, 1983; Blachowicz and Fisher 2004; Snow 2013), so that students can become fluent readers (Purcell-Gates 1997; Rasinski 2004) and comprehend the texts that they encounter. Decoding and fluency lead to comprehension, understood as ‘constructing meaning that is reasonable and accurate by connecting what has been read to what the reader already knows and thinks about all of this information until it is understood’ (Kirmizi 2011, p.290).
Sometimes, in keeping with a technical view of literacy and reading, comprehension is perceived as a ‘relatively shallow process’ (Murnane et al., 2012, p.6),

‘one that involves being able to remember (or quickly find) information read, to summarize a paragraph, to identify the main idea of a paragraph and perhaps to make simple inferences from information in a text’.

(Murnane et al., 2012, p.7)

Students use decoding, fluency and comprehension skills to process messages in texts, skills that can be explicitly taught and promoted through instruction (Purcell-Gates 1997; Pressley and Gaskins 2006; Walsh 2006). However, subscribing to this view has been described as a ‘simple view’ (Murnane et. al., 2012, p.7) of reading and comprehension, a view that is derived from the traditional understanding of reading as a one-way process from writer or text to reader (Liu 2010, p.152). In terms of pedagogy, proponents of a skills-based or skills-driven model of reading and comprehension are more likely to rely heavily on teaching these skills in isolation, promoting drill and practice in decoding skills (Purcell-Gates 1997).

Certainly, this simple view of reading and comprehension highlights the importance of explicit instruction of language, language decoding skills and word reading, the value of which is undeniable. It could be argued that the processes and tools involved in learning to read and write (phonological awareness, decoding, fluency and prosody) might be described as ‘foundational literacy knowledge’ (Barone 2015, p.7). Students who struggle to decode and read fluently will undoubtedly struggle to access texts. PISA 2009 results confirm that the awareness of effective reading strategies is strongly related to reading performance, yet PISA also highlights the fact that in several European countries, the range of reading comprehension strategies in teaching reading literacy reduce significantly as students transition from primary to post-primary level (Sulkunen 2013). This approach to literacy development presents a potentially traditional, functional and individually focused understanding of literacy (Keefe and Copeland 2011). It also positions the skills involved in reading and writing as decontextualised (Lotherington and Jenson 2011) and autonomous skills (Street 2001; Moje and Luke 2009) and positions literacy as purely psychological cognition (Moje 2000; Duncum 2004). Furthermore, focusing solely on decoding and fluency is less adequate in reflecting ‘deep comprehension skills’ or ‘advanced literacy skills’ (Murnane et al., 2012), also referred to as ‘critical
reading skills’ (Liu 2010). Such skills are ideally developed through ‘active’, ‘motivated’ or ‘responsive reading’ (Pressley and Gaskins 2006) through sociocultural cognition. Pressley and Gaskins illustrate how these reading skills were developed in their research involving Benchmark School, where the faculty committed to embedding an evidence-based comprehension instruction programme (2006).

Sociocultural literacy studies present a view of reading as not only the decoding and understanding of signs and sign-systems in an effort to summarise, but also the interpretation of those sign-systems, interpretations that are socially and culturally mediated (Cope and Kalantzis 2006; UNESCO 2006; Gee 2015). Such positions draw heavily on the work of Vygotsky’s (1978) theories about how concepts are formed through interaction and interpretation. Certainly ‘interpretation is a contested concept … and terms such as comprehending, understanding, constructing meaning and making sense are often used interchangeably to define the act of interpretation’ (Serafini 2010, p.155). Thus a sociocultural approach to literacy development presents readers as ‘active constructors of meanings’ (Serafini 2010, p.156) with an acceptance that written texts are subject to interpretation and dependant on context, resulting in an understanding of comprehension as a subjective process. The RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG), a group comprising of 14 experts with a wide range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives in the field of reading, was convened to explore the potential of a research and development programme that would support the improvement of reading comprehension in the U.S. (Snow 2002).

The RRSG argues that the term comprehension is used so frequently that it is often incorrectly perceived as an unproblematic concept, and offer a definition of comprehension that better reflects the arguments presented here:

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We define reading comprehension as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language…Comprehension entails three elements: The reader who is doing the comprehending, the text that is to be comprehended, and the activity in which comprehension is a part. In considering the reader, we include all the capacities, abilities, knowledge, and experiences that a person brings to the act of reading. Text is broadly construed to include any printed text or electronic text. In considering activity, we include the purposes, processes, and consequences associated with the act of reading. These three dimensions define a phenomenon that occurs within a larger sociocultural context that shapes and is shaped by the reader and that interacts with each of the three elements.
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(Snow 2002, p.11)
Sociocultural theories have certainly contributed to changing traditional understandings of reading and comprehension:

‘The demands of reading are changing, there is more for readers to deal with ... the types of things readers take on or have dropped in their laps... they demand at least a literal understanding... but that is only the foundation’.

(Dublin City FM 2009)

Theories regarding ‘multi-literacies’ (Cazden et al., 1996) coupled with an increased prevalence of multimodal texts (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Kress and Bezemer 2009), particularly digital texts, have forced us to consider broader understandings of text, reader, reading activity and social context (Alvermann 2002; Coiro 2003; Wolf 2008; Serafini 2012).

‘Reading is too complex a process to refer to it simply as decoding alphabetic print or making meaning of a text. To read critically one must go beyond asking ‘What does this text mean?’ to asking ‘How does it come to have a particular meaning and not some other?’

(Alvermann 2002, p.190)

Deep comprehension or reading for criticality requires students to actively ‘synthesize information across different sources, to evaluate arguments on a variety of dimensions, to understand varying perspectives on an issue, and to assess the credibility of sources of information’ (Murnane et al., 2012, p.7). In PISA, reading literacy is defined as ‘understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society’ (OECD 2013, p.9). It is viewed as including a wide range of cognitive competencies, from basic decoding, to knowledge of words, grammar and larger linguistic and textual structures and features, to knowledge about the world. It also alludes to metacognitive competencies such as the awareness of and ability to use a variety of appropriate strategies when processing texts (Shiel et al., 2016). It is also interesting to note that the definition of reading literacy utilised in the 2015 PISA tests was largely similar to that used in its first iteration in 2000, except for the addition of one important word, that being ‘engagement’(OECD 2013, p. 9). This highlights the importance of active participation in the reading process and is suggestive of the role of the reader as meaning-maker and interpreter rather than receiver of signs. Such perceptions of reading and comprehension pave the way for more rounded perspectives on reading, as explored further in the next chapter (Green
Therefore, reading comprehension is presented in the literature in two ways and for two purposes. Firstly, in a narrow way where comprehension is perceived as a cognitive and skills-based approach to decoding texts to locate, select information and summarise. On the contrary, in its broadest sense, to promote deep comprehension, while still including these skills and dispositions, where reading is an active, participatory and meaning-making endeavour. This understanding of reading comprehension is cognisant of skills such as analysis and evaluation, skills that are crucial to engage with and critique multimodal texts and thereby empower learners. This is of significance in this study, as LNLL refers to the importance of understanding literacy as the ability to ‘read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication’ (DES 2011, p.8), suggesting that reading is perceived in the broader sense.

2.5.2 Traditional Understandings of Literacy as Writing

Since its inception 5000 years ago, writing has had a revolutionary impact on civilisation but has also been associated with power and standardisation. Initially the preserve of elites and religious orders, writing was linked to power and social inequality. According to Kalantzis et al. (2016) writing has produced the phenomena of what is valued, it determines what knowledge matters and is responsible for determining the skills and sensibilities that people need to be deemed competent and underpins the whole edifice of the institutionalised, text-book based education system. Therefore, as with reading, there is an ideological dimension to writing that needs to be acknowledged.

Despite its prominence in educational programmes as one of the ‘3 ‘R’ s of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, writing research has lagged significantly behind research on reading (Myhill and Fisher 2010; Kiuhara et al., 2009) resulting in the view that writing has been referred to as ‘one of the weakest areas in teaching’ (Barton 2013, p.123). In what has been regarded as a ground-breaking report, The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges calls for a ‘writing revolution’. In ‘The Neglected 'R'; the need for a writing revolution’, it is argued that ‘writing is not a frill for the few but an essential skill for the many’ (The
College Board 2003, p.11), and while the importance of writing may have been acknowledged in education policies, it has never been fully realised in practice. As a result, there exists a claim that ‘most students cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment’ (The College Board 2003, p.16).

2.5.2.1 *The Complexity of Writing*

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in the US contends that there are a number of dimensions to writing and considerations for educators and these views are very much in keeping with the sociocultural perspectives regarding literacy that were explored earlier:

> ‘Writing is not created by a singular, linear process; it cannot be taught, like bike riding, as a single skill; it changes with shifting technologies—like today’s new media; it can enable and enhance learning; it takes many forms; and it cannot be assessed effectively in a single sitting. All this means that writing can be seen as holistic, authentic, and varied’. (2008, p.3)

Writing is a complex task for a number of reasons, principally because ‘it is an unusual activity in that it continues to make high cognitive demands as writers become more expert’ so that ‘at every age and stage it is an ‘effortful’ activity’ (Myhill and Fisher 2010, p.1). In the post-primary context in Ireland for instance, students need to write longer texts and display proficiency in an increasing number of genres and for a variety of purposes and audiences as they encounter different literacies and literacy expectations presented by different subjects. Writing is also linguistically complex. The alphabet has 26 letters to represent the sounds of 44 phonemes, a complex code that students need to decipher and master orally before they can write it. Yet how we write is very different from how we speak ‘with various conventions about how to write words and sentences and punctuate them’ (Gee and Hayes 2011, p.58) Furthermore, words, phrases and clauses vary depending on subject-area, yet combine to form ‘the essential semiotic resource for meaning-making in print or on screen’ (Myhill and Fisher 2010, p.1). However, writing extends beyond mastery of grammar, punctuation and diagramming sentences:
In their empirical research, Bangert-Drowns and colleagues (2004) sought to investigate the capacity of writing to influence academic achievement in a meta-analysis of 48 school-based ‘writing-to-learn’ programmes. Writing-to-learn activities are understood as short, impromptu and informal writing tasks that were both informational (asking students to communicate their comprehension of subject matter) and personal (linking personal experiences with academic content and focusing on expression). The researchers found that in 36 of the 48 cases, outcomes were positive, suggesting a ‘fairly consistent positive achievement effect attributable to writing-to-learn interventions’ (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004 p.42). However, despite the potential of writing to promote academic achievement, a national survey of 1,200 high school language arts, social studies and science teachers reports a narrow range of writing activities utilised by teachers. The most common writing practices promoted by teachers are short answer responses to homework, responses to and summaries of materials read and completion of worksheets (Kiuhara et al., 2009) where there was a focus on writing for note-taking and making lists (Gillespie et al., 2014). Despite evidence to support the benefits of these writing tasks, it is argued that the focus of writing often concerns preparing students to pass written tests rather than to become better writers (Hicks and Steffel 2012; Barton 2013), and that students are presented with few opportunities to engage in processes of analysis, interpretation and personalisation’ (Gillespie et al., 2014, p.1067). This is despite the fact that writing as a process can support student learning as they engage in ‘sense-making’ (Hinchion 2016).

2.5.3 Literacy and Oral Language

For the purpose of this study, the term ‘oracy’ is used to discuss speaking and listening as part of literacy development. ‘Oracy’ was introduced by Wilkinson due to the perceived absence of a term to describe ‘the central concept of speaking and listening’ (Wilkinson 1970, p.73). In contrast to traditional understandings of literacy as reading and writing, Wilkinson describes oracy as inseparable from literacy as ‘it is part and parcel of the verbalization of experience’ (1970, p.77). Green (1988) later
supported this argument stating that it is through the process of verbalisation that thoughts move from conceptualisation to verbalisation in speech and then to print, what we might have at that time perceived as ‘literacy’. More recently, this has been explored in a five year longitudinal study in 51 elementary schools in the U.S. which focuses on how the four language systems of reading, writing, speaking and listening develop over time and in an inter-related way (Berninger et al., 2006; Berninger and Abbott 2010). This argument is supported by findings of the research conducted by Wright and colleagues when they compared vocabulary understanding and reading comprehension scores from different reading sources (2013). They argue that

‘developmentally, children first make gains in their listening skills that help generate new spoken vocabulary. Children must then take their spoken language knowledge and translate it into literacy development, specifically reading decoding and reading comprehension skills’.

(2013, p.368)

Indeed, oracy has been described as a primary form of language (Shanahan 2008; Gee 2015) since it predated reading and writing.

2.5.3.1 Sociocultural Theories and Oracy

Sociocultural theories of literacy that contend meaning is made through language in a shared social and cultural context is underpinned by Vygotsky’s (1978) perception of language as a cultural and social tool, as well as a psychological or cognitive tool. Vygotsky argued that ‘the initial function of speech is the communicative function. Speech is first and foremost a means of social interaction, a means of pronouncement and understanding’ (Wertsch 1985, p.94). However, through communication, speaking and listening or oracy, has the capacity to make meaning and contribute to learning. Critiquing Vygotsky’s work, John-Steiner argues that

‘meaningful communication between children and their caretakers occurs as they engage in dialogue and social interaction. ‘Meaning is… what is lying between the thought and the word. Meaning is not equal to the thought, not equal to the word’… But Vygotsky further suggests that it is through the unification of thinking and speaking that consciousness develops and that meaning becomes central to this synthesis’.

(2007, p.148)

The positive benefits of speaking and listening have been well documented in the literature. In their review of the teaching and assessment of oral language in Western
Australian secondary schools, Oliver *et al.* (2005) outline how the conscious development of oracy promotes confidence, self-efficacy, engagement and understanding. Jones maintains that talk is ‘a powerful tool for communicating thoughts, expressing feelings, exercising power and generally developing identities as human beings’ (2007, p.577). Such views support the Vygotskian understanding of oracy as a cultural and social tool. In fact the benefits of oracy development reach beyond school into the workplace and wider society (Oliver *et al*., 2005); gaining employment, managing successful relationships, promoting confidence and avoiding conflict are all attributable to the development of speaking and listening skills (Bentley-Davies 2012). However, empirical research also highlights how talk is also a cognitive tool (Mercer and Howe 2012), one that has the capacity to promote metacognition (Wilkinson 1970; Goh cited in Mah 2016; Mercer *et al*., 2017), resulting in a growing international and indeed, an interdisciplinary, interest in the social and cognitive functions of language in social interactions (Mercer and Dawes 2014).

However in their review of empirical research concerning talk and learning, Mercer and Howe caution that if classroom oracy practices are to aid learning, ‘talk must be of the right quality’ (2012, p.13). Many authors have emphasised the importance of creating space for classroom talk as a meaningful and purposeful pedagogy that can promote student engagement, development, higher-order thinking and collaboration (Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993; Alexander 2006; Skidmore 2006; Mercer, 2006, 2014; Mercer and Howe 2012). Alexander argues that

> ‘children ... need to talk, and to experience a rich diet of spoken language, in order to think and to learn. Reading, writing and number may be acknowledged as the curriculum ‘basics’ but talk is arguably the true foundation of learning’.

(2006, p.9)

In ‘Towards Dialogic Teaching’, Alexander presents a structured approach to talk in the classroom arguing that ‘dialogic teaching is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, purposeful’ (2006, p.28). Classroom-based research conducted in one UK secondary school English classroom highlights how a dialogic approach has the capacity to ensure that ‘learning is ‘deepened’ through dialogue’ (Brindley and Marshall 2015, p.130). Direct instruction is still important and ‘traditional teacher talk is useful for teaching through instruction or demonstration, but it does not
facilitate self-expression, thinking or dialogue’ (Fisher 2011, p.91). Indeed, Nystrand’s large-scale study of the effects of classroom discourse on student learning in 400 English lessons in 25 US high schools ‘makes a strong case for the superior effectiveness of dialogically organised instruction: students taught in this way tend to do better in written tests than those taught using a monologic, recitational approach’ (1997 cited in Skidmore 2006, p.505). ‘Dialogue is not simply talk or the sharing of ideas. It is a structured, extended process leading to new insights and deep knowledge and understanding’ (Abbey 2008) and can have a positive impact in student engagement as well as their educational outcomes (Rojas-Drummond and Mercer 2004; Mercer and Dawes 2014).

Thus ‘oracy as pedagogy’ offers a real opportunity to promote speaking and listening as aspects of literacy development in adolescents’ learning. However, studies report that modest amounts of school time have been devoted to speaking and listening and that there has been a lack of focus on formal oral language development in schools (Shanahan 2008), resulting in a view that talk has not been utilised to its full potential (Mercer and Dawes 2014). Alexander’s study compares the practices of teachers in different countries and highlights the dominance of three kinds of classroom talk; ‘rote’ or ‘drilling’, ‘recitation’ or questioning for recall and ‘instruction/exposition’ or telling/directing students (Alexander 2006, pp.30-31). Far less common was the use of discussion or dialogue despite the fact that ‘of the five kinds of talk, discussion and scaffolded dialogue have by far the greatest cognitive potential’ (Alexander 2006, p.31). A comprehensive account of empirical research that examines the nature of student-teacher talk from the 1970s until the 2010s (Mercer and Dawes 2014) concludes that the ‘Initiation-Response-Feedback’ (IRF) model is ‘the most common minimal unit of interactional exchange between a teacher and student… the building block of the most conventional kind of classroom talk’ (p.432). Jones argues that ‘most classroom practice is characterised by IRF; initiation through teacher questioning, response by the child and feedback, or closing down, by the teacher’ (2007, p.571) despite evidence that the Initiation-Response-Evaluation model ‘often acts as a straitjacket’ (Sutherland 2010, p.98) to learning. Indeed a paper that emerged from this study (Lenihan et al., 2016) offered a synthesis of international literature concerning classroom talk and national reports concerning talk as a tool for learning, particularly in the English post-primary
classroom in Ireland. It concluded that despite the strength of aforementioned arguments promoting talk as pedagogy, there has been a reluctance to fully realise the potential of the dialogic classroom, evident in the dominance of teacher-talk.

In keeping with arguments that talk should underpin all learning, we turn to Barnes’ models of ‘exploratory’ and presentational talk’ (2010). Barnes contends that ‘learners will need some time to explore the implications of new ideas in a discussion led by the teacher’ (2010, p.8). This type of ‘exploratory talk’ is crucial for meaningful learning to take place as students ‘talk things out’ and organise their thoughts. Such an approach is guided by constructivist beliefs that scaffolded interaction with peers will support students’ learning; exploratory talk is grounded in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), the gap between what students can do independently and what they can do with assistance, allowing students to learn more successfully together than alone (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985; Jones 2007). Thus exploratory talk can be viewed as ‘spoken language that encourages deeper thinking’ (Barton 2013, p.29). Furthermore, exploratory talk is a crucial step towards the type of ‘presentational talk’ that we might encourage all our students to use once students get to a point in their learning where they feel confident and capable to present their synthesised and considered thoughts, as well as demonstrate their awareness of their audience. Returning to sociocultural learning theories, students engage in a process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ through their engagement in exploratory talk; they assume a more central role in the ‘community of practice’ that is the classroom and become more competent (Lave and Wenger 1991) as they ‘internalise’ new understandings that were generated through participation in joint activities (Mercer 2006).

Thus, the basic situation for the development of oracy is the group situation’ (Wilkinson 1970, p.75) and providing opportunities for group-work and discussion could certainly help to utilise exploratory talk as students participate in authentic learning experiences within their own community of peers (Heath 1986) and articulate their ‘half-formed thoughts’ (Mercer and Howe, 2012 p.16). Furthermore, varied experiences that promote oracy in different contexts provide opportunities for students to develop individual and different ‘oracy profiles’ as students build capacity to use language effectively in different situations (Mercer et al., 2017, p.51). In this way, oracy also has a moral imperative; it can ‘compensate for aspects
of linguistic deprivation’ (Barton 2013, p.29) for those students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds whose vocabularies may not be as expansive (Dublin City FM 2012) and may not have had opportunities to develop their oracy profiles in their out-of-school experiences (Mercer et al., 2017).

However, there is often greater emphasis and value placed on presentational talk than on exploratory talk in policies and in practice. This may stem from a commonly-held view of oracy as something that is equated to students preparing and delivering scripted presentations, performing formal speeches to a group or class or participating in debates (Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993; Oliver et al., 2005; Hibbin 2016; Mercer et al., 2017). Such a positioning elevates the functions, the end-results and outcomes of speaking and listening (usually concrete or tangible products) over the processes of speaking and listening, and the experience itself (Green 1988; Hibbin 2016), what Hewitt and Inghilleri refer to as ‘the expressive orality’(1993).

While the processes and experiences of speaking and listening in daily classroom practice may be less formal, less structured and thereby, seen as less authoritative, they are no less valuable. However, empirical research regarding dialogic practices in the classrooms highlights how, when instrumental or ‘reductionist’ (Haworth 2001) views of oracy prevail, some teachers may have a narrower understanding of oracy, resulting in greater focus on speaking and pronunciation rather than listening. This positions oracy as a basis for communication and conversation skills rather than for cognition (Oliver et al., 2005; Barton 2013; Goh, in Mah 2016; Hibbin 2016). It can result in ‘talk that is solely information-related and transactional in function’ (Stinson 2015, p.305). For instance, Hibbin’s study (2016) explored perceptions of oral story-telling in primary classrooms and concluded that oral language was devalued when positioned beside reading and writing. It revealed a tendency to focus on written outcomes emerging from the spoken word rather than privileging oral devices (Hibbin 2016) or expressive orality (Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993). This finding is supported in other literature. Sterling Honig contends that

‘because reading and writing are so critical to positive achievements in school, the emphasis on enhancing language skills in classrooms has more frequently focused on teaching phoneme/grapheme correspondence and on strengthening reading fluency, reading for meaning and writing skills’.

(2007, p.581)
This is in keeping with the view that the use of oracy is constrained by the dominant cultural norms of schools as institutions (Mercer and Dawes 2014), in this case the privileging of reading and writing over speaking and listening. While it is important to acknowledge claims that children who have well developed oral language do better in writing (Shanahan 2008), Hibbin argues that we need to resist instances where all ‘oral work becomes recruited into the enterprise of learning to read and write’ (2016, p.55). What is needed is an integrated approach to oracy, reading and writing.

2.5.3.2 Oracy in Policy Documents

It is worth acknowledging specific references to the place of oral language in education policies to consider how oracy is positioned. For instance, studies that review and evaluate the position of oracy in policy documents in the UK (Haworth 2001; Jones 2017) have found that a tension exists between what is presented in policy documents and what is experienced in classrooms by teachers and students. This is also evident in the Irish context. A discussion document concerning languages in the post-primary curriculum issued by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) argues that ‘we continue with syllabuses and examinations that recognise the importance of oral communication but manage to retain emphasis on reading and writing at the expense of speaking and listening’ (NCCA 2003, p.9).

The definition of literacy offered in LNLL makes explicit reference to ‘spoken language’ and the understanding of literacy presented in the strategy includes ‘speaking and listening’ (DES 2011, p.11). Later in the document, there is repeated reference to terms such as ‘oral language development’, ‘oral language skills’, ‘oral competency’ and ‘oral and aural skills’. An example of a policy document that aims to promote a clear message about the fundamental role of oral language in learning is the recently introduced Junior Cycle English Specification (2015, amended 2018). It positions oracy as central to learning by arguing that that in the new syllabus:

‘there is a strong focus on the oral dimension of language, including the vital importance of learning through oral language. This makes the English classroom an active space, a place of “classroom talk” where learners explore language and ideas as much through thinking and talking as through listening and writing’.

(NCCA 2018, p.9)
Speaking and listening are supported by the existence of a formal assessment, the Oral Communication Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) (which will take place in the final weeks of the students’ 2nd year of Junior Cycle) and can take the form of a presentation, a performance, an interview or a response to a stimulus. Certainly, the ‘moment’ of the CBA is a clear example of ‘presentational talk’ in action. However, the Specification, with a focus on Oral Language Learning Outcomes integrated across three years of learning, emphasises the importance of exploratory talk also, by embedding speaking and listening activities as part of our everyday practice in the classroom ‘to explore language and ideas’ through speaking and listening.

2.5.4 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is described as ‘one of the hottest’ of the new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.21), emerging as a priority in policy documents and on education reform agendas internationally. Gilster defines digital literacy as

> ‘the ability to understand information and more important, to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver... it is multidimensional and interactive... it is deceptively simple’.

(Gilster, cited in Pool 1997, pp.6-7)

However, the complexity of defining digital literacy is evident in the literature. An ECDL Foundation paper entitled ‘Computing and Digital Literacy: Call for a Holistic Approach’ recommends a standardised approach to the development of coding skills internationally. It defines digital literacy as

> ‘a basic set of skills required to participate in essential ICT user activities. Typical skills would include the ability to work with numbers and documents (software such as word processors and spreadsheets) and the ability to use a web browser, e-mail and internet search engines securely and effectively’.

(ECDL 2015)

On the other hand, the ‘Key Competence Network on School Education’ (KeyCoNet), a network funded by the European Commission focused on improving the implementation of key competencies in education, states that digital competence incorporates knowledge, attitudes and skills but ultimately stresses that

> ‘approaches to developing digital competences typically involve going beyond the functional use and consumption of digital media, towards encouraging learners to become critical consumers and creators of media and technology’.

(Grayson 2014, p.36)
As illustrated, digital literacy is complicated by the fact that our understanding of it is constantly evolving and reacting to technological advances. In fact, ‘technology is proving, by far, to have the greatest impact on how literacy continues to evolve’ (Nelson 2015, p.19) and in keeping with a sociocultural approach to literacy, illustrates how ‘literacy’ emerges from specific contexts or ‘Discourses’ (Gee 1989). The centrality and pervasiveness of technology and the changing nature of ‘text’ means that children are growing up in a different world as a result of digital technologies (Prensky 2012; Gee 2015; Mills 2016) and digital literacy has emerged as a priority. Therefore, Gilster’s assertion that digital literacy is ‘deceptively simple’ is an important point for educators as it encourages us to consider its complexity.

2.5.4.1 Digital Literacy and Policy

Efforts to position digital literacy as more than a set of functional skills and a tool for media consumption are evident in national policy documents. Irish education policies such as LNLL and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) make specific reference to the incorporation of digital literacy as an aspect of literacy development. The ‘Digital Strategy for Schools (2015-2020)’ highlights the potential of short courses in coding and programming at junior cycle as well as the introduction of Computer Science as a subject at senior cycle, promoting ICT integration across the curriculum at post-primary level. While LNLL does not offer a definition of digital literacy, the NCCA’s junior cycle short course on Digital Media Literacy explores digital literacy in the following way:

In studying digital media, students learn to use digital technology, communication tools and the internet to engage in self-directed enquiry. As students develop their digital literacy skills, they improve their capacity to know what they are looking for, what information to ignore or discard, and how to identify what can be useful or significant. They learn to discriminate between the multiple sources of information available online and to challenge the views they find there. They learn how to create, collaborate and communicate effectively and to understand how and when digital technologies can best be used to support these processes.

(NCCA 2016a p.4)

Schools have a crucial role in promoting the digital literacy of their students, helping young people reach their potential but also to use technology in a safe, ethical and responsible manner (Alverman 2002; Nachimuthu 2010; Asselin and Moayeri 2011; Poore 2011). A key aspect of digital literacy development identified in the literature is that students are taught to produce as well as consume digital culture
(Carroll 2011; Poore 2011; Burnett and Merchant 2015; Manderino and Castek 2016; Mills 2016; Castek and Manderino 2017), a departure from the practice of using technology as a media consumption tool. Certainly many students are familiar with many of the aspects, platforms and practices of digital literacy and these form a significant and important role in their lives outside school in a global, interconnected and knowledge based world (Nachimuthu 2010; Asselin and Moayeri 2011). Within school however, it is imperative that students become proficient in the ‘sophisticated, hybrid and hypertextual’ (Mills 2016 p.88) words of digital texts, a social world of online communities where students develop and project identities through Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, as well as in virtual gaming worlds. ‘These online projections symbolise and fortify membership in groups’ (Mills 2016, p.90). For the child who is not afforded the opportunity to be digitally literate, they are at best, at risk of not being able to participate or can be limited in their learning through exclusion from these online, networked communities. At worst, they may be at risk of harm due to their inexperience and inability to critically assess and evaluate these complex communities.

2.5.4.2 A Digital Divide

Digital literacy is an example of a ‘new’ literacy, and it is new in two ways; in its technicality but also in its ethos (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.73). It is new in a technical sense because digital-electronic technologies use programming languages and code and require that users perform certain physical operations such as clicking, swiping, cropping, but it is also different to conventional text as it is multimodal and has the capacity to incorporate print text, visual images, moving images and sound. Examples of ‘new’ literacies in the digital domain include podcasts, web-logs or ‘blogs’, website interfaces including those used in social media and instant messaging interfaces, to name but a few (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007). From its ethos, digital literacy is regarded as a new literacy because the values underpinning its use are radically different to the values associated with traditional or conventional understandings of literacy. Drawing on the previously mentioned ‘Mindsets’ theory, proponents of digital literacy would generally align themselves with Mindset 2, understanding that digital literacy is not just ‘a digitised way of doing ‘the same old same old’’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.93) but as a profoundly new way of ‘being’ as well as ‘doing’.
Prensky coined the terms ‘digital native’ and ‘digital immigrant’ (2012, p.69) to explore a generation gap that exists between those who were born into the digital age and those who were not. He contends that a person born since 1980 is so embedded in this technological and digital culture, that they are a ‘digital native’ (Prensky 2012), for whom ‘computer games, email, the internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives’ (Prensky 2012, p.68). Earlier generations he describes as ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2012), people who must navigate a new world and learn a new, digital, language (Kivunja 2014). However, research conducted by the ECDL foundation contend that this argument is a ‘fallacy’ and contrary to being a digitally fluent ‘native’, worrying numbers of students do not possess the skills necessary to be deemed digitally literate (ECDL 2015, p.7). The use of digital devices does not determine that users are digitally literate. Perhaps the ‘digital divide’ is less to do with a generation gap and more to do with competing Mindsets (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007) as already outlined. For instance, a literature review offered by KeyCoNet outlines key issues in relation to the definition and implementation of key competences in school education in Europe (some of which include communication in multiple languages, math competence, digital competence and learning to learning). In relation to this study, it highlights how difficulties can also emerge from a gap or difference between teachers and students regarding their potentially differing conceptions of digital literacy (Arjomand et al., 2013). In this sense then, and in the context of this study, perhaps what is more pertinent is that we consider these debates regarding teachers’ beliefs and values. For instance, one starkly different view held by proponents of ‘Mindset 1’ or ‘Mindset 2’ in relation to this study is the positioning of ‘text.’ When thinking in terms of digital literacy, the concept of ‘text’ changes dramatically. In fact, Lankshear and Knobel contend that in the past

> ‘the book comprised the text paradigm...the book in no way comprises the text paradigm in the emerging digital media space. Indeed, there is no text paradigm. Text types are subject to wholesale experimentation, hybridisation, and rule breaking’.

(2007, pp.13-14)

Beach and O’ Brien support this idea arguing that less focus on the centrality of the textbook means that the reading students will engage in moving forward is one that embraces intermediality and intertextuality (2012, 2012b), understood as blending of
different media and different texts. However, this in itself poses a challenge. One of the complexities arises from the fact that in contrast to the static, stand-alone and often linear nature of print texts, digital texts are new and constantly changing:

‘New digital literacies are elusive because they are so rapidly unfolding and evolving; just when we figure out a particular digital context and tools that make it possible, and study them, the whole milieu changes’.

(Beach and O’ Brien 2012)

This is supported by the view that to be ‘literate’ today often means being able to use some combination of digital interfaces, technologies and mobile applications, examples of which include blogs, wikis, texting, search engines, Facebook, Google Docs, Skype, iMovie and so on (Leu et al., 2011). However there is an added complexity; as digital technology evolves, these forms of expression will evolve, change, and be replaced, becoming outdated also.

2.5.4.3 Digital Literacy and Contemporary Meaning of Text

As a result, there is greater emphasis in the literature to the differences between reading digitally and reading traditional print texts. Recent research highlights the advantages (Beach and O’ Brien 2012; Wright et al., 2013; Korbey 2014) and the challenges (Murphy-Paul 2013; Korbey 2014) of incorporating digital reading in classroom practices. While in some ways the basic principles of what it means to be literate are still the same (Nelson 2015), all authors cited here highlight the importance of acknowledging the sometimes subtle, but more often overt, differences between the reading of print and the reading of digital texts. For instance, because ‘texts are no longer static the way they were in the print era- they are interactive’ (Mills 2016, xiii), reading digital text is different to reading traditional print text. Some commentators warn that the type of reading that we engage in online and in digital interactions is surface reading that is ‘pragmatic and instrumental’ (Murphy-Paul 2013) and results in a different reading experience as well as the development of different capacities. This is supported by Wolf who argues

‘the addictive immediacy and the overwhelming volume of information available in the “Googled world” of novice readers invite neither time for concentrated analysis and inference nor the motivation for them to think beyond all the information given’.

(2008)
Other commentators argue for the potential of deep reading in digital domains. Zamora (2016) highlights the potential of ‘Hypothes.is’, an open platform that invites participants into a community of readers through digital annotation that promotes an extended close reading conversation, making reading ‘a social act’ (Zamora 2016) but also engages students in the processes of meaning-making (Hinchion 2016) through writing digitally. This is significant given the sociocultural positioning adopted in this study, where digital literacy is not interpreted solely in terms of engagement with technology and the development of computer-related skills, but as a social practice that takes place in a particular context (Lankshear and Knobel 2006: Evans 2017). Indeed, ‘talk, text, media and the world all go together’ (Gee 2015, p.107).

Concerns are raised regarding a risk that students may be distracted by the ‘bells and whistles’ of an interactive digital book (Wright et al., 2013; Korbey 2014) such as animations and hyperlinks. Furthermore, annotations of digital texts can be a challenging process for students (Korbey 2014) as students need adequate knowledge of how to use the full range of interactive technological features offered by e-readers and digital texts, such as highlighting, dictionaries, thesaurus and audio-narration. However the studies cited here argue that such technological resources, when explicitly encouraged in classrooms, can support students in their reading. Empirical research conducted by Wright and her colleagues (2013) involved offering elementary school children both print and e-reader platforms with the aim of comparing vocabulary understanding and comprehension scores, as well as exploring the frequency at which students accessed reading resources that included dictionaries and thesauruses. They found that not only did students enjoy their reading experience of digital texts more, but that students were more likely to access technological language features on the iPad than to use traditional paper equivalents. Furthermore, they noted that there was no difference in students’ levels of comprehension in quizzes conducted after each reading experience. Promoting digital literacy in its truest sense necessitates an examination of our assumptions about literacy, but also about ‘texts’, explored now as I examine the literature regarding multi-media texts, multimodal texts and the emergence of ‘multiliteracies’.
2.5.5 Contemporary Understandings of Literacies and Texts

2.5.5.1 Multiliteracies

As explored previously, text was traditionally understood as alphabetic and written symbols in the form of books, magazines and newspapers (Larson 2009, 2010). The publication of ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’ (Cazden et al., 1996) provoked a ‘redefinition of texts and practices… by recognising multiple ways of communicating and making meaning, including such modes as visual, audio, spatial, behavioral and gestural’ (Leander and Boldt 2012, p.23). Such an understanding of ‘literacies’ is different to those more traditional understandings that predated it:

‘Mere literacy’ remains centered on language only… conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence… translate(d) into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy. A pedagogy of multiliteracies by contrast focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone… one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes’.

(Cazden et al., 1996, p.64)

In his critique, Jewitt contends that this work has been regarded as responsible for a paradigm shift in how literacy is understood as a concept:

‘Multiliteracies set out to stretch literacy beyond the constraints of official standard forms of written and spoken language to connect with the culturally and linguistically diverse landscapes and the multimodal texts that are mobilized and circulate across these landscapes’.

(2008, p.245)

Kalantzis et al. explain that there are two understandings of ‘multi’ in multiliteracies; multiple contexts in which literacies exist (a setting like a school or a church, but also identities, social roles etc.) as well as the multiple modes of representation (written, visual, spatial, tactile, gestural, audio and oral) (2016, p.2), both of which have implications for literacy educators.

2.5.5.2 Multimodal texts

When texts are referred to as ‘multimodal’, this is understood as the way that knowledge is realised, the look and layout of a text, and multimodal texts generally combine two or more semiotic systems (Duncum 2004; Walsh 2006; Bezemer and
‘A mode is a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, speech, moving image are examples of modes, all used in learning resources. Meanings are made in a variety of modes and always with more than one mode. Modes have differing ‘modal resources’. Writing for instance has syntactic, grammatical and lexical resources, graphic resources such as font type, size and resources for framing such as punctuation...(whereas) speech has intensity (loudness), pitch and pitch variation (intonation)... Image has resources such as position of elements in a framed space, size, colour, shapes’.

(Bezemer and Kress 2008, p.171)

As aforementioned, digital media are typical examples of multimodal texts. Their multimedia design uses a variety of modes to communicate. Alphabetic text, with all its modal resources, is generally accompanied by links, navigation tools, audio or video files and so on, each of which draws on modal resources of their own. Reading these different modes, as mentioned in the previous section, requires very specific knowledge and skills.

2.5.5.3 Contemporary Meaning of ‘Text’

Definitions and understandings of text have certainly changed over centuries, and are culturally specific (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Gee and Hayes 2011; Gee 2015; Mills 2016) and there are many early examples of multimodal texts; from an ancient Chinese long-scroll to the earliest advertisements to the first illustrated children’s book in the 17th century. Face-to-face communication is ‘inherently multimodal’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.226). Textbooks are generally multimodal and they have become increasingly multimodal, reflecting the trend towards multimodal representation (Kress and Bezemer 2009; Serafini 2010) and have changed both in look and in content with greater emphasis on images, and not using images as ‘merely mirrors of the written text’ (Duncum 2004, p.261) as has often been the case in the past. While multimodal texts are not necessarily digital, the digital revolution means that ‘multimodality is more pervasive, diverse and important today than ever before’ (Gee and Hayes 2011, p.1), an argument supported throughout the literature (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Jewitt 2008; Leander and Vasudevan 2009; Lotherington and Jenson 2011; Leander and Boldt 2012, 2013; Bialostok 2014; Garcia 2016).
2.5.5.4 *Reconceptualising Reading for Multimodal and Contemporary Texts*

Duncan argues that ‘we need to rethink our traditional, exclusive focus on things visual’ (2004, p.253) and give greater consideration to not just ‘what’ multimodal texts present but ‘how’ we make meaning through our engagement with them. Walsh (2006) explores the various and varying literacy practices required to successfully navigate texts from three different modes, focusing on a novel, a picture-book and a website. Therefore, she presents mono-modal as well as multimodal texts. As already explored in this section, Walsh’s examination of the different reading processes necessary to navigate print, visual and multimodal texts (2006) highlights how each mode or form of representation requires a particular grammar to ‘decode’ and navigate the texts. Walsh contends that while there are certainly nuances regarding the grammar needed to understand (such as an ability to decode images and understand visual codes such as colour, framing and perspective) when reading a picture-book, there are many parallels between the grammar of the novel and the picture-book. Both essentially ‘tell’ the story and since they are both literary narratives they are linear in structure, students would engage in prediction and activation of prior knowledge. Striking differences exist however between the two printed texts and the website, an informational page. While the narrative texts ‘tell’ the story, the webpage will ‘show’ through images and video but can also tell with print and audio. Thus, a more intricate sensual experience is promoted in the multimodal text. There are the technological differences to grapple with, using a screen and a mouse, hyperlinks and navigation bars. One of the biggest differences is the fact that there is no beginning or end and so ‘the reader’s pathway can be multilinear and multi-directional’ (Walsh 2006, p.30). The reader can choose what to click on and what to avoid. There is no expectation to read/interpret all the links or tabs. It has a different purpose to the narrative texts and so, does not have a formal structure. Therefore, while the modes are different, processing these modes to make meaning is also a different experience (Walsh 2006).

2.5.5.5 *Considering Texts for Adolescent Literacy Development*

Considering the above discussion regarding multiliteracies, multimodal and contemporary texts, it is worth reiterating that this study adopts an understanding of text that recognises multiple modes of representation (written, visual, spatial, tactile,
gestural, audio and oral) (Kalantzis et al. 2016, p.2). Such an understanding is of particular importance for those involved in adolescent literacy development for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as outlined in section 1.3.5.2, the organisation of post-primary education in Ireland can present a challenge for students. The fact that post-primary students encounter many different types of text across, and indeed, within, different subject areas, is something that must be considered in relation to effective adolescent literacy development. Subject disciplines differ not only in how they view ‘text’, but also in how they expect students to ‘read’ those texts. In science class, a text could be a graduated cylinder, while diagrams are not necessarily read left to right, or top to bottom; rather it depends on the conceptual representation. In history, a text could be a video or a photographic source and students must learn to handle such historical artifacts (Gillis 2014). Depending on the discipline, students will approach reading from the stance of a scientist completing data records and lab reports, or from the stance of a historian examining documents for bias (Lacina and Watson 2008); while in science, objective reading is key, in history, readers will always be aware of subjectivity (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). Therefore, across a typical school day, the different subject areas encountered by adolescents in post-primary schools not only present students with different types of text, but also with specific expectations as to how they should approach and handle those texts.

Considering adolescent literacy development, international (Fisher and Frey 2014) and national (Smyth and Calvert 2011; Smyth 2016a; Devine et al. 2013; Coolahan) research highlights how text remains central in secondary school classrooms. Indeed, ‘the secondary school years are devoted to knowledge building… (and) a significant portion of knowledge building is accomplished through interaction with texts’ (Fisher and Frey 2014, p. 138) However, it is essential that educators consider the types of texts utilised if they are to effectively support adolescent literacy development (IRA 2012). Even when considering print texts alone, adolescent students are likely to encounter a great variety of texts and genres, and they need to be able to comprehend and analyse these texts. Furthermore, while students might be quite familiar with navigating narrative texts, there is a significant increase in the volume of informational texts students encounter in post-primary school. These might include comparative literature essays, memoirs, speeches and literary
criticisms, expository texts such as primary and secondary sources, as well as articles, technical manuals, reports, public documents and advertisements (Fisher and Frey 2014). Questioning, discussion and guided reading of these different printed texts must take place in the respective subject areas, where all teachers need to teach reading, and indeed writing, to apprentice students into the literacy of each subject. Of course as outlined earlier, some printed texts such as cartoons, advertisements, music scores, maps and technical manuals are multimodal, with visual elements in their representations. Explicit instruction about how to read such texts is crucial to support effective literacy development.

However, while it is important to consider the many different types of print texts that students encounter inside and outside school, as discussed in section 2.5.5, Abrams and Gerber highlight how contemporary understandings of ‘literacies extend beyond print text’:

> ‘all modes (including, but certainly not limited to sound, gesture, tone, image, video, physical design) are part of the meaning-making experience...when we talk about literacy and being literate in today’s world, we are discussing a rather complex topic, and we need to consider all the texts- from traditional print to social media posts to videogames- that are part of students’ lives’.

(Abrams and Gerber 2014, p. 19)

Two central points pertaining to adolescent literacy development emerge here. The first concerns breadth and balance in terms of exposure to a variety of text types, an issue reflected in a number of recent policies in Ireland. According to LNLL, syllabi should provide ‘for the development of literacy in a range of texts (literary and non-literary) and a range of media including digital media’ (DES 2011, p. 54). As a result, revised curricula in language (English and Irish) at primary level and English at post-primary level are currently being implemented in schools in Ireland, and both include broad understandings of text. At primary level, for example, ‘text’ includes ‘all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital’ (ELINET 2016, p. 53). Regarding adolescents who progress through post-primary schools, text is understood in the following way in the Junior Cycle English Specification:

> ‘Engagement with texts is central to the development of language and literacy and it is important to recognise that the term text applies to more than communication in written formats. All products of language use—oral, written, visual, digital or multimodal—can be described as texts. Multimodal texts combine language with
other systems for communication, such as print text, visual images, soundtrack and the spoken word’.

(NCCA 2018, p. 10)

As illustrated in both primary and post-primary syllabi, there is no suggestion to remove print text. Rather the argument rests on the basis that ‘multimodal and digital texts need to complement (not supplement) print text…(to) extend beyond the lexical and canonical… multimodal and digital texts should not be subordinate to traditional ones’ (Abrams and Gerber 2014, p.20). Much research concerning literacy development highlights a number of contemporary texts that should be recognised as a legitimate part of classroom practice (IRA 2012). Some have already been mentioned at various points in this chapter, and although not an exhaustive list, there are a number of examples of digital and multimodal texts that could support adolescent literacy development. For example, strategy videogames encourage experimentation, active learning and have potential academic connections (Abrams and Gerber 2014; Gee 2015, 2017). Blogs and discussion boards (Williams 2005; Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007; Leu et al. 2011; Abrams and Gerber 2014; Daniels et al., 2015) offer adolescent students opportunities to read and write with both a purpose and an audience, using devices that they are familiar with, while potentially exposing them to new platforms and learning experiences. For instance, Bezemer and Kress’ study (2017) of a 12 year old boy’s text-making on Facebook over the first year of his ‘Facebook life’ explores how he engaged in a variety of different types of text-making through status updates, posts, links and notifications. Some of these texts were multimodal, incorporating pictures, videos and written text. Taken collectively, the texts become progressively more sophisticated and accomplished as Daan becomes more literate in the world of Facebook. He demonstrates his technical expertise in moving content between platforms and utilising the semiotic resources afforded by Facebook, as well as his ability to write, create and share. Affording adolescents opportunities to engage with contemporary texts can support literacy development as well as other areas of learning.

As discussed in section 1.3.5.4, adolescents are in ‘the crucial transition to adult responsibility’ and as such, they need to be aware of how texts may be ‘manipulating their perspectives’ (Elkins and Luke 1999, p. 215). Elmore and Coleman’s study (2019) highlights the potential of political memes (multimodal texts that comprise of
a virally transmitted photograph, embellished with text, that satirises a cultural symbol or social idea) to teach Critical Media Literacy skills. The authors argue that memes are ‘powerful, argumentative visual texts worthy of classroom investigation…due to their often provocative or controversial nature…. (but that they are) underutilised as rich textual resources applicable to classroom scrutiny’ (Elmore and Coleman 2019, p. 30). Their action research involving 56 Eight Grade Language Arts students demonstrates the power of these texts to support adolescent students in analysing texts, identifying power relationships and reading critically. Such learning is particularly crucial for adolescents who are at a stage in their development where they are searching to form identities (Erikson 1968; ELINET 2016), but also because they are more exposed to the persuasive rhetoric of popular texts such as memes, Snapchat stories, YouTube videos, tweets, video games and protest signs (Elmore and Coleman 2019). Because adolescents engage with many of these types of text in their daily lives outside of school (IRA 2012), it is essential that their teachers also view these texts as not only legitimate texts for classroom instruction, but of equal importance to the traditional literary canon and traditional printed texts with which they themselves are familiar. Only then can these powerful learning tools be utilised as part of a balanced and varied ‘mélange of texts’ (Abrams and Gerber 2014, p. 22) as part of effective literacy development.

This brings me to the second point concerning Abrams and Gerber’s call for balance and parity in terms of the texts used to promote adolescent literacy development. While the texts such as those discussed here feature strongly in students’ daily lives beyond the classroom and form part of their ‘out of school literacy practices’ (Moje 2000, 2004; Williams 2005; Leander and Boldt 2012; Gee 2015), many commentators argue that the incongruity between the curricular and social literacies of adolescents (Moje 2000; Knobel 2001; Williams 2005; Young and Moss 2006; Jewitt 2008) is an obstacle to literacy development. Adolescent students spend significantly more time reading and writing in online spaces than in classrooms (Jewitt 2008; Williams 2008; Clark and De Zoysa 2011; Leu et al., 2011; Gee 2015) and digital media practices are ‘an integral part of daily life’ (Williams 2017, p.141). There is a gulf in terms of their experience of text in school and in their lives outside school. In the Irish post-primary context, a recent sociocultural study (Quinlan and Curtin 2017) explores the connections and disconnections reported by a group of
adolescents in the post-primary setting in their study concerning literacy and identity. A mixed-methods approach was adopted whereby 25 students aged 13/14 completed questionnaires and five participants were then selected to participate in interviews. For these students, ‘school in many ways is alien to the world they participate in outside educational boundaries’ as students encountered ‘contrasting literacies’ that are very different to those that they had previously encountered (Quinlan and Curtin 2017, pp.458-459). Students highlight the dated nature of their prescribed texts in the English syllabus in particular, perceived as irrelevant to them, and how the primary mode of printed text is at odds with the multimodal world they inhabit outside of school. The authors conclude that ‘students’ preferred literacies were at odds with the prescribed literature in school, with students emphasising the gulf in scholastic and social literacies’(Quinlan and Curtin 2017, p.462); rather, students have to ‘twist, bend and reform their preferred identities’ in relation to literacy within the ‘scholastic figured world’ of education (Quinlan and Curtin 2017, p.468). As discussed in section 1.3.5.4 regarding important considerations for adolescent literacy development, motivation for learning is a particular concern at this stage in a student’s learning journey and Daniels (2010) regards relatedness as a key factor in motivating and engaging students in learning. In situations such as that described by Quinlan and Curtin in their aptly-titled paper ‘Contorting Identities’, ‘the social world of the student is not well represented in the scholastic world’, and the result is often ‘disengagement and dissatisfaction in school’ (2017, p. 463). If students cannot relate to texts and literacy practices, if they cannot see the relevance or value of the texts they encounter, or moreover, if they do not feel their literacies and identities outside of school are valued in school, it can prove difficult to motivate them in learning. This is especially true for students who struggle with literacy or with learning more generally. Ensuring students are exposed to a variety of text types can increase relatedness (Daniels 2010) and in turn, motivate students to engage in learning.

As well as motivating adolescent students, engagement with texts that are relevant and relatable also offers an opportunity to bridge the gap between home and school as part of the learning process, supporting learning and making it meaningful. Moje and colleagues argue that failure to recognise students’ out of school experiences, home-lives, cultural insights, interests in popular culture, hobbies, pastimes and
practices - what they refer to as their ‘funds of knowledge and Discourses’ (2004, p. 64) - is a missed opportunity for literacy learning. Discourses, as discussed in 2.3.1, are ways of being in the world. ‘Funds of Knowledge’ are conceptually understood as the ‘historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being’ (Moll et al. 1992, p. 133). Moje and colleagues’ (2004) study with 30 youths in a Latino Community reveals a variety of funds of knowledge that often go untapped as motivational and participatory ‘ways in’ to content knowledge in science classrooms. The adolescent participants exhibit funds of knowledge pertaining to family life regarding landscaping, dry-cleaning and farming that are ‘directly relevant to the scientific concepts under study in both air and water-quality units’ (Moje et al. 2004, p. 52), yet they are not fully exploited. Regarding funds of knowledge relating to their peer groups, participants offer sophisticated knowledge of bike-stunts, music, swimming and surfing the internet, participants’ understandings and proficiency is ‘replete with social purpose and literate practice’, all of which could be connected to the science curriculum, be it through their study of gravity, forward motion or acoustics in physics. Engaging with a variety of text types and linking to adolescents’ out of school literacy practices will help students to be more proficient in handling the infinite number of texts they will encounter in print and digital spaces, in school and throughout their lives after school.

However, not only do students need to learn how to read a variety of texts; they also need opportunities to write, create and produce, across genres and text types. This necessitates flexibility in relation to the modes of representation used by students to demonstrate their learning, and it has the potential to motivate and build confidence, thereby promoting autonomy. Darrington and Dousay’s literature review (2015) highlights the potential of multimodal writing to motivate struggling secondary students to write. They reveal how ‘multimodal writing has four areas of relative advantage over traditional writing assignments’ (2015, p. 30). It can motivate through novelty, it provides writers with an audience, it can offer choice and control to students, and can be relevant and related to their lives and interests. For instance, in a multimodal classroom, an assessment of students’ understanding of a central theme in a Shakespearean drama text could consist of students choosing between engaging in a critical essay, an oral presentation or recording a short animated video.
to demonstrate their understanding. Again, this connects the scholastic world of school and the literacy practices valued by students outside school.

It is essential that we engage adolescent students with a variety of contemporary texts for a number of reasons; to motivate, to create learning opportunities and to ensure that students are equipped to handle the variety of texts that they will be expected to understand and produce in school and beyond. Highlighting the relevance and legitimacy of multimodal and digital, as well as printed texts, in the scholastic world of the secondary subject classroom will also empower students by legitimising their ‘funds of knowledge’. Engaging with a rich and varied diet of multimodal, digital and print texts may support adolescent learners by helping them to see connections but also to feel connected.

2.5.5.6 Returning to Critical Literacy

While critical literacy perspectives have been previously explored in section 2.4, I return to the concept as this section ends. Having considered the literature pertaining to digital literacy, multiliteracies, multimodal and contemporary texts, it is evident that critical literacy is increasingly important in today’s multimodal society, where ‘the cultural forms of global capital combine images, words, and sound to produce highly seductive experiences that are not in everyone’s best interests’ (Duncum 2004, p.262). In an era of fake news (Wendling 2018), students need to be empowered to be critically literate as ‘we are no more ‘successful’ readers and writers if we are prey to manipulative texts than if we cannot decode’ (Freebody 1992, p.58). In fact, for educators it would be ‘highly irresponsible in the face of saturation by the Internet and media culture to ignore these forms of socialisation and culture’ (Kellner and Share 2005 p.371). It is argued that now, more than ever, ‘students need critical literacy skills and discernment to judge the appropriateness, morality, authenticity, truth, significance, relevance and substance of the texts they encounter’ (Mills 2016, p.4). Given that adolescence is a time of searching and questioning as part of the process of identity development (Erikson 1968), and that adolescents are increasingly exposed to a variety of texts in their out of school literacy practices (IRA 2012), putting critical literacy on the agenda of adolescent education is a moral imperative. Adolescents must be equipped to critically assess and discern the texts, opinions, arguments and ideologies that they encounter.
However, there is another agenda inherent to critical literacy, one pertaining to social justice. McLaren states that critical literacy ‘involves decoding the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms such as television and film in order to reveal their selective interests… to create a citizenry critical enough to both analyse and challenge the oppressive characteristics of the larger society so that a more just, equitable and democratic society can be created’.

(1988, p.214)

Certainly any text, be it a traditional print text, a work of visual art or an interactive digital text, can be read from a critical perspective. However, given students’ exposure to multiliteracies and multimodal texts, now more pervasive in a digital age, multimodal texts offer fertile ground in which we can promote students’ capacity for critical literacy (Molden 2007; Jewitt 2008; Rogers and O’ Daniels 2015; Mills 2016). This is partly due to the interactive and participatory nature of digital learning whereby there is a ‘democratization of knowledge’ and the promotion of ‘collaborative authorship and digitally connected knowledge communities’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011). Thus the individual has become simultaneous creator and consumer of knowledge as online communities are presented as powerful spaces to discuss, question, and critique. Texts are not just read but also remastered, ‘remixed’ (Leander and Vasudevan 2009, p.130) and rewritten. While it is important to note that ‘digital engagement does not necessarily constitute critical literacy’ (Rogers and O’ Daniels 2015, p.73), the potential of digital engagement to promote critical literacy, to analyse and challenge dominant discourses as advocated by McLaren, is something that can be exploited.

2.5.6 Critique

There are some criticisms of the understandings of literacy outlined in this chapter. For instance, although literacy has been reconceptualised over the decades, many international studies, including PISA, return to the dominant forms, modes and genres associated with reading and writing (Salvatori 2013, p.67). Alternatively, Gee acknowledges that the New Literacies Studies movement ‘tended to have little or nothing to say about the mind and cognition…it paid attention only to the social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts of literacy’ (2010, p.169). Such a position has encouraged some critics to argue that there was a neglect of the cognitive dimension by NLS. Criticisms have also been levelled at NLS for focusing
on the literacy practices of middle class, English speaking youth from privileged backgrounds in developed countries, particularly in relation to digital literacy practices. However, Mills argues that this is a generalisation that requires scrutiny and points to the number of studies that have been conducted internationally that have focused on the literacy practices of economically marginalized students from multilingual backgrounds (2016, p.8).

Mills levels a number of critiques at the NLS. While NLS has always stressed the ‘plurality and context specific nature of the new literacies’, she argues that NLS has yet to account for common patterns of literacy practice that hold across diverse case studies’ (2016, p.25). She calls for there to be an identification of the ‘limits of the local’ and for NLS proponents to acknowledge the extent to which participants within local communities are influenced by outside and external influences, particularly in our networked world. Linked to this point, while NLS have ‘worked against a universalist view of literacy’ (2016, p.25) she points to how from its very conception, NLS have drawn on comparisons across ethnographic research sites.

Leander and Boldt (2012, 2013) criticise the understanding of multimodality as presented here, concerned that such views place too much emphasis on text at the expense of literacy events and practices. Similarly Leander and Vasudevan (2009) argue for a need to ‘unmoor multimodality’ from a focus on the static page or screen with the multimodal text-as-object and focus on the ‘event’, or the multimodal performance (2009, p. 127). In a ‘Voice for Literacy’ podcast, Baker and colleagues stress how ‘literacy is one of the huge range of materials that children draw from in order to feed their passions…literacy is not the point; it’s some of the material that we can use in living our lives’ (Baker et al., 2013).

Finally, Luke (2000) questions the plausibility of critical literacy as positioned in education reform policies and asks if there is really a possibility of embedding critical literacy practices in schools, since schools are never neutral but ideologically influenced institutions of the state.

2.5.7 Chapter Summary

While ‘there is no one singular phenomenon that is literacy’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2007, p.2), this section has sought to promote reflection on the many and multifaceted assumptions that exist regarding literacy as a concept. The central aim
was to provide an insight into pertinent literature regarding the concept of literacy, and the theories and models discussed here are utilised as lenses to present and analyse the findings of this study in later chapters.

In recent decades, literacy theory has evolved and expanded from a cognitive focus on reading and writing to an understanding that reading and writing are tools to make meaning. However, making meaning is not a cognitive act alone; it is physical, social, cultural and oftentimes, ideological. Changes in how literacy is understood are acknowledged in education policy documents, both nationally and internationally and have implications for educators. To conclude this section I draw on the understanding of ‘being literate’ offered by Parker and colleagues:

‘Fundamentally, to be literate requires us to use and develop our potential in reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to make meaning and to enhance our belonging, self-expression, power and critique as we go about living our lives’.

(Parker et al., 2017, p.39)

In this study, literacy is understood as being less concerned with texts and more with literacy events and practices, less focused on the products and more on the person and processes, less individual and more social, multimodal rather than mono-modal. I now turn to explore how post-primary teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy are considered in this study by examining the literature relating to teachers’ beliefs.
3 Literature Review: Beliefs, Knowledge and Experiences of Policy Implementation

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents a critical review of the literature that is relevant to this study regarding three conceptual areas: teachers’ beliefs, teachers’ professional knowledge pertaining to literacy practices in the post-primary classroom and teachers’ experiences of policy implementation, the central, complex and interrelated concepts in this study.

I offer definitions and understandings of each of these concepts in the relevant sections, thereby exploring the terminology utilised over the course of this study. It is important to state that there is interdependence between the central concepts in this study. However, for the purpose of clarity, the literature regarding each concept is explored separately in sections 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 respectively.

3.2 Teachers’ Beliefs: Conceptual Understandings of Literacy

3.2.1 Introduction

‘As professionals we have the responsibility constantly to put the assumptions underlying our beliefs to test. Because beliefs affect our world view’.

(Harste et al., 1984, p.87)

As noted in the introductory chapter, this study aims to explore teachers’ understandings of literacy, and the first research objective of this research is to
explore teachers’ conceptual understandings or beliefs about literacy. In order to frame the discussion of teachers’ understandings of literacy at a conceptual level, this section presents literature that offers some insight into the ‘messy construct’ (Pajares 1992) of teacher beliefs.

3.2.2 The Beliefs Examined in this Study

In terms of teachers’ beliefs, this study seeks to establish what teachers believe about literacy as a concept by considering how they describe literacy and the value literacy holds for them. It also seeks to establish if teachers’ beliefs about literacy as a concept have changed in light of recent education reforms and policy interventions. In particular, this study investigates the extent to which teachers’ beliefs align with the understanding of literacy advocated in LNLL. Finally, it seeks to ascertain whether or not teachers believe that they are responsible for literacy development. It is important to note that there is a dearth of research in this area. The National Literacy Trust conducted its first national teacher survey, examining literacy from teachers’ perspectives with a sample of 2,326 teachers from 112 schools in the UK, in 2015. The study was believed to be the first of its kind in the UK and important due to the fact that ‘little is known about teachers’ attitudes, confidence, beliefs and perspectives on literacy’ (Clark and Teravainen 2015, p.7). However in studies concerning teachers’ definitions of literacy, researchers have found that that there has been ‘tremendous variability in the ways in which literacy was defined’ (Keefe and Copeland 2011, p.97) and ‘diffuse understandings of what the word ‘literacy’ means’ (Clark and Teravainen 2015, p.11), likely to stem from the complex and contested nature of literacy as a concept.

3.2.3 Beliefs as a Concept

It is often difficult to gain an understanding of teachers’ beliefs, a ‘formidable concept’ and a ‘messy construct’ (Pajares 1992). Firstly, the term ‘belief’ is used interchangeably with terms such as opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptualisations and so on. Secondly, beliefs ‘cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend and do’ (Pajares 1992, p.314). Pajares argues that it is difficult to separate beliefs from knowledge and experience, since beliefs are viewed as ‘knowledge of a sort’ (1992, p.310), drawing their power from previous episodes or experiences (Nespor 1987) resulting in an
argument that teachers are more inclined ‘to base their beliefs upon past experiences than on research’ (Pourdavood et al., 2015 p.598). Thus clarity about what we mean by beliefs is crucial and Pajares recommends that ‘research studies would be well served by a reasoned choice commonly understood and consistently employed’ (1992, p.311). In the literature, teachers’ beliefs are understood as their implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms and the subject matter to be taught’ (Kagan 1992, p.66) or as ‘a set of complex beliefs about a wide range of professional practices and the people, structures, systems and theoretical paradigms that underpin them’ (Devine et al., 2013, p.84). This study adopts the definition of ‘belief’ put forward by Rokeach (1968) who contends that a belief is ‘any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase ‘I believe that…’ (p.113). Rokeach goes on to argue that beliefs may be descriptive, evaluative or prescriptive. Furthermore, and important in the context of this study, he argues that when clusters of beliefs are organised around a concept and predisposed to action, such organisation becomes an attitude. When beliefs are evaluative, comparative and judgemental, and a predisposition for action becomes more imperative, beliefs can become values. Rokeach argues that our beliefs, attitudes and values become our belief system.

3.2.3.1 **Beliefs as determinants of classroom practice: Philosophy before strategies**

Numerous studies highlight a link between teachers’ beliefs and classroom practice (Nespor 1987; Pajares 1992; Lenski et al., 1998; Hall 2005; Santa 2006; Kim et al., 2013; Warren-Kring and Warren 2013 Buchanan 2015; Clark and Teravainen 2015; Pourdavood et al., 2015; Fives and Buehl 2016). ‘It is now widely accepted that teachers’ personally held beliefs and values help to guide their teaching practices’ (Freedman and Carver 2007, p.656) and that ‘the professional knowledge base of teachers is grounded in their beliefs and values’ (Gleeson 2012, p.11). If teachers structure their practice according to their beliefs, including how they should carry out their work, how their students learn and how to structure lessons and classrooms to enhance learning (OECD 2013, p.151), it is pertinent to explore the educational philosophies that shape those beliefs.
Teachers’ beliefs influence how they understand the very nature of knowledge or ‘epistemology’, understood here as ‘the systematic consideration, in philosophy and elsewhere, of knowing: when knowledge is valid, what counts as truth and so on’ (Packer and Goicoechea 2000, p.227). This is of significance in this study as it is held that how curriculum reform occurs and the extent to which educational policy is enacted is often determined by the teacher’s ‘instructional script’ (Barrett-Tatum and Dooley, 2015, p.266). For instance, Powell conducted a four-year empirical study of two teachers who ‘held contrasting beliefs about the nature of knowledge’ (1996, p.368). He argues that Dan held an objective epistemology while Amy held a subjective epistemology. Those who hold an objectivist mind-set, Powell argues, hold the view that ‘knowledge is based on modernist, objective scientific rationality; that knowledge is produced in a value-free manner, that it has an existing hierarchical structure, and that all students, if they are to understand science, must master this basic structure’ (1996 p.372). Those who reflect a subjectivist epistemology on the other hand, might hold that knowledge

‘is based on personal meaning and subjective interpretation...knowledge is produced in a value-laden manner that (is) linked to personal ethics and morals... (and that knowledge is) personally constructed when interacting with another person’s thoughts, ideas or experiences’.

(Powell 1996, p.373)

We will now consider how these beliefs regarding knowledge can have implications for the classroom practices that teachers choose to adopt, the ‘instructional script’ that guides their practice. Fives and Buehl (2016) contend that the most common approach to studying teachers’ beliefs about teaching ‘is a dichotomised perspective on these beliefs, asking teachers whether they see teaching practice as student-centered (typically reflecting a constructivist model) or teacher-centered (typically reflecting a transmission model) (2016, p.116). We now turn to these different perspectives to consider how these theories could potentially illuminate the findings in this study.

3.2.3.2 **Constructivism**

Constructivism is defined as ‘the philosophical and scientific position that knowledge arises through a process of active construction’ (Mascolo and Fischer 2005). Robson holds that the core posit of constructivism is that people create or
construct their own realities and that therefore, there are ‘multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge’ (Robson 2002, p.27). Grounded in the work of theorists such as Piaget (1970), Bruner (1986) and Vygotsky (1978), constructivism in education has the following implications:

‘Constructivism holds that learning is essentially active. A person learning something new brings to that experience all of his or her previous knowledge and current mental patterns. Each new fact or experience is assimilated into a living web of understanding that already exists in that person’s mind. As a result, learning is neither passive or simply objective’.

(Abbott and Ryan 1999, p.67)

If the underlying principle of constructivism is that knowledge is actively constructed by the learners themselves, then

‘human beings are compared to scientists who constantly carry out their own personal experiments, construct hypotheses and actively seek to confirm or disprove them in the process of seeking knowledge. Gradually, they build up their own concepts about the world which they come in contact with and they create their own understanding’.

(Berry 2008, p.9)

Brooks and Brooks (1999, p.21) outline five overarching principles of constructivist pedagogy and these are presented in Table 2 as implications for constructivist pedagogy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Principles of Constructivist Pedagogy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Posing Problems of Emerging Relevance to Learners</td>
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<td>Structuring Learning around ‘Big Ideas’ or Primary Concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeking and Valuing Students’ Points of View</td>
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<td>Adapting Curriculum to Address Students’ Suppositions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing Student Learning in the Context of Teaching</td>
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Table 1: Overarching Principles of Constructivist Pedagogy

Ultimately, ‘classrooms supporting the principles of constructivism embrace the notion that learners make sense of the world by combining prior knowledge with new experience… (and) are responsible for constructing their own understanding of
the world’ (Lenski et al., 1998, p.3). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is an international questionnaire completed by teachers and principals from a nationally representative sample concerning professional development, teaching beliefs and practices, working conditions, et cetera. According to TALIS 2013, across all participating countries, the practice of students working in small groups was significantly and positively related to constructivist teaching beliefs (OECD 2013a, p.165). Such pedagogy positions the teacher as a guide or facilitator to scaffold and co-construct knowledge with students.

3.2.3.3 Direct Transmission

In contrast to constructivism, teachers who hold ‘direct transmission’ beliefs about teaching and learning often view learning as a process of ‘knowledge transmission’ (OECD 2013b, p.34). Other phrases appear in the literature to describe this approach to classroom practice such as ‘didactic’ or ‘transmission pedagogy’ (Cope 2014) or ‘conventional instruction’ (Pourdavood et al., 2015). As noted earlier, Freire (1996) used the phrase ‘banking education’ to describe the process of teachers depositing knowledge in the minds of students. Teachers who subscribe to a transmission model may view knowledge as ‘a transmittable entity’ and view their role as teacher as one who engages in ‘transmitting knowledge’ (Kang and Wallace 2005). The transmission model of teaching emphasises ‘skill and drill, teacher-centered instruction and passive learning’ (Alvermann 2002, p.201). A traditional transmission model of learning is one that is associated with more ‘teacher centered and curriculum-driven instruction’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.5). By the time students reach post-primary or secondary school, they often experience ‘transmission or banking models of teaching that focus on content alone or that promote ‘quick fix’ approaches to learning’ (Knobel 2001, p.409), where ‘the joint nature of teaching and learning’ is overlooked (Coolahan et al., 2017, p.7).
Lenski et al. (1998) outline the characteristics of a transmission model of teaching:

‘classrooms are dominated by teacher talk and textbooks are the primary source of information...instead of being considered thinkers and inquirers, students are considered blank slates awaiting fulfilment as their teachers disseminate information. The teachers are the source of knowledge and it is their primary responsibility to fill the ‘blank slates’ of their students’.

(Lenski et al., 1998, p.2)

Advocates of didactic pedagogy will usually promote a fixed classroom architecture, organised in a way that students listen to the teacher who is viewed as a figure of authority. Textbooks ensure that children are all ‘on the same page’ and learning is perceived as a process of ‘knowledge absorption’ (Cope 2014). Some authors contend that there has been a significant shift from transmission models to more constructivist models of education in recent years. For instance, Resnick argues that there has been a move from instruction and learning that focused on practice and repetition to interpretation and explanation when learning complex material; from ‘stamping in’ correct answers and ‘stamping out’ incorrect answers, led mainly by the teacher, to promoting students’ self-monitoring and self-management; and from a focus on the learning of the individual to also considering the social dimensions of learning (2010, p.186). However, there is also a significant body of research that would argue that despite the calls for more student-centered, active and constructivist practices, transmission persists as the dominant form of instruction. In the United States middle and high school context, Alvermann (2002) argues that there are several reasons for its prevalence:

‘One frequently cited justification for its use is the need to address pressures coming from outside the classroom, such as accountability in meeting curriculum standards and preparing students for state-wide assessments. However, pressures within the classroom to maintain order, regulate socialization patterns, and meet the constraints of time and resource availability also contribute to the transmission model’s longstanding use among subject area teachers’.

(Alvermann 2002, p.201)

In the Irish context, Gleeson speaks about the dominant ‘technicist’ discourse that focuses on ‘delivery of the curriculum’ and ‘covering the course’ (2009, p.122). This view is supported by findings from empirical research involving classroom observations in six primary and six post-primary schools in Ireland where the authors argue that ‘across the entire sample, active learning practices were one of the
areas which was least evident’ (Devine et al., 2013, p.99). Smyth’s Post Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) (Smyth 2016a) involved interviews with key personnel and a survey of all teachers who had first year classes in the case-study schools and reports that there was frequently a mismatch between the kinds of approaches young people had experienced in primary school and those adopted by their post-primary teachers. Just 13% of those teachers surveyed reported using frequent questioning in classes and four out of ten stated that students regularly copied notes from the board (Smyth 2016a, p.168). Many of the students interviewed commented on ‘the prevalence of teacher talk and reading from the textbook’ (Smyth 2016a, p.172) and that some teachers seemed to emphasise ‘covering the course’ (Smyth 2016a, p.170). In contrast, many students spoke about how more active teaching methods, greater discussion and interaction in class, as well as being able to relate to the material being studied, supported them in their learning (Smyth 2016a, p.177). Furthermore, the study reports that ‘teacher-centred classes were a common experience across all school years’ (Smyth 2016a, p.174) but students in exam years, ‘third and especially sixth year, reported a greater mismatch between the active learning that they favoured and what they experienced in their classes. As the exam approached, there was less use of interactive methods than previously with a much greater focus on covering the course in preparation for the exam’ (Smyth 2016a, p.174). In sixth-year classes in particular, ‘classes are heavily teacher dominated and exam-oriented’ with a strong emphasis on homework, on teachers doing most of the talking, on practicing exam papers and on copying notes from the board (Smyth 2016a, p.176).

A recent report was published concerning how young people are taught and how they learn in post-primary schools in Ireland. ‘So, how was School Today?’ sets out the views of some 3,242 young people aged 12-17 who responded to a survey through the network of 31 Comhairle na nÓg councils (Child and Youth councils). The report reveals that ‘young people want their teachers to use active teaching and learning approaches’ (DCYA 2017, p.ii) but ‘only 30% of students think their teachers make learning interesting and fun’ (DCYA 2017, p.26). The report also contends that the exam-focused system in Ireland detracts from a willingness to engage in active and student-centered learning. Ultimately, it reports ‘a mismatch between how teachers teach and how students feel they learn best’ (DCYA 2017, p.26).
Indeed, comparative research indicates that teachers in Irish post-primary schools, relative to many other countries, tend to employ more teacher-centred approaches, such as whole-class instruction or the teacher reading from a text book rather than student-centred constructivist approaches (Shiel et al., 2009). For instance, the 2009 TALIS Report presented findings in such a way:

‘Teachers in Ireland tend to support constructivist beliefs about teaching (e.g., they view their role as facilitator of active learning by students) to a lesser extent than teachers in Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Norway and Poland. Conversely, teachers in Ireland hold stronger direct transmission beliefs (e.g., they see their role as transmitting knowledge, and providing correct solutions) than teachers in these countries’.

(Shiel et al., 2009, pp.23-24)

Taken collectively, these studies highlight how transmission remains a ‘prevalent notion’ in education (Coolahan et al. 2017). Of course, it is also worth considering how we investigate teachers’ beliefs and practices. For instance, as with some of the aforementioned studies, this research involves teachers self-reporting and it is possible that teachers might want to espouse constructivist beliefs despite the fact that these aren’t reflected in their practices. Equally, it is possible that teachers may not be aware of their educational philosophies and how they can impact their practice on a subconscious level. These factors need to be deliberated when considering the findings that are reported regarding post-primary teachers’ literacy strategies in chapter six.

3.2.3.4 The Complexity of Changing Beliefs and Practices

There are a number of important considerations when exploring teachers’ beliefs and practices. Galton discusses the use of dichotomies, such as those outlined above, that are frequently used when discussing the subject of teaching methods and practices highlighting how oftentimes, we are presented with ‘transmission versus discovery learning’ or more recently ‘active versus passive learning’, as well as ‘traditional versus progressive stances’ (2007, pp.3-4). Elsewhere in the literature there are references to constructivist versus instructionist approaches and teacher-focused and content oriented practice as opposed to student-focused and learning oriented practice (Entwhistle et al., 2000). However, it must be noted that ‘these are ‘broad all-embracing constructs’ (Galton 2007, p.4) and while there is an underlying assumption that all teachers belong to ‘one camp or the other’ (Galton 2007, p.3), the
reality is that most teachers borrow from both camps and instead, occupy different points on a continuum in terms of the approaches and strategies that they use. This is something that is considered when discussing the professional practice of teachers in this study in relation to literacy development.

It is argued that teachers’ beliefs can change over time based on new experiences. Sometimes changes in beliefs can result in teachers experiencing ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Festinger 1957), understood as a state where an individual is confronted by inconsistent or contradictory thoughts, beliefs or attitudes. In an effort to suppress the tension caused by such an experience and eliminate the dissonance, an individual must take action. McFalls and Cobb-Roberts outline the different responses that a teacher might enact in the example below:

‘A teacher who uses a direct instruction approach to teaching science may experience dissonance after reading an elaborate report disconfirming the effectiveness of this instructional technique. To reduce psychological discomfort, the teacher may (a) change the new cognition to make it consistent with the pre-existing cognition (i.e., deny or devalue the research altogether), (b) add new cognitions to bridge the gap between the opposing cognitions (i.e., find additional information that supports the idea that using a direct instruction approach is better than no instruction or other forms of instruction), or (c) change his or her behaviour (i.e., stop using a direct instruction approach altogether)”.

(2001, p.165)

Edley explores this by drawing on the concept of ‘ideological dilemmas’, defined as the positions people find themselves in when they are confronted by the sometimes ‘dilemmatic nature’ of experience, full of ‘contrary or competing arguments’ (2001, p.203). In keeping with Galton’s view that it is difficult to compartmentalise beliefs and practices, Billig argues that

‘Teachers’ ideological conceptions tend not to be so neatly packaged and consistent as those posited by theorists of educational ideology; similarly, the practice of classroom teaching tends not to be a straightforward realization of some such coherent position. Rather...teachers may well hold views of teaching, of children, of the goals of educational practice and the explanations of educational failure, which theorists of ideology would locate in opposed camps. And so also will the practical activity of teaching reflect principles that are propounded by what are held to be opposed ideologies. Further, it is not unknown for teachers to be aware of such contradictions, to feel themselves involved in difficult choices and as having to make compromises’.

(Billig et al., 1988, p.46)
The literature outlined here acknowledges the complexity and interdependence of teachers’ professional experiences and practices and how teachers can subscribe to different, sometimes competing, views simultaneously or at different times in their career.

It should also be acknowledged that beliefs can be resistant to change (Guskey 2002; Darling-Hammond 2016). Guskey (2002) argues that in the context of CPD programmes, teachers’ beliefs generally don’t change until changes in their practices have resulted in changes in student learning outcomes, supporting the view that beliefs are largely influenced by experiences. For instance, over the course of their careers and oftentimes when engaging with CPD, teachers may experience ‘confirmation bias’, a concept with a long-recognised history and derived from studies in reasoning in the field of psychology. Quite simply, it refers to ‘using evidence to build a case to justify a conclusion already drawn’ (Nickerson 1998) where teachers tend to develop theories about instruction that are consistent with their belief systems. Nickerson contends that ‘confirmation bias connotes a less explicit, less consciously one-sided case-building process (and) refers usually to unwitting selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence’ (Nickerson 1998, p.175).

In a similar vein, ‘over-assimilation’ is described by Timperley as

> *what happens when teachers believe that they are enacting new practices when, in reality, they have made only superficial changes... The problem of over-assimilation means that new information is sometimes perceived as congruent (“I already do this”) when it is actually quite dissonant. As a result, teachers’ new practice resembles the new learning only on the surface; in reality, little changes*.

(Timperley et al., 2007, pp.xxxix-xli)

These are all important considerations in a study that seeks to explore and provide an insight into teachers’ beliefs and practices about literacy, while also highlighting the interdependence between beliefs and practices. I now turn to focus specifically on literature relating to teachers’ professional knowledge and examine some models and approaches to literacy development that could support teachers’ practice in relation to literacy teaching and learning.
3.3 Professional Knowledge Regarding Literacy

3.3.1 Teachers’ Professional Knowledge

Gess-Newsome argues that teachers’ professional knowledge consists of a number of ‘professional knowledge bases’ including assessment knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, knowledge of students and curricular knowledge (2015, pp.31-34). Indeed, much of the literature concerning teacher knowledge draws heavily on the work of Shulman who highlights how an understanding of ‘both content and process are needed by teaching professionals’ (1986, p.13). Content knowledge refers to the specific content of a particular subject or the ‘substance of subjects’ (James and McCormick 2009). This is important given the post-primary context in this study post-primary teachers are often regarded as ‘subject specialists’ or content-area teachers (Hall 2005; Freedman and Carver 2007; Lacina and Watson 2008; Fang and Schleppegrell 2010; Hipwell and Klenowski 2011; Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). While teachers need an in-depth knowledge regarding the content of their subject, they also need pedagogical knowledge.

Certainly there are many definitions and understandings of pedagogy, with some conceiving pedagogy as ‘the science of the art of teaching’ (Galton 2007, p.10). This study draws on the understanding of pedagogy as proposed by Kalantzis who understands pedagogy as

‘the purposeful and deliberate recruiting of pedagogical traditions for specific purposes and goals... teachers develop repertoires of pedagogical practices and instructional sequences and they can pick and choose what is appropriate’.

(New Learning 2016b)

This understanding is informed by the work of Shulman who explains that pedagogical knowledge

‘goes beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge for teaching’ equipping the teacher with a ‘veritable armamentarium of alternative forms of representation, some of which derive from research whereas others originate in the wisdom of practice’.

(1986, p.9)

Shulman also introduced the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (1986), regarded as ‘a merger of knowledge about content and knowledge about pedagogy’ (Darling-Hammond 2016, p.84). PCK concerns how it is important to
acknowledge that ‘each subject has its own special compendium of useful analogies and its own methods of conducting enquiries’ (Galton 2007, p.9). These theories regarding pedagogy and PCK are important in this study and while not discounting the importance of all Gess-Newsome’s professional knowledge bases (2015), the limited scope and focus of this study necessitates that this section focuses predominantly on ‘pedagogical knowledge’ adopted by teachers in relation to literacy development specifically.

The literature argues that teachers need ‘an instructional toolbox that is full’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.160) in order to meet the literacy needs of their students, with the explicit instruction of strategies (Pressley and Gaskins 2006) as an integral part of their classroom practice. ‘Instruction in effective content area classrooms resembles coaching. Coaches know that verbal explanations (the pedagogy of telling) are not sufficient. They model the skills and strategies necessary for success’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.160). This means that teachers need a number of ‘practical tools’:

‘Practical tools are classroom practices, strategies and resources that do not serve as broad conceptions to guide an array of decisions but, instead, have more local and immediate utility. These include instructional practices, such as journal writing and daily oral language exercises, and resources such as textbooks or curriculum materials that provide such instructional practices’.

(Grossman et al., 1999, p.14)

As demonstrated here, reflecting on pedagogical knowledge presents a number of different terms such as ‘pedagogical practices’, ‘instructional sequences’ and ‘practical tools’ to name but a few. Elsewhere in the literature, these approaches are referred to as ‘strategies’; the intentional, deliberate actions that teachers and learners invoke to solve a specific problem or meet a particular goal (Garner 1990). This study draws on the understanding of pedagogical knowledge put forward here by Grossman to examine the practices, strategies and resources utilised by teachers to promote adolescent literacy development. However, for the purpose of clarity the term that has been adopted in this study to describe what teachers do in their practice is ‘strategies’ to describe all of these actions, choices, approaches and resources. This is largely due to the fact that understanding teachers’ professional knowledge is a complex task and the extent to which teachers have ‘conscious access’ to the knowledge that underpins effective teaching and learning is far from clear.
(Entwhistle et al., 2000, p.8). Therefore, in this study, it is the analysis and discussion of the strategies that teachers’ use that provides some insight into their professional knowledge regarding literacy and literacy development.

3.3.2 Responsibility for Literacy Development

However, a study of this nature must first confront a question that frequently comes to the fore in discussions regarding literacy development; ‘Are all teachers literacy teachers?’ The traditional understanding in the post-primary context was that the English teacher was responsible for literacy development, particularly when, as noted earlier, ‘literacy’ is narrowly conceived as reading and writing and the understanding of ‘text’ was conceived narrowly as alphabetic and printed text. However, the sociocultural turn has resulted in there now being a much broader understanding of what it means to be ‘literate’ as well as what constitutes ‘text’. For instance, Siebert refers to how in his mathematics classes, texts included pictures, manipulatives, discussions, symbols and conceptually oriented explanations (cited in Draper et al., 2005, p.15). Because all students encounter texts in all subject areas, all teachers need to explicitly instruct students how to navigate the texts that they encounter (Wray 2001; Draper et al., 2005; Siebert et al., 2016). Furthermore, English teachers cannot be expected to be aware of the complex cognitive processes involved in reading texts in different disciplines and therefore cannot assume responsibility for overall literacy progress (Fisher and Ivey 2005; Lacina and Watson 2008; Gillis 2014; Smagorinsky 2015).

‘Literacy instruction... is a matter for all teachers; to understand how literacy development and reading processes actually work, to understand that there are skills and strategies to be mastered in secondary content areas and to accept responsibility for incorporating literacy development into their instruction... to make use of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking for different purposes’.

(Freedman and Carver 2007, p.654)

It is with the support of such research that LNLL claims that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47). However despite such rhetoric, this study questions whether or not post-primary teachers believe they have the ‘practical tools’ to support adolescent literacy development.
3.3.3 **Teacher Confidence and Literacy Strategies**

Much international research regarding literacy development in the post-primary or secondary setting explores teachers’ lack of confidence regarding literacy development. For instance, one study highlights how a group of maths teachers were ‘not comfortable being called ‘reading teachers’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.4) while another illustrated how agri-science teachers did not feel confident when it comes to addressing the literacy difficulties of their students (Park and Osborne 2006, p.41). A mixed-methods study involving 39 middle and high school teachers aimed to explore their beliefs about literacy and their implementation of reading strategies in content area classrooms. The researchers utilised a validated assessment scale to identify beliefs and they used interviews to examine professional practice. The findings of this study highlight a perceived lack of pedagogical knowledge as teachers ‘feel they are not adequately trained’ (McCoss-Yerigan and Krepps 2010, p.6) in terms of classroom literacy practices, and that they lack experience with instructional strategies appropriate for expository texts (Draper et al., 2005). Moats contends that ‘teachers do not display fully explicit awareness of spoken language structure and its relationship to writing just because they themselves are literate’ (1994, p.88). More recently, Didau has argued that a potential ‘stumbling block’ is a lack of knowledge relating to writing skills that includes grammatical conventions of language, how words work, how sentences and coherent responses should be structured in written forms and genre awareness; that ‘through no fault of their own, many teachers are not familiar with these concepts’ (Didau 2017).

Much of this uncertainty relating to professional knowledge regarding literacy might be attributed to the organisation of post-primary or secondary education into discrete subject areas. It often results in a dilemma for teachers who position themselves to focus on covering course content and thereby struggle to see the value or find the time to implement literacy strategies in their practice (Warren-Kring and Warren 2013). This dichotomy is further explored by Hipwell and Klenowski, reiterating earlier discussion of transmissive teaching approaches and the cognitive dissonance that teachers often experience:

>‘For many teachers, particularly high school teachers, assuming responsibility for teaching the literacies of their learning areas, or the curriculum literacies, has been and continues to be a challenging prospect. Teachers of content area subjects see
themselves first and foremost as deliverers of content. Often teachers bemoan that there is insufficient time to cover the content’.

(2011, p.137)

The ‘egg-crate organisation’ of schools (Lortie 1975) means that subject area teachers ‘often lack the necessary language awareness and literacy strategies to help students cope with the specific language and literacy demands of their discipline’ (Fang and Coatham 2013, p.629) as there is ‘a lack of expertise among many educators on how to teach comprehension, conceptual knowledge and vocabulary effectively’ (Murnane et al., 2012, p.12).

Irish research echoes international findings. MacMahon’s study (2012) investigates post-primary teachers’ ability to meet the needs of students with literacy difficulties. Conducted in three post-primary schools in 2010, just prior to the introduction of LNLL, it concludes that ‘teachers lacked the professional knowledge and skills necessary to support students with literacy difficulties’ (MacMahon 2012, p.257).

For a number of teachers, there was a sense that it was not their responsibility to teach literacy but rather, to teach the content of their subjects and for some teachers, literacy development was ‘somebody else’s problem’ (MacMahon 2012, p.197). Similar findings are reported by the Learning to Teach Study (LETS) (Conway et al., 2011). This study, conducted in 2008/09 aimed to identify the individual and contextual dynamics of how student teachers develop curricular and cross-curricular competences during ITE and utilised surveys and interviews with student teachers. Like MacMahon’s study, it argued that student teachers in one ITE programme had very narrow conceptualisations of literacy. Conclusions could be drawn here that ‘teacher education both at pre- and in career stages in many instances may be failing to prepare teachers to adequately understand the nature and development of adolescent literacy in the subject classroom (Murphy et al., 2013, p.333). In the wake of the introduction of LNLL, Reidy (2013) conducted a case-study in one voluntary secondary school in Ireland involving 13 teachers of history, geography and science which sought to examine teachers’ attitudes towards literacy and literacy development. While the study highlighted how participants felt literacy was important for student learning and progression, Reidy identified issues such as time constraints, the volume of course content and the lack of emphasis on literacy in state examinations as potential obstacles to embedding a whole-school literacy guide
across the curriculum (2013 pp.63-65). She concluded that literacy largely remained the preserve of language classes.

Collectively, these studies highlight the complexity of reform regarding literacy and while it is laudable to state that all teachers should be literacy teachers, the personal literacy confidence of teachers can have a significant impact both on teachers’ beliefs and on teachers’ practices (Louden and Rohl 2006; McCross-Yerigan and Krepps 2010; Murphy et al., 2013). Furthermore, the literature presented here points to the complexity of literacy instruction in the post-primary setting where ‘teaching with an emphasis on literacy while delivering instruction in a content discipline requires a complex set of instructional strategies’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.159). Traditional understandings of literacy often result in many subject teachers believing that ‘they now have to be both experts in their field and experts in English and reading skills’ (Ronan 2015).

In stating that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47), LNLL proposes a ‘philosophical shift in what it means to teach’, something that is ‘not an easy task’ (Santa 2006, p.474). This is attributable to the fact that ‘the integration of literacy instruction in the secondary school is a complex change process that will require collaboration, communication and a commitment to major conceptual, structural and cultural changes’ (Moje 2008, p.105). This is something considered now as I present some different pedagogical approaches to literacy instruction that could inform teachers’ professional knowledge and underpin the strategies that teachers employ in their practice to support the literacy development of adolescents.

3.3.4 **Models to Promote Literacy Development**

The move away from traditional understandings of literacy as a technical skill led to the emergence of a number of models and frameworks in the 1980s and 1990s that acknowledge the sociocultural and constructed nature of literacy.

Green presents three dimensions of literacy that educators need to consider in an effort to move understandings of literacy beyond the ‘basics’ model. Guided by a sociocultural approach to literacy study, Green’s model of literacy refers to three interrelated dimensions are ‘operational’, ‘cultural’ and ‘critical’ (Green 1988, p.160-163). Respectively, these concern competency in using a language system, the cultural and contextualised nature of engaging with all texts and the ideological
nature of making meaning. Similarly, McLaren highlights three positions that characterise literacy development; functional literacy, cultural literacy and critical literacy. While functional literacy concerns ‘the technical mastery of particular skills’ (1988, p.213), cultural literacy concerns acquiring knowledge that is part of a particular culture and within the cultural literacy position, there is an interesting dichotomy; prescriptivists and pluralists. Prescriptivists argue that students’ literacy education should comprise of a particular set of texts, presented in a standard form of English and the language of the academy. Pluralists on the contrary, argue for ‘the legitimacy of a broader range of discursive practices which reflect more closely the language practices, values and interests of racially and economically diverse groups of students (McLaren 1988, p.215). Like Green’s third dimension of literacy (1988), McLaren’s critical position contends that all texts ‘constitute ideological weapons capable of enabling certain groups to solidify their power through acts of linguistic hegemony’ (McLaren 1988, p.218) Like Apple (1993), McLaren warns that critical literacy is essential to resist the imposition of values of dominant groups in society.

Freebody and Luke’s ‘Four Resources Model’ (1990) presents another sociocultural and multipronged approach to literacy development presenting four related roles that readers embody, those being the roles of code-breaker, text-participant, text user and text analyst (Freebody and Luke 1990; Freebody 1992). ‘Code-breakers’ employ the previously explored processes, skills and habits used to access alphabetic codes or scripts, the ‘technology of the written script’ (Freebody 1992, p.42), allowing the reader to ‘participate’ in making meaning of the text. By drawing on both textual/technical knowledge and topic knowledge, readers begin to ‘use’ texts and recognise how different texts serve different purposes or functions. Finally, as the reader ‘analyses’ texts, they begin to question and critique the ideological influences that are inherent in all texts (Apple 1993, 2013). In response to the changing nature of texts and society, Serafini ‘expands’ the four resources model for our changed society by repositioning the reader as ‘reader-viewer’ and expanding the notion of ‘text’ to move from mono-modal to multi-modal texts. As a result, the four resources are reconceptualised as ‘reader as navigator, reader as interpreter, reader as designer and reader as interrogator’. These changes acknowledge how texts are no longer predominantly print based, how recent understandings of interpretation position it as active, and also seek to acknowledge the plurality of interpretations. Serafini also
contends that texts are not just used by reader-viewer but can be re-used and designed, so that we are creators as well as consumers of texts. The move from ‘reader as analyst’ to ‘reader as interrogator’ is particularly interesting as it suggests ‘a more aggressive stance to interpreting and designing texts’ (Serafini 2012, p.159) and highlights the importance of the critical dimension of text navigation.

Just as Green and McLaren argue for the interrelatedness of their dimensions and positions respectively, the Four Resources model emphasises the need to nest these four related roles to promote effective literacy practice since ‘no single one will, of itself, fully enable students to use texts effectively’ (Freebody and Luke 1990, p.8). These models taken collectively, point to the complexity of literacy development but they also provide useful ways to explore teachers’ understandings of literacy. However, I deemed two models, outlined by Kalantzis et al. (2016) and Fang (2012), of particular significance in exploring adolescent literacy development in Ireland where students in post-primary classrooms learn in ‘content-areas’. These models are utilised as useful frameworks to analyse the findings of this study.

3.3.4.1 Kalantzis and Cope: Major Approaches to Literacy Teaching and Learning

Kalantzis and Cope present four traditions or paradigms in their model of ‘literacies pedagogy’ referred to as Didactic Literacy Pedagogy, Authentic Literacy Pedagogy, Functional Literacy Pedagogy and Critical Literacy Pedagogy (NewLearning 2016c). Each paradigm is explored here in an attempt to appreciate the complexity of literacy instruction and the knowledge that is required by teachers of literacy.
3.3.4.1.1 Didactic Literacy Pedagogy

‘Didactic literacy pedagogy’ involves overt instruction of grammar, rules, clauses and sentences and emphasise the importance of formal rules and concepts in language learning. The authors equate it to ‘traditional literacy pedagogy’, ‘transmission pedagogy’ or ‘direct instruction’ and argue that the focus is ‘almost exclusively on overt instruction and conceptualising’, where an ‘instructor or teacher tells you what you need to remember, or need to learn by heart’ (New Learning 2016c). Such an approach to pedagogy highlights the importance of grammar and vocabulary development and phonics. Texts might be drawn from the ‘Literary canon’, thus suggesting that these texts are what are valued. Reading is largely understood as fluency and the flow of words being sounded out and comprehension focuses on locating, selecting and responding with appropriate answers (New Learning 2016c). They argue that the ecology of a classroom where a didactic literacy pedagogy is enacted is one of uniformity, where there is a focus on standardisation and accepted use of language, and where there is little room for opinion or interpretation and ‘meaning’ is understood as ‘only one answer’ (New Learning 2016d). Learning offer centres around the syllabus, teachers and textbooks (New Learning 2016e). In a didactic literacy approach, there might be a distinct
focus on the following: grammar and labels for words, vocabulary, phonics, reading fluency and reading comprehension (New Learning 2016d). Cope acknowledges that the word didactic certainly has negative connotations but a focus on knowledge building and conceptualisation— the idea that students need the words and labels to describe what they are reading or making meaning with—is an aspect that should be retained in a holistic approach to literacy development (New Learning 2016e).

3.3.4.1.2 Authentic Literacy Pedagogy

An ‘Authentic literacy pedagogy’ focuses on immersion rather than explicit instruction and on the experiential and situated nature of learning. Students become literate through immersion in everyday literacy practices that are authentic and hold meaning for them by developing a love of language in a natural and authentic way (New Learning 2016c). Drawing heavily on the theories of Dewey (1916) and Montessori, ‘authentic means a certain kind of trueness and relevance to students’ needs’ (New Learning 2016f) and focuses not on acquisition of knowledge but on meaning-making that is progressive and student-centered. School, in Dewey’s understanding, was a social activity that should provide the skills students need to actively participate in civic society. It is learner centred and there is space for self-expression. Instead of learning abstract rules, words are learned in context in a way that is meaningful to learners.

Examples of authentic literacy pedagogy might include writing as a process (drafting, editing, rewriting) and when students learn spelling as they encounter the words rather than in decontextualized lists (New Learning 2016g). While it is active, experiential and immersive, this approach to pedagogy necessitates high levels of student motivation (New Learning 2016h) and takes a considerable amount of time, longer than the short cut of telling a student how to do something (New Learning 2016g). Furthermore, critics of the ‘immersion’ model will argue that some students will struggle without the direction afforded in the didactic pedagogy model. Again, the argument presented here is that a balanced approach is needed (New Learning 2016i).

3.3.4.1.3 Functional Literacy Pedagogy

The third major paradigm in Kalantzis and Cope’s model is ‘functional literacy pedagogy’. It draws extensively on much of the work already discussed concerning
multiliteracies, as well as on the work of Halliday, and stresses how we use different ‘literacies’ for different purposes and functions. Unlike the didactic approach of breaking down aspects of words, functional literacy pedagogy focuses on the purpose and structure of a text and acknowledges that different subjects and disciplines have different types of ‘text’. It is referred to as ‘functional’ because students need to understand different text structures and purposes in order to function as students and in life outside of school. Cope makes references to the differences in both purpose and structure between a news article, a fable, a recipe, and a science report (New Learning 2016j). This approach that looks at different texts in different disciplines fits well with the tenets of Disciplinary Literacy, explored later in this chapter.

Teachers who adopt a functional literacy pedagogy might still choose to explicitly teach students about grammar and word choice, but through the purpose of the text, and the overall aim of a functional approach is that students are aware of and able to read and write with purpose in different disciplines. The focus is on modelling using examples of texts that are characteristic of the discipline, followed by a scaffolded and guided joint-construction of texts between teacher and student, resulting in students independently constructing a text themselves. Cope and Kalantzis point to how some criticisms of the approach are raised concerning the complexity of genre, text, style, structure and purpose and how some texts are hybrids of a number of text forms. Questions are also raised about the types of texts that students are exposed to as there may not be a link to what is relevant to the student (New Learning 2016k).

3.3.4.1.4 Critical Literacy Pedagogy

‘Critical literacy pedagogy’ is the most recent of the approaches to literacy pedagogy drawing extensively on the work of Freire (1985; 1996) and Apple (1993; 2013). The focus of a critical pedagogy, as discussed earlier, is on the value-laden nature of texts, the underlying assumptions and biases. A critical literacy pedagogy will highlight how texts are constructed and can reinforce values and attitudes by promoting conformity, social reproduction and the messages of a dominant culture (New Learning 2016l). Unlike a didactic literacy pedagogy, which seeks ‘one answer’, a critical literacy pedagogy highlights that not only is meaning-making active and relevant, but also how the same text can have many meanings; it is situated and context specific and ‘meaning is made in the interaction between the
intention and the experiences of the person who utters or creates the meaning in text’ (New Learning 2016l).

Therefore, teachers seeking to adopt a critical literacy pedagogy in their practice might encourage students to ‘unpack multiple layers of meaning’, to think critically about the agendas and voices that are presented in texts and expose their students to a range of different texts and voices, not just what is understood as the ‘great canon’ (New Learning 2016m). Advocates of critical literacy pedagogy are also keenly interested in the role of digital media and the affordances of new technology as new ways of communicating. As explored in previous arguments regarding multiliteracies, multimodality and digital literacy, digital texts and media are all forms of literacy and meaning making and are arguably more connected to students’ lives in the 21st century. Critical literacy advocates want to see more of these encompassed in the curriculum as it wants to promote engagement with the lived experiences of the students, help them to navigate their world and empower them to be informed, aware and active citizens (New Learning 2016m).

In their discussion of these four major approaches to literacy teaching and learning, Kalantzis and Cope do not promote one pedagogy over the other. Rather they argue that teachers, as professionals, need to make informed choices about how they promote the literacy development of their students. Returning to the earlier discussion of pedagogy at the beginning of this section, they contend that

‘the teacher requires a repertoire of approaches to any particular area, that repertoire determined by the knowledge that the students bring to the exercise, the knowledge and skills and activities that the teacher brings to the students, and how those interact ultimately to transform the learner so they become experts in this particular domain’.

(New Learning, 2016n)

Each approach has strengths and weaknesses and ultimately, balance is the key to successful and holistic literacy development. Fang adopts a similar argument in his exploration of different approaches to literacy development.

3.3.4.2 Fang’s Approaches to Adolescent Literacy Development

While Kalantzis and Cope’s model is appropriate in any educational setting, Fang’s model (2012) is particularly relevant in this research that focuses on post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy as it offers a concise yet useful synthesis and
critique of the different approaches to developing content area literacy among adolescents. Like Kalantzis and Cope, Fang points to how each of the four approaches have their own distinct epistemological assumptions and sets of practices. He labels the four approaches as ‘Cognitive’, ‘Sociocultural,’ ‘Linguistic’ and ‘Critical’. They are examined here from a pedagogical perspective, considering the possible implications of each approach for teachers’ classroom practice.

3.3.4.2.1 The Cognitive Approach

The cognitive approach draws heavily on cognitive psychology and advocates ‘systematic, explicit teaching of mental routines or procedures for accomplishing cognitive goals, such as understanding a text, writing an essay, or solving a problem’ (Fang, 2010, p.103). To use a colloquialism, it is concerned with the ‘in the head skills’ (Hipwell and Klenowski 2011) and aligns very much with the traditional understandings of literacy as reading and writing that were explored in detail in section 2.2. Proponents of this approach to literacy development will often advocate ‘generic’ strategies and practices that are viewed as appropriate across all content areas because there is an assumption that ‘the cognitive requirements for reading/writing are essentially the same regardless of content areas’ (Fang 2012, p.104). Examples of such generic strategies include prediction/anticipation strategies such as KWL charts (Ogle 1986; An instructional reading strategy used to guide student engagement with texts), summarising, skimming and scanning, comprehension strategies (Chauvin and Theodore 2015), the five-paragraph essay (Siebert et al., 2016) graphic organisers, vocabulary journals (Fisher and Ivey 2005; Schmitt and Schmitt 1995) and note-taking strategies such as Cornell note pages (Fisher and Ivey 2005), to name but a few.

3.3.4.2.2 The Sociocultural Approach

Fang’s sociocultural approach to adolescent literacy development acknowledges that literacy development is a complex process, one that needs to consider the social and cultural factors at play in the lives of young people, as well as considering their cognitive needs. Of particular centrality is the belief that ‘teachers should value the out-of-school literacies that adolescents bring to the classroom and use their everyday funds of knowledge and cultural practices as both a bridge to and a resource for promoting the development of content area literacies’ (Fang 2012,
p.104). The previous chapter explored some of the out of school literacy practices of adolescents (see section 2.5.5) in relation to multiple modes of representation, multiple types of text and some of the commonly used platforms for literacy practices. In the Irish post-primary context, Quinlan and Curtin’s study (2017) highlighted the dilemma that exists; ‘if a student’s preferred literacies have no place in the classroom, academic contentment can be hard to achieve’ (p. 462). As also highlighted in section 2.5.5.5, refusal to bridge the gap between the literacy practices of schools and the preferred literacy practices of adolescents outside of school may result missed opportunities for literacy development (Williams 2005). Moreover, failing to recognise and consider contextually specific and cultural factors such as student interest, engagement, motivation and identity makes language ‘the hidden curriculum’ of schooling, and potentially hinders literacy learning (Fang 2012).

3.3.4.2.3 The Linguistic Approach

The linguistic approach is underpinned by the belief that students need to master the lexical and grammatical components of language so that they can access the knowledge in content areas at school. As a result, ‘traditional foci of the linguistic approach have been on decoding, fluency, vocabulary and text structure’ (Fang 2012, p.106). Having already given some time to the importance of decoding and fluency, we turn our attention here to vocabulary development and morphology.

Vocabulary learning has been highlighted in the literature as an essential element of learning any language or in learning to communicate and there is a strong evidence basis for the explicit instruction of vocabulary in an effort to promote literacy development. In fact, the importance of vocabulary knowledge to subject matter comprehension has been recognised since the 1920s (Whipple 1925) and was greatly influenced by the work of Thorndike (1921), Pressey (1923) and Dolch (1928). Often quoted are the words of Wilkins who contended that ‘without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed’ (1972, p.111). More recently, Pearson and colleagues (2007) argue that we need to give much greater consideration to effective vocabulary instruction, citing several studies that illustrate how vocabulary is closely tied to comprehension. Mehigan contends that vocabulary is as crucial an element as fluency and decoding in promoting comprehension and understanding and argues that vocabulary development is the potential ‘missing link’ in students’ literacy development (Dublin City FM 2012).
Indeed, the centrality of vocabulary development for academic achievement is echoed in much of the literature (Krashen 1989; Schmitt and Schmitt 1995; Blachowicz et al., 2006; Tran 2006; Milton 2008; Schmitt 2008; Walters and Bozkurt 2009; Picot 2017).

While it is argued that ‘there is no single or uniform way that is regarded most effective in terms of vocabulary instruction, (Blachowicz et al., 2006; Schmitt 2008), different views emerge in the literature regarding whether or not vocabulary can be best taught ‘implicitly’ or ‘explicitly’. Instances where implicit learning occur may refer to moments where there is no clear focus on what is to be learned, learners are unaware of the process of learning, the information to be learned and do not consciously exploit any learning strategies (Marzban and Kamalian 2013, pp.86-87).

It is a term often used interchangeably with phrases such as ‘incidental learning’ (Krashen 1989; Milton 2008; Nakata 2008) ‘unintentional learning’ and ‘unplanned learning’ (Larsson 2014, p.5). Explicit learning, conversely, takes place when learners focus their attention on what is to be learned, they are aware of the process of learning and the information to be learned and exploit strategies to learn (Marzban and Kamalian 2013, pp.86-87). Explicit teaching of vocabulary strategies to promote vocabulary acquisition might include visual, semantic, and mnemonic strategies (Stewart 2012). Krashen (1989) is perhaps one of the most notable proponents of an implicit approach to vocabulary development contending that above all else, ‘comprehensible input’ in the form of reading is the ‘essential environmental ingredient’ to promote language learning (1989, p.440). He argues that extensive free voluntary reading was superior to direct instruction in terms of acquisition of reading vocabulary, grammar and writing (p.443-444). Milton supports these arguments in his review of published evidence concerning immersion in informal learning tasks that to promote vocabulary development. This series of case studies document students’ engagement with comics, DVDs and songs to promote vocabulary in a second language where all three different but informal tasks appeared to produce ‘considerable gains in vocabulary learning’ (Milton 2008, p.234). However, he also argues that the learning afforded by these informal learning experiences should ‘enhance, but should not replace, a programme of formal classroom input’ (Milton 2008, p.236).
According to the research, there is capacity for vocabulary development from implicit or incidental learning experiences (Tran 2006; Milton 2008; Nakata 2008; Larsson 2014). However, there is also the argument that vocabulary learning from the natural context of reading for pleasure alone is not sufficient, and can be ‘slow and haphazard’ (Nakata 2008, p.4) and can require ‘considerable autonomy and motivation on the part of the learner’ (Milton 2008). Rather, explicit strategies are also crucial. Proponents of explicit vocabulary instruction suggest a number of strategies to learn the vocabulary encountered by students in the different ‘content areas’ or subjects at second-level. Shanahan and Shanahan provide a comprehensive list of the potential strategies one could use including graphic organisers, brainstorming, semantic maps, sorting and rating knowledge of words, map words, develop synonym webs, and so on. However, they point to how such strategies ‘would not adequately recognise discipline-specific distinctions’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012, p.9).

Focusing on vocabulary development, while important, is but one aspect of the linguistic approach whereas ‘being an effective reader does not mean that the reader never struggles to comprehend, but rather that the reader has internalised ways of approaching difficulties and working through complex text’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.161). Another consideration in the linguistic approach to literacy development is morphology. It is also referred to in the literature as ‘structural analysis’ (Blachowicz et al., 2006, p.530) and focuses on how learning ‘word-parts’ can support students’ literacy development. Knowledge of the different elements or parts of words including affixes (prefixes and suffixes), roots and word origins or etymology can support students’ word learning. For instance, Parkinson (2017) argues that etymology and morphology provide high impact strategies to improve literacy skills. She argues that by explicitly teaching the explanation of the Greek root ‘chron’ which means time when teaching the word ‘chronological’, teachers are also presented with an opportunity to teach vocabulary such as ‘chronicle’ or ‘chronic’. Parkinson’s argument stems from her belief that teachers do not have time to teach students every word and therefore must teach students skills to deconstruct the words that they encounter. Study of how words are formed can support students when they meet new words or indeed, words that they have previously encountered. Indeed, the literature asserts that there is a link between morphological awareness
and children’s reading development (Deacon and Kirby 2004; Moats 1994). Shanahan and Shanahan (2012) give the example of how science terms in particular are ‘rife with words constructed from Greek and Latin roots’ (p.9) and therefore students could greatly benefit from an understanding of morphology. Other effective vocabulary strategies include teaching words in pairs (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995), creating awareness of word families and word associations (Picot 2017), or by extending the word base (Tran 2006) so that teaching the word ‘happy’ presents us with an opportunity to teach ‘unhappy and happiness’. Teachers are also presented with opportunities to teach synonyms and antonyms. This not only increases vocabulary in terms of breath but also in terms of understanding and depth, as students make connections and come to understand the concepts that they are studying with greater clarity.

The linguistic approach to literacy development has much to offer in terms of tools that can be used to support adolescent literacy development. However, Greene (1996) argues that teachers need to have extensive knowledge and be able to explicitly teach the structure and appropriate use of all language systems, including phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax. This could pose a significant obstacle for many post-primary teachers who may not have the confidence or the knowledge to teach such linguistic structures. Even for those teachers who have been exposed to such knowledge, it may still be daunting since some language skills are constrained skills-skills that are necessary, although not sufficient for full literacy-for instance, learning the names and sounds of letters, syntax and phonics. However, others such as comprehension skills, composition skills, spelling and vocabulary are ‘life-long endeavours’ (Dublin City FM 2012).

3.3.4.2.4 A Critical Approach

Finally, a critical approach to literacy development ‘views all texts- written, spoken, linguistic, visual and multimedia- as inherently ideological and value laden, suggesting that text meaning is neither natural nor neutral and must therefore be understood in relation to both the intention of the writer/designer and the social-historic-political contexts that govern its production’ (Fang 2012, p.106). Referring back to some of the strategies and methods advocated by cognitive and linguistic approaches, one immediately sees an issue as ‘critical reading… cannot be conceived in generic terms; one must understand not only the concepts of disciplines but also
how evidence is used to arrive at and warrant those concepts’ (Moje 2007, p.18). Rather, strategies to promote critical literacy focus on encouraging students to explore the assumptions made by authors and encourage them to engage in multiple readings of the same text from different perspectives so that they are reading the word and the world and empowered as readers (Freire 1996). The pedagogical implication of a critical approach to literacy development means that teachers need to ensure the adolescents they are teaching are active agents in learning not just as ‘consumers of text’ (Mills 2016). A detailed account of how to approach a critical pedagogy, as well as the importance and relevance of critical literacy, particularly for current and future generations living in a digital age, has been explored in the previous section (McLaren 1988; Alvermann 2002; Kellner and Share 2007; Molden 2007; Lambirth 2011). Advocates of the critical approach to literacy development argue that

‘literacy is not, and never can be, limited to the functional application of a set of skills. Rather it involves knowledge and understanding about the social location of literate practices and the ability to distance oneself from the use of literacy to comment and reflect upon this use’.

(Wray 2001, p.17)

Fang’s synthesis of these four approaches to adolescent literacy development offers a useful lens to consider the strategies that teachers use in their practice, as we reflect on whether the strategies align with cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic and/or critical approaches to literacy development. Like Kalantzis and Cope, Fang concludes that while each approach is distinct, ‘they complement one another in ways that allow teachers to tailor instruction to student needs, curricular goals and the specific tasks at hand’ (Fang 2012, p.107). Draper et al. (2005) argue that

‘the ability to meaningfully interact with words such as photosynthesis, parallelogram and nationalism depends both on an individual’s ability to decode or sound out the words as well as his or her ability to understand the concepts represented by the words’.

(2005, p.14)

Indeed, knowledge of how to read and decode texts as advocated by the cognitive and linguistic approaches is insufficient as students need to not just recognize, but also understand textual conventions so that they can ‘respond to textual cues appropriately and ‘encode meaning’ based on prior experiences’ (Smagorinsky 2015,
Therefore, students need to be able to react to and interact with texts, drawing on sociocultural and critical approaches. I now briefly explore how these theoretical bases have informed practice at post-primary level in relation to Content Area Literacy and Disciplinary Literacy.

### 3.3.4.3 Content Area Literacy Instruction

The cognitive approach as outlined above characterises the epistemological underpinnings of Content-Area Literacy (CAL) instruction that became popular in the early 20th century (Moore et al., 1983; O Brien et al., 1995; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). CAL is also referred to as ‘secondary content literacy’ (O Brien et al., 1995) or ‘curriculum literacies’ (Wyatt-Smith and Cumming 2001) and emerged as a specialism for two reasons. Firstly, there was a rejection of a ‘vaccination model’ of literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008), the belief that literacy skills were fully developed in the early years of education. This resulted in an acknowledgement that students need continued support in reading in post-primary school. Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter one, because the structure of post-primary school is different to what students previously encountered, where they learn in many different ‘content areas’, post-primary students begin to experience ‘a separation of areas of knowledge into school subjects, each of which makes distinctive literacy demands’ (Wray 2001, p.14). Secondly, at the turn of the century there was a move away from imitation and rote-learning in favour of students being able to read independently to ‘locate, comprehend, remember and retrieve information that is contained in various styles of writing across the curriculum’ (Moore et al., 1983, p.420).

This approach has been referred to as the ‘infusion model’ (O Brien et al., 1995; Moje 2008; Bean and O’ Brien 2012), regarded as an ‘infusion’ of ‘highly generalisable learning strategies or processes that can be easily adapted and used across different school subjects’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012, p.13). CAL strategies (discussed earlier as KWL, skimming, scanning, summarising, predicting, visualising et. cetera) were originally presented in the literature by Herber (1978). In the Irish context, one research study highlights how teachers of all subjects in one school adopted the use of a ‘Step-by-Step Literacy Guide’ (Reidy 2013, p.45), a ten-point guide that encouraged teachers to consider a variety of strategies that could
help promote the literacy development of their students. These included vocabulary strategies, subject-specific keywords and concepts, vocabulary banks and semantic maps, reminders regarding spelling, grammar and syntax and some oral language development prompts also. In the summary of this study, Reidy (2013) argues that
the guide aimed to support ‘uniform teaching of literacy across the curriculum’ (p.35) based on the premise that ‘uniform methodology supports teacher practice. If teachers teach literacy skills in the same way, then literacy will be more effectively embedded in students’ learning’ (Reidy 2013, p.67).

As noted earlier, this approach rests on the assumption that the cognitive requirements for reading and writing are essentially the same across all subject areas (Fang and Coatham 2013). However, critics of this ‘generalist notion of literacy learning’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, p.41) contend that generic reading strategies ‘haven’t matched well with how content is actually read in the subject areas’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2014). Oftentimes these are positioned as ‘simple strategy steps applied helter-skelter to every content area’ (Bean and O’ Brien 2012, p.277), yet studies have demonstrated how this can leave teachers frustrated when their literacy practices do not seem to support student learning (Park and Osborne 2006). Certainly the CAL movement highlighted that all teachers need to consider literacy development, and the ‘Step-by-Step Literacy Guide’ promoted awareness while also supporting Reidy’s colleagues in the Irish context (2013).

These strategies certainly have the potential to support students’ literacy development (Park and Osborne 2006; Moje 2007). However, there success rests on students’ ability to utilise the appropriate strategy when faced with a dilemma (Garner 1990; Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). Furthermore, strategies prove futile if students cannot yet read a substantial percentage of the words in a text (Fisher and Ivey 2005). Commentators agree that we should not abandon these strategies altogether (Moje 2015) and that they are still foundationally important (Bean and O’ Brien 2012). However, the CAL model ‘oversimplifies the complexities of secondary school curriculum, pedagogy and culture (O Brien et al., 1995, p.454) as ‘literacy at secondary level is much more complicated than selecting a strategy to use with a particular text passage’ (Gillis 2014, p.621). ‘What is missing… is attention to the specific demands of the practices-and thus the texts- of the disciplines’ (Moje 2007, p.16). For instance, reading, writing, speaking and listening are tasks that are
conducted differently depending on the discipline (Lacina and Watson 2008; Murnane et al., 2012; Smagorinsky 2015; Goldman et al., 2016). Smagorinsky argues that ‘virtually any act of writing requires specialized knowledge’ (2015, p.142) and a report in an English Language Arts class can look very different to a laboratory report in science class both in terms of form as well as content. Indeed, he contends that even within disciplines such as English, there are nuances when writing for different purposes and we need to teach students how to write narratives as well as how to write arguments, two distinct genres even if they have some similarities.

Such a position is influenced by the sociocultural turn in literacy studies. To illustrate, Wyatt-Smith and Cumming conducted a study (2001) involving 1500 senior secondary students in schools in New South Wales and Queensland and determined that students were not only expected to use various literacy modes of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking in dynamically networked ways. Furthermore, they explored how the ‘situatedness’ of these literacy practices meant that that as students moved between Biology, English, Maths and Agricultural studies classes, their communicative practices and the expected ways of representing the world and learning- can and does vary from subject to subject, and also one lesson to the next’ (2001, p.309). A generic or neutral ‘strategies’ approach to literacy and learning does not address ‘the view that meaning is situated in particular events’ (O Brien et al., 1995, p.450). This awareness of the different literacy demands of different content areas or subjects led to the emergence of the Disciplinary Literacy movement.

3.3.4.4 Disciplinary Literacy

While the terms CAL and Disciplinary Literacy (hereafter DL) are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different approaches to literacy development (Fang and Coatham 2013; Shanahan and Shanahan 2014; Chauvin and Theodore 2015). DL is a highly complex instructional approach that differentiates ‘literacies’ by their different subject domains or disciplines (Moje 2015). It rests on the premise that different disciplines have their own language or ‘literacy’ and the only way that we come to truly know, understand and fully appreciate the complexities and conceptual
underpinnings of our disciplines is to be fluent in that unique literacy. It is also deeply rooted in the sociocultural approach to literacy development:

‘Literacy is enacted in a specific context and for a specific purpose and to or with a specific audience... literacy practice is always domain specific... (disciplinary literacy refers to the) specialised practices of a given disciplinary domain, such as mathematics or history or art’.

(Moje 2015, p.256)

A DL approach to literacy development has a number of implications for practice as ‘subject-matter learning is not merely learning about the stuff of the disciplines, it is also about the processes and practices by which that stuff is produced’ (Moje 2007, p.10). Teachers are tasked with ‘intertwining’ DL practices and disciplinary knowledge ‘by coupling content with domain-specific literacy practices, students engage in the same process used by disciplinary experts (e.g. literary critics, scientists, historians, mathematicians)’ (Spires et al., 2016, p.151).

As explored in chapter one, the organisation of post-primary schools into distinct subject areas means that teachers need to draw on their PCK with subject specific strategies to effectively promote literacy development in their subject areas. This is something that is advocated by Gillis who argues that we need to ‘adapt not adopt strategies’ (2014). Speaking of her experiences in science instruction, she comments ‘I chose strategies that accomplished my content objectives and adapted them to fit my teaching style, context, and content’ (Gillis 2014, p.615). Her argument hinges on the belief that literacy is more than a series of tips and tricks and effective literacy instruction is more than a ‘toolbox’ approach or a smattering of strategies. She states that ‘being a teacher of secondary literacy is more accurately being a teacher of discipline appropriate literacy practices’ (Gillis 2014, p.621). Similarly, Moje and Handy (1995) draw on the experiences of a chemistry teacher who engaged in a reading methods course and learned various strategies that could help students to interact with texts. However, strategies needed to be modified to suit her learning intentions and so she used an SQ3R strategy, (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) as a note-taking strategy to suit the needs of her students and organise their note-taking.

Disciplines also differ in how they view ‘text’ and how they expect learners to ‘read’ those texts. In Science, a ‘text’ could be a graduated cylinder and diagrams are not
read left to right, top to bottom rather it depends on the conceptual representation whereas in history a text might consist of video or photographic sources and students must learn to handle historical artifacts while attending to bias or providence (Gillis 2014). Students approach reading from the stance of a historian examining documents for bias or a scientist completing data records and lab reports (Lacina and Watson 2008) and while in Science, objective reading is key; in History, readers will always be aware of subjectivity (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). In a two-year study that examined the reading habits of disciplinary experts, Shanahan and Shanahan revealed how chemists alternated between reading prose and diagrams, interested in the transformation of information from one form to another, while mathematicians emphasised rereading and close reading as two of their most important strategies (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Table 2 highlights some of the key differences between CAL and DL (Siebert et al., 2016, p.29).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General CAL Instruction</th>
<th>Disciplinary CAL Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on learning literacies for learning content</td>
<td>Focuses on disciplinary literacies for participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows for literacy teaching outside of disciplinary practices</td>
<td>Is situated within disciplinary practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileges and focuses on language-based texts</td>
<td>Acknowledges and addresses all relevant literacies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaches general literacy strategies that can be applied across disciplines</td>
<td>Teaches disciplinary literacy strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Contrasting Characteristics of General Content Area Literacy (CAL) and Disciplinary CAL Instruction

However, there are a number of challenges. As explored in previous sections, ‘middle and secondary school teachers are part of a subculture that values a teacher-centered presentation style and feel adding content reading strategies within their curriculum is awkward and time consuming’ (Warren-Kring and Warren 2013, p.76). The development of such a model of literacy instruction, by its very nature, takes a considerable amount of time. It is often far more challenging than providing traditional content-instruction (Chauvin and Theodore 2015) as there are no short cuts to meaningfully apprentice students into a discipline (Murnane et al., 2012; Moje 2015). Moje argues that the ‘unavoidable truth’ is that both deep disciplinary knowledge and deep knowledge of literacy skills are needed to teach disciplinary
A DL approach is also in stark contrast to transmissive practices, didactic approaches (Kalantzis and Cope 2016) or cognitive approaches (Fang 2012) to literacy development, a challenge given the overwhelming focus of both teachers and students on content-covering in ‘these days of high-stakes testing only reinforce that focus’ (Gillis 2014, p.615). Finally, the research about DL has ‘so far remained conceptual’ (Fang and Coatham 2013, p.629) and is of course, limited by the fact that the research in this area has been conducted largely in areas of English Language Arts (Smagorinsky 2015) History, Mathematics and Science (Wray 2001; Moje and Luke 2009; Shanahan and Shanahan 2012; Moje 2015).

3.3.5 The Irish Position in relation to CAL and DL

The complexity of post-primary education in Ireland regarding the division of learning into discrete subject areas has been explored in the introductory chapter of this thesis and at various stages in recent sections in this chapter. Furthermore, this study has highlighted how adolescent literacy is acknowledged as a particular stage in learning and literacy development (IRA 2012; ELINET 2016). However, despite the fact that the subtitle of LNLL makes reference to ‘children’ and ‘young people’, the policy document does not appear to differentiate between different stages of the literacy continuum (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008), nor does it acknowledge how the literacy needs of adolescents are different to those of young children who are developing their basic literacy skills. As argued throughout this thesis, literacy is a complex concept but ‘secondary content area literacy learning and its use are particularly complex’ (Moje et al., 2004, p. 38):

‘the meeting of different disciplinary knowledges, Discourses and texts throughout a single day in secondary school requires sophisticated uses of language and literacy by teachers and students as they explore upper level content concepts such as science, history, literature and mathematics’.

(Moje et al., 2004, p. 38)

However, a problematic issue regarding LNLL is the fact that the policy does not acknowledge how the structure of post-primary education has implications for literacy development. For instance, there appears to be little consideration given to the implications of literacy learning in different subject areas, nor is there any acknowledgement of the distinctions between disciplines. Rather, reading (as there is a marked emphasis on reading and to a lesser extent, on writing in the document, to
the neglect of oracy) is presented in a general and decontextualised way. Furthermore, despite the arguments presented in this study that adolescents encounter a greater range and variety of texts than younger students, LNLL offers little guidance regarding the variety and range of texts that students should encounter as part of a holistic approach to literacy development. While there are some references to functional texts that students will encounter in life after of school such as email and shopping lists (DES 2011, p. 9), it is clear that when literacy is discussed in the context of the classroom, the policy appears to privilege traditional text types (books, albeit in print and digital format) and book reading (DES 2011).

Furthermore, LNLL does not offer examples of methodologies, strategies or models to promote literacy development, something that is regarded as a major shortcoming of the policy as a ‘strategy’. The approach advocated in LNLL aligns with a CAL approach to literacy development in the sense that literacy learning appears to be regarded as decontextualised and generic. Despite the wealth of research supporting a Disciplinary Literacy approach in the post-primary setting, the policy does not make reference to or highlight the value of a DL approach in the post-primary setting, and this is regarded as another shortcoming of the policy. It does not give attention to the specific demands and literacy practices of different disciplines (Moje 2007). Rather, reading, writing, speaking and listening are discussed in general ways, in line with a CAL approach to literacy development. Such a conclusion can also be drawn when critiquing the supports offered to Literacy Link (LL) teachers during CPD programmes to support the implementation of the policy. Suggested strategies and recommended approaches included activating prior knowledge, explicit vocabulary instruction and purposeful reading (PDST 2013) as well as morphology, morphemic awareness and explicit models of instruction relating to comprehension (PDST 2014). While there is little doubt regarding the value of such instructional strategies for literacy development, this infusion model (O’ Brien et al., 1995; Moje 2008; Bean and O’ Brien 2012) does not consider the domain-specific literacy practices that adolescent literacy students need exposure to in order to fully engage with texts in different subject areas. Of course, it must be acknowledged that such an approach was an inevitable consequence of the cascade model of CPD, discussed at length in the next section of this chapter (section 3.4.2) as well as in the discussion of the findings in chapter seven. Following CPD, the LL teacher would lead literacy
learning in their own school context, and because they were being prepared to disseminate literacy practices to teachers from a variety of subject areas on their return to school, the strategies modelled and advocated by the support services had to be generic, neutral and applicable to all subject areas. LNLL, in its policy wording and implementation plan, appears to advocate more of a ‘toolbox’ approach to literacy development (Gillis 2014) which is, as already outlined, problematic, overly-simplistic and does not adequately support students to navigate the literacy demands of different disciplines in post-primary education.

3.3.6 **Section Summary**

The approach to literacy instruction adopted in schools depends on a number of factors, but literacy instruction is particularly influenced by theories of learning and instructional and curricular practices (Turner 1995). For instance, despite the merits of a sociocultural approach to literacy development (Fang 2012) or an authentic literacy pedagogy (Kalantzis and Cope 2016), it is unlikely that teachers can meaningfully foster constructivist approaches to literacy development if they subscribe to a transmission model of teaching and learning. Indeed, the approaches that teachers adopt can be indicative of how they view literacy in their practice, again highlighting the intertwined nature of beliefs and practices. The key point expressed in all models of literacy development explored here is that balance is necessary. For instance, subscribing to a purely individualistic and cognitive approach ‘ignores the social and cultural aspects of literacy and validates learning strategies that support traditional positivist and technical goals of schooling’ (O Brien et al., 1995, p.446).

Accepting that all teachers have a responsibility to promote literacy, all teachers need to be equipped with the professional knowledge to support literacy development that is specific to their subject area:

> ‘Understanding content literacy means being knowledgeable of the print materials available in a particular content area and making these materials available to students ... to make use of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking for different purposes’.

(Freedman and Carver 2007, p.656)

There is no ‘off-the-shelf” solution to literacy development and no shortcuts in supporting students to be confident and capable readers, writers, speakers and
listeners who can consume and create different texts. Competence in literacy instruction requires deep professional knowledge so that teachers can consciously employ strategies that are authentic to their subjects, meaningful for their students and broad enough to encompass the many different facets of what it means to be literate in the 21st Century. Generic strategies can be useful yet teachers also need a thorough understanding of when, how and why they choose those strategies, as well as an understanding of what might work best in their discipline. Failure to promote such a deep understanding of literacy pedagogy may result in literacy being perceived as something other, something additional, something that needs to be ‘bolted-on’ learning in content-areas.

3.4 Teachers’ Professional Experiences of Policy Implementation

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, this study takes place at a very particular moment in the lifespan of LNLL during its implementation stage and as Darling-Hammond advises, ‘implementation, a term frequently used as though it means straightforward compliance, is not so simple’ (1990, p.342). Therefore, this final section of the literature review offers an insight into pertinent literature regarding the complexity of policy implementation.

3.4.1 Policy Implementation

There is an argument in the literature that in the last five decades, there has been much public funding of educational innovations and policies, yet the impact on meaningful change in relation to student learning outcomes is questionable. Hord argues that this often results from a ‘tidy model of change’ (1987, p.13), using the analogy of comparing educational innovation to the introduction of genetically engineered grain; if the grain was planted, and cared for following the instructions, the grain would grow. However, when innovations failed to deliver on the desired or predicted results, researchers began to look at the process of implementation, as this was seen as both ‘the major problem in education reform’ and ‘the key to successful innovation’ (Hord 1987 pp.13-14). Hord presents a circular model of the change process (1987, p.57), outlined in Figure 5, which is useful when considering the extent to which change might be assessed as a result of the implementation of LNLL.
The model illustrated in Figure 5 demonstrates that change cannot be seen as linear; not only is each stage or sub-process in the process of change interrelated, but there is also movement back and forth between stages. For instance, the initial stages in any innovation concerns assessment of the situation, such as the needs of the school and students but ordinarily this will happen while exploring options available. Once these sub-processes have been engaged with, schools, as organisations are ready to adopt the innovation.

Figure 5: Circular Model of the Change Process

Adoption, Hord argues, ‘represents the first concrete step in people actually changing their behaviour, which is the ultimate goal, and as such, its position in the innovation process is critical’ (Hord 1987, p.73). Successful adoption necessitates the consideration of teachers’ beliefs and values (Gleeson 2012), provision of appropriate strategies and resources and must promote the engagement of ‘every individual within a system’ if it is to prove successful, gaining strength through commitment and support, as well as ‘ownership’ of an innovation (Hord 1987, p.73). However, adoption and initiation are ‘twin-processes’ (Hord 1987, p.74) that are difficult to separate as the initiation process involves moving from the theoretical to the actual, to seeing how strategies and theories can be applied. Implementation is the sub-process that is most pertinent in the context of this study, as this research was conducted during the early implementation stage of LNLL, and therefore the
focus is on this aspect of Hord’s change process. Implementation represents the point at which real and meaningful change can be brought about within an organisation. It is also a lengthy and complex process:

‘teachers and others involved in an innovation are learning about it, discovering how to use it, assimilating its intricacies and becoming efficient and comfortable with its use in their classrooms. In other words, they are seeking to master the innovation and mastery will obviously take far longer than the kind of superficial acquaintance initiation can provide... there will be much fumbling and stumbling... it is during the implementation that most of the problems connected with an innovation will first become glaringly apparent.’

(Hord 1987, p.77)

As a result, the implementation stage is the ‘likeliest point at which the innovation process breaks down’ (Hord 1987, p.78) and therefore, it will require the concerted and continued efforts of a number of committed, adequately prepared individuals. The final stage is institutionalisation and although beyond the remit of this study, it is worth exploring when considering the extent of change brought about in the research sites as a result of the introduction of LNLL. Institutionalisation is described as the stage where teachers are

‘no longer concerned with the logistics of innovation use; when their behaviour with respect to the innovation is organised and made routine so that they can shift their attention to their students’ behaviour with it; and when the innovation in practice assumes a form that is compatible with the original intention’.

(Hord 1987, p.82)

Fullan and Pomfret (1977) argue that ‘implementation refers to the actual use of an innovation or what an innovation consists of in practice’ (1977, p.336). They outline five dimensions of implementation concerning curriculum change in practice, presented in Table 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Implementation of Curriculum Change in Practice</th>
<th>Aspects of the Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Subject Matter or Materials</td>
<td>What subject matter or curriculum content to include, what order to present it in and what medium to use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Organisational Structure</td>
<td>Formal arrangements and physical conditions including allocation of time, space, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Role/Behaviour</td>
<td>Adopting new teaching styles, tasks, relationships, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Knowledge and Understanding</td>
<td>Philosophies, values, assumptions, objectives regarding subject matter, implementation strategies, organizational components etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Value Internalisation</td>
<td>Value and commitment to implementing the various components of an innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Five Dimensions of Implementation Concerning Curriculum Change in Practice

These dimensions provide a useful framework to explore the extent to which change occurred following the implementation of LNLL in chapter seven (See section 7.5). Having considered the processes of policy implementation and ways of considering how change as a result of implementation might be considered, we turn now to other important factors in the implementation process; how LNLL was implemented nationally, the role played by teachers as policy enactors and schools as stages for implementation.

3.4.2 The Vision for Implementation of LNLL

LNLL aimed to enable teachers, through participation in mandatory pre-service and professional development units, to become familiar with ‘the various strategies, approaches, methodologies and interventions that can be used to teach literacy… as (a) discrete area and across the curriculum’ (DES 2011, p.31). Since this study is concerned with the practices of in-service teachers, the majority of whom had qualified as teachers before the changes to ITE programmes, the focus will be on the supports that were implemented for in-service teachers. Citing a number of examples of centralised and mandated reforms as well as ‘grass-roots’ initiatives, Fullan argues that ‘neither top down nor bottom-up strategies work. What is required is a more
sophisticated blend of the two’ (1994, p.7). Perhaps this belief influenced the proposed implementation of LNLL.

Literacy as a policy objective in Ireland was promoted in schools as part of the SSE framework (DES Inspectorate 2012). Changes were taking place regarding how schools were evaluated and assessed in Ireland with a move from external assessment in the form of Whole-School Evaluation (WSE) and Subject Inspection to a more school-centred, internal evaluation, where all stake-holders in the school community are given a voice through a process of internal auditing. SSE is described as ‘a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review’ whereby all stakeholders in a school will

engage in reflective enquiry on the work of the school... reflect on their aims, consider criteria for success within the school’s context and ethos, and determine appropriate methods for judging the quality of educational provision in the school. It is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering information from a range of sources and making judgements with a view to bringing about improvements in students’ learning.

(DES Inspectorate 2012a, p.12)

Schools were directed to engage with SSE from the 2012-2013 school year and because LNLL had outlined how all post-primary schools needed to implement a three-year School Improvement Plan (SIP) which includes specific targets for the promotion and improvement of literacy, schools would focus on literacy (as well as numeracy and one other area of teaching and learning) over the first four-year cycle of SSE, from 2012-2016. In terms of implementing this at school level, SSE Guidelines state that school leaders should lead the SSE process. However, a distributed model of leadership is advocated in the documents whereby ‘leadership is not the exclusive prerogative of people in positions of authority’ (Linsky and Lawrence 2011, p.6). Rather the guidelines state that schools

will need to identify who will be responsible for the SSE process... how the overall process will be co-ordinated and how evidence will be gathered and analysed...who will take responsibility for writing a concise SSE report, for developing a School Improvement Plan (SIP) and for implementing the actions of leadership.’

(DES Inspectorate 2012a, p.26)

Facilitating change concerning literacy was the responsibility of the Literacy Link (LL) teacher and the Literacy Core team, empowering teachers who do not have formal leadership roles to participate as informal leaders. Perhaps this was an
attempt to foster that ‘sophisticated blend’ of top-down and bottom up-reform, where ‘leadership requires collective action by those who govern schools and those who work in schools’ (Sugrue 2011, p.57). Distributing power amongst informal leaders is extremely important when considering sustainability of reform and policy implementation in schools. Furthermore, it is crucial that teachers are consulted and actively involved in the process of educational reform since it will affect them and the work they do.

The model promoted was referred to as the ‘Literacy Link Model’. The very word ‘link’ is thought-provoking. The LL teacher forms a crucial bridge of communication between formal school leadership and the informal leaders on the team, but more so, between policy and practice. The role of the LL teacher involves ‘building, guiding and sustaining an effective core literacy team in their school and ultimately, to extend and deepen the understanding of literacy at a whole-school level’ (PDST, 2013c, Slide 58). The LL teacher attended two days of CPD and then led the core team toward introducing and implementing a SIP that set targets and objectives for literacy specific to their school context and needs of their students. Having attended CPD off-site from knowledgeable experts in literacy, the LL teacher had the responsibility of leading learning about the concept of literacy and about collaborative inquiry at school level with their colleagues on the team. The Literacy Core Team has been defined as a Community of Practice, a ‘team…who share a concern, or a passion about a topic…who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an on-going basis’ (Wenger et al., 2002 cited in PDST 2013c). The Literacy Core Team, in turn, is encouraged to involve the whole staff regarding professional learning about literacy by sharing resources, facilitating pop-up workshops, coaching and mentoring, as well as by providing opportunities for team teaching and peer observation.

This ‘cascade model’ of CPD is so-called because it involves training in ‘the knowledge and skills thought necessary to enable the desired changes’ being transmitted or disseminated to ‘a relatively small number of specialists or trainers’ (level one of the model) (Wedell 2005, p.3), who then train larger numbers of teachers (level two), who will, in turn, pass the ‘essence’ of their training on to their colleagues (level three). The model is also referred to as ‘the multiplier approach’ (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012, p.250). Certainly the cascade model offers a logical
approach to disseminating important information in a short space of time (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012; Bett 2016) and because it is cost effective (Hayes 2000; Kennedy 2005) and requires less investment in human resources, time and materials (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012). Hayes predicts that it is likely to remain a part of teachers’ experience of CPD.

Such a model of implementation provides a platform for collaboration through in-school and whole-school CPD where teachers work together with a plan informed by specific goals and objectives; teachers have space for dialogue, can reflect on their practice and share new teaching strategies. One of the most exciting potential consequences of such a distributed leadership model is the development a Professional Learning Community (O’ Sullivan 2011) or a Community of Practice (COP) (Lave 1991; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015).

On the other hand, a significant body of research contends that such a ‘cascade model’ of CPD to support the implementation of this policy is problematic. Firstly, trainers need to be knowledgeable and capable of challenging assumptions and questioning the beliefs of teachers regarding the innovations or practices that are being recommended (Wedell 2005). Perhaps more importantly, Solomon and Tresman (2009) contend that while skills and knowledge might be passed on, there is rarely a focus on attitude, values or beliefs. Kennedy argues that in such instances, the model supports a technicist view of teaching (2005). There is also an assumption that one-shot approaches to CPD are likely to do all that is intended to support teachers in implementing change when sustained and continued support is more likely to prove successful (Wedell 2005; Dichaba and Mokhele 2012).

Furthermore, the model can result in a dilution or misinterpretation of key messages as they cascade from one level to the next (Hayes 2000; Kennedy 2005; Turner et al., 2017) and ‘less and less is understood as one goes down the cascade’ (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012, p.253). Finally, there is an assumption inherent in the model that cultural and contextual factors that support this sort of professional learning, including openness to collaboration and resources such as time and space, are in place in schools (Wedell 2005; Bett 2016). A number of the studies mentioned here have highlighted this as an issue, where the second level of teachers struggle to disseminate information to the third tier of colleagues (Wedell 2005; Turner et al., 2017). Sometimes it is to do with misunderstanding of crucial information or a lack
of knowledge; other times the supports and structures necessary for successful dissemination are not in place. I now turn to explore the context and culture in which teachers implement policies.

3.4.3 Teachers Enact Policies

While the responsibility for policy lies with the Minister for Education, supported by the DES, the NCCA and the TC, policy needs to go through a process of ‘interpretation and translation’ (Ball et al., 2012) and it is ultimately teachers who ‘enact’ policies. Priestley argues that

> ‘policy can only ever act as a statement of intent; curricular practices emerge from teachers’ understandings of these intentions, mediated by their prior knowledge, and the structure and cultural resources and constraints afforded by their professional contexts’.

(NCCA 2016, p.5)

‘Teachers exercise considerable control over the decision of whether or how to implement a change’ (Richardson 1990, p.13) as teachers will decide how policy is ‘translated from text to action’, ‘enacted’, or ‘put into practice’ (Ball et al., 2012, p.3). As this was envisaged as a whole-school policy and part of the SIP, all teachers are involved as policy actors and have a crucial role to play in how the policy is implemented. However, teachers’ willingness and capacity to engage with LNLL as a policy is also dependent on a number of factors, including not just access to CPD as explored above, but also a willingness to engage with CPD.

3.4.3.1 Teachers as Learners: Perceptions of Professional Development

Elmore problematises the term ‘implementation’:

> ‘First, “implementation” is something you do when you already know what to do; “learning” is something you do when you don’t yet know what to do. The casual way policy-focused people use the term obscures this critical distinction’.

(Elmore 2016, p.531)

Successful implementation necessitates teacher change thereby positioning the teacher as learner. Indeed ‘the teacher-as-learner concept is the centrepiece linking classroom and school improvement’ (Fullan et al., 1990, p.15) and the literature contends that there is a strong link between staff development or professional learning and successful implementation of policies or reforms (Fullan and Pomfret
Therefore, it is crucial that teachers are willing to engage in CPD and that the CPD provided will support them in their professional learning.

In Ireland, The Teaching Council Act (2001) was significant in developing a framework for the continuous education, training and professional development of teachers. It resulted in the establishment of a Teaching Council in March 2006 whose remit includes responsibility over entry standards, courses, in-service provision, research, professional codes of behaviour and the review and accreditation of teacher education programmes. The Teaching Council refers to teacher’s rights and responsibilities regarding professional learning, arguing that

‘teachers should take personal responsibility for sustaining and improving the quality of their professional practice by actively maintaining their professional knowledge and understanding to ensure it is current, reflecting on and critically evaluating their professional practice, in light of their professional knowledge base (and) availing of opportunities for career-long professional development’.

(Teaching Council 2012 Article 5.1)

For teachers in some jurisdictions such as Finland, Singapore and Victoria, Australia, there is an openness to CPD and teachers actively engage in professional learning activities. In Finland, a recent national survey reports how on average, teachers devote about seven working days to professional development while some reported spending as much as 20-50 days, and in Singapore, the government supports about 100 hours, more than 12 days, to professional development time annually (Darling-Hammond 2017, p.304). In these jurisdictions, professional learning is embedded in the daily work of teachers, there are opportunities for collaboration and sharing learning as well as teacher research and teachers are granted substantial amounts of time to engage in CPD ((Darling Hammond 2017, p.304). In contrast, teachers’ experience of CPD in Ireland is ‘fragmented and often ad hoc and CPD itself is narrowly defined, lacking in theoretical basis, and rolled out in stops and starts rather than in any coherent or sustainable way’ (Harford 2010, p.355). The dominance of the cascade model of CPD, as already outlined, is also problematic (Other models of CPD are explored by Kennedy, 2005). Yet this is the model that teachers are most familiar with in Ireland and over the past number of decades ‘the dominant vision of teacher professional development was that it is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills to provide professional
development and that that provision be peer led, during school time based on withdrawing teachers from school’ (O’ Sullivan, 2011, p.113). In contrast to reports from other jurisdictions, the most recent TALIS report in which Ireland participated (OECD 2009) revealed how teachers in Ireland participated in CPD for an average of 5.6 days over an 18-month period, compared to an average of 15.3 days for all of the countries surveyed (Drudy 2013, p.45). This was the lowest out of the 23 participating countries (OECD 2009 p.53). Gleeson (2012) argues that a lack of engagement in professional learning in Ireland stems from the structure of post-primary education and teachers’ professional formation as subject teachers in Ireland, where ‘the significance of pedagogy is down-played in favour of subject expertise’ (Gleeson 2012, p.5). For teachers to engage in CPD, there needs to be value placed on a strong professional knowledge base (Lynch et al., 2013). Gleeson argues that

Irish teachers pay little attention to knowledge-of-practice ... They are, at best, agnostic and often openly sceptical regarding important aspects of the professional knowledge base, such as educational research, education ‘theory’ and reflection-in or -of practice. This atheoretical stance reflects the prevailing anti-intellectual bias, the absence of a robust education media and the technical nature of Irish education discourse.

(Gleeson 2012, p.6)

McMillan et al. (2016) argue that there is a continuum of understanding regarding the purpose of CPD ranging from functionalist approaches that view CPD in terms of quality and accountability to broader and more holistic approaches that value life-long learning. How teachers view CPD will certainly influence their willingness to engage with professional learning opportunities (Harford 2010; O’ Sullivan 2011; Lynch et al., 2013; Bett 2016; McMillan et al., 2016). The prevailing discourse regarding professional learning in Ireland was that the ‘dip’ or Higher Diploma in Education, would ‘equip (teachers) for the entirety of their career’ (Moloney 2000). This discourse was bolstered by the lack of a formal induction programme for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) (‘Droichead’ was introduced under the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) in 2013) and a career long continuum of professional learning (‘Cosán’ was not introduced until 2015). The Higher Diploma was replaced by an expectation for aspiring teachers to engage in a Professional Masters of Education (PME) and their teacher training would henceforth be referred
to as Initial Teacher Education. Such changes, over time, may contribute to changing attitudes regarding professional learning among teachers.

3.4.3.2 **School as the Stage for Policy Enactment**

Of course ‘educational reform is a complex cultural endeavour’ (Gordon and Patterson 2008, p.33) and it would be simplistic to evaluate the success or failure of implementation efforts based purely on the policy itself or the policy enactors. Rather, ‘teacher change should be viewed within the culture and norms of a collective of teachers, administrators, other personnel and students in a particular school’ (Richardson 1994, p.14).

> ‘The language of reform underestimates the intricate ways in which individual and institutional lives are interwoven’ and the school is ‘the arena in which teaching traditions and reform imperatives confront one another most directly and concretely’.

(Little 1993, pp.147-148)

Therefore, it is crucial to consider other factors that could directly impact on policy implementation at school level, since the school is the stage for implementation.

3.4.3.2.1 **Expectations Regarding Collaboration**

Teachers are increasingly encouraged towards professional practice that involves co-operating, networking (Senge *et al.*, 1999; Moloney 2000), collegial sharing and support (Fullan 1993; Hargreaves 1994) or collaboration (Shah 2012), with benefits for teachers, students and schools as organisations (Hargreaves 2000; Fullan 2011; Shah 2012). Fullan argues that effective schools are those where teachers have ‘a collective or shared depth of understanding… about the nature of their work’ (Fullan 2011, p.4) but also, he insists that ‘teachers have a moral obligation to help redefine the profession towards interactive professionalism’ (Fullan 2011, p.7).

This emphasis on ‘collaboration’ is also highlighted in many recent Irish education policy documents. The *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* makes explicit reference to the need for a ‘new emphasis on… peer collaboration’ (DES 2016, p.4) as part of a new quality framework for schools. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* highlights how ‘professional collaboration envisaged between teachers has huge potential to enrich both the quality of students’ learning and teachers’ own professional engagement’ (DES 2015, p.2) and this is supported by the introduction
of 22 hours professional time to engage ‘with a range of professional and collaborative activities’ (DES 2015, p.31) concerning teaching, learning, assessment and reporting. The Digital Learning Framework for Post Primary Schools also ‘promotes collaboration between teachers and will support collaborative planning across subject departments and in those areas, like literacy, numeracy and STEM, requiring a cross-curricular focus’ (DES 2017b, p.3). Finally, Looking At Our School (LAOS), the most recent publication that outlines expectations regarding SSE, positions collaboration at the ‘heart’ of a teacher’s work (DES Inspectorate 2016, p.7). As a policy, LAOS offers a quality framework with standards and statements of effective and highly effective practice across four domains for ‘Teaching and Learning’ and four domains for ‘Leadership and Management’. ‘Collective/collaborative practice’ is a distinct aspect of the two dimensions in the framework.

Vygotsky (1978) posited that cooperation lies at the basis of all learning, whereby interaction leads to scaffolding that allows actors to achieve more than they would be able to do individually (John-Steiner 2007). Knowledge, he contended, is embodied in actions and interactions with the environment and others. In this sense, organisations are most likely to be effective learning organisations when they form Communities of Practice (COP) in networks or other collaborative arrangements, and are engaged in a process of social learning that occurs when actors who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. This view of collaborative ventures as COPs presupposes that new knowledge emerges as groups work together towards the achievement of joint goals (Muijs et al., 2011).

In fact, from the mid-1980s, evidence has accumulated that cultures of collaboration are not just a self-indulgent teacher luxury, but have positive and systematic connections to teachers’ senses of efficacy about being able to make a difference with their students and that ultimately, ‘teachers normally learn better together than they do alone’ (Hargreaves 2000, p.165). Years earlier, Lortie explored how collegiality promotes confidence and self-esteem among colleagues. In contrast, he describes the experience of the individual who is isolated rather than part of a collective as one of ‘sink or swim’ (Lortie 1975, p.160). The argument is therefore that collaboration promotes learning but that it also promotes confidence.
It is also argued that collaboration is a useful antidote to increasing teacher-workload:

‘Many teachers caught up in educational reform and change are experiencing increasing role expansion and role diffuseness, with no sense of where their commitments and responsibilities should end. In this context, professional collaboration can help them marshal their resources, conserve their energy, and sift their way through the plethora of requirements and demands’.

(Hargreaves 2000, p.166)

Indeed, in the current context in Irish post-primary education, teachers may benefit greatly from collaboration as it can help them to ‘achieve their missions, goals, objectives, and aspirations; capitalize on important opportunities; solve pressing problems; meet urgent needs; or satisfy their accountability requirements’ (Lawson 2004, p.229). However, collaboration in its truest form necessitates ‘de-institutionalisation’ (Lawson 2004, p.234) and the structures and practices in place in the institution that is the Irish post-primary school need to be considered and problematised if collaboration is to be facilitated. I turn now to examine teachers’ experiences of isolation and collaboration.

3.4.3.3 Teachers’ Experiences of Isolation

Much has been written about teachers’ professional experience as being one that is characterised by isolation (Lortie 1975; Fullan 1990; Moje and Handy 1995; O’Brien et al., 1995; Hargreaves 2000; Elmore 2003; Timperley et al., 2007; Cantrell et al., 2008; Fullan 2011; Shah 2012) where cultural norms of ‘non-interference, individualism, isolation and privatism’ (Shah 2012, p.1243) exist. In a literal sense, teachers often work alone, separated by the walls of their classrooms and Hargreaves argues that the experience that has characterised the careers of most teachers is that they ‘taught in a box. They instructed their classes in isolation, separated from their colleagues’ as a result of the ‘physical egg-crate structure of schooling’ (Hargreaves 2000, pp.160-161), an experience referred to as ‘balkanisation’ (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, p.115). However, this experience is magnified at post-primary level as secondary school teachers are trained as ‘subject matter specialists’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.5) and the very organisation of secondary schools into

‘separate, relatively autonomous, subject-based departments is the characteristic that most clearly distinguishes them from primary schools, and the characteristic
that poses the greatest challenges to those who seek to change teacher practice through professional learning’.

(Timperley et al., 2007, p.208)

Furthermore ‘in secondary classrooms where content is king’ (McCoss-Yerigan and Krepps 2010, p.5), and assessments are high stakes, teachers are often keenly aware of limited timeframes, making them feel under pressure to cover content and teach a certain number of concepts (O’Brien et al., 1995; Moje and Handy 1995). Such contexts are difficult ones in which to promote collaboration. This ‘distinctive culture’ or ‘content area subculture’ (Cantrell et al., 2008, p.77) means that different forms of knowledge and methodologies are valued and teachers are not just physically isolated, but also pedagogically or philosophically isolated.

In the Irish context, Moloney’s study explores post-primary teachers’ perceptions and experiences of collaboration and based on her interviews with teachers in three secondary schools, she vividly describes ‘the work of teaching … as being one of isolation’:

‘The teacher’s terrain is the classroom. It is the teacher within the classroom who decides what exactly is to be taught or learnt, as the case may be, how much time will be spent on any given item and what response is expected from students. Teachers, generally, would not have consulted with colleagues on these or on different methodologies possible in teaching…Somehow, they were the experts and so whatever they decided within the classroom was undisputed and certainly not a matter for discussion. People were frequently defensive in relation to their position in the field of education.’

(Moloney 2000, pp.9-10)

The ‘privateness’ of the classroom can reinforce individualism as the manner in which teachers work alone in their classrooms are often isolated, this might explain a reluctance to ask for or seek help (Lortie 1975) or to collaborate. Elmore argues that second-level schools are typically large, complex, and loosely coupled organisations. They are usually balkanised into subject-based departments, each with its own distinctive culture … It is difficult to imagine a less promising institutional structure for being responsive to external pressure for change and improvement’.

(Elmore 2003, p.197)

Fullan and colleagues point to how collaboration is something that requires careful consideration and that it is unrealistic to assume that by encouraging collaboration and providing time for same will necessitate meaningful collaboration taking place:
‘before a staff decides to implement a process that breaks down norms of isolation and builds norms of collaboration—perhaps through a peer coaching or mentoring program—teachers and administrators might consider what factors in the classroom and school will support or militate against such programs’

(Fullan et al., 1990, p.14)

Despite the proliferation of the term in the literature and in policy documents, it is crucial to problematise the concept of collaboration. Indeed, in his review of the literature regarding the conceptualisation of collaboration across disciplines, Lawson (2004) argues that despite its immense potential, a significant problem emerges from the existence of ‘imprecise, incoherent and competing conceptions of collaboration’ (p.225). Lawson describes the complexity of collaboration as follows, arguing that

'collaboration is in evidence when interdependent, autonomous stakeholders with their respective competency domains mobilize resources, and both harmonize and synchronize their operations to solve shared problems, meet common needs, capitalize on important opportunities, and obtain prized benefits… Stakeholders develop unity of purpose; forge a collective identity; develop shared language, knowledge, norms, and skills; foster equitable relations; develop conflict resolution mechanisms; agree on shared responsibilities and mutual accountabilities; promote norms of reciprocity and trust; reconfigure rule, roles, and jurisdictions; share resources; realign existing policies and create new ones; develop shared governance systems; and accommodate salient features of the local context’.

(Lawson 2004, pp.227-228)

It is tempting to suggest that ‘collaboration’ as a team is not something new in Irish education as teachers have already been working collaboratively as subject departments, but drawing on Lawson’s description of collaboration as outlined here, the mere existence of teams does not constitute real collaboration. Rather the team needs to have clarity in terms of understanding as well as clearly defined goals that contribute to improved learning outcomes for their students if they are to be truly effective. Furthermore, TALIS 2009 reveals that the dominant form of professional collaboration in the Irish post-primary setting is ‘exchange and co-ordination’ rather than ‘professional collaboration’ (Shiel et al., 2009). However, ‘collaboration is not a panacea, nor is it a ‘cover all’, umbrella concept for every conceivable form of collective action’ (Lawson 2004, p.235) and while working together in terms of sharing resources is laudable, it is not collaboration in the truest sense of the word. Accepting that collaboration is easier to encourage when groups share common identities or a history of working together (Lawson 2004), it could nonetheless be argued that the very nature of WSE and Subject Inspections may have contributed to
reinforcing the balkanised subject subcultures where teachers work in isolation or at the very best insulation (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, p.115). As Timperley and colleagues argue, participation in professional learning communities in the post-primary context can either promote professional learning or work against it by reinforcing the status quo (2007).

3.4.3.4 **Education Policy and Reform Efforts in Ireland**

LNLL as a policy is just one example of recent change in post-primary education in Ireland and in considering its implementation, it is worth considering the difficulties that other reform efforts have encountered in recent decades as system wide-change has presented a number of challenges in Irish post-primary schools (MacPhail et al., 2018). This has led commentators to argue that ‘the failure to disseminate successful innovation … has been one of the most frustrating aspects of curriculum developments in Ireland’ (Granville 1995, p. 144). For instance, despite repeated efforts to reform Junior Cycle since 1974, they have met with considerable resistance from teachers and teachers’ unions (O’ Mahony 2014; Coolahan et al. 2017), particularly regarding the issue of teachers assessing their own students for the purpose of certification (Lenihan et al., 2016). An earlier example of system-wide or whole-school change was the introduction of ‘Schools IT2000’, an initiative introduced in 1997 to promote ICT in classrooms. However, critique of the strategy highlighted the need to address dilemmas of practice stemming from such reform efforts concerning teachers’ attitudes and knowledge as well as school culture (Conway 2000). Furthermore, resistance to change is often attributed to the high-stakes nature of examinations in Ireland, (Devine et al., 2013; Smyth 2016a; Coolahan et al., 2017) whereby the Leaving Certificate examinations determine access to third level courses. This has a backwash effect on classroom practice where post-primary teachers are attached to ‘a prescribed, exam-led syllabi and an overdependence on text-book based teaching and learning’ (Coolahan et al., 2017, p. 55). Another challenge may emerge from the perceived increase in workload and accountability that results from performativity regimes as outlined in the introduction to this study (Ball 2003; Gleeson 2009; Hennessy and Mannix-McNamara 2013). Finally, the success of reform efforts also hinges on adequate resourcing and recent cutbacks in education expenditure that impacted salaries, promotions, capitation
rates and pupil-teacher ratios collectively combined to ‘cast a dark shadow over educational development’ (Coolahan 2017, p. 180).

3.4.4 Section Summary

Policy is often ‘taken for granted and/or defined superficially as an attempt to ‘solve a problem’’ (Ball et al., 2012, p.2). However, this section has attempted to open up the the ‘black box’ of policy implementation (Fullan and Pomfret 1977) by presenting a number of considerations that are crucial if innovations are to become embedded in teachers’ practices and in school cultures. Implementation, as Hord contends, is the crucial point in the change process, the point an innovation is most likely to break down and it takes perseverance and determination for an innovation such as a whole-school literacy strategy to become ‘institutionalised’ (Hord 1987). The successful implementation of a school-wide and collaborative effort such as a whole-school literacy strategy requires coordinated efforts from all teachers in all departments and aims to move ‘from a view of teaching as private and personal to one of teaching as public and collaborative, nurturing experimentation and sharing’ (O’ Sullivan 2011, p.120). However, it is crucial to question the structures that are in place in our schools and how well whole-school efforts can be realised in this context. The literature informs us that trust, openness, fairness, a willingness to share and engage in professional dialogue, a tolerance of errors, adequate resourcing and support from school leaders are all necessary constituent parts in making collaboration a reality. Such cultural and organisational changes also takes time as ‘collaboration entails multiple, pervasive changes… it may take years to develop and even longer to institutionalise’ (Lawson 2004, p.234). Taken collectively the issues outlined in this section point to the need to consult teachers in the implementation process (Kennedy 2013) and that the ‘school factor’ (Gleeson et al. 2002), as the stage where reform efforts will flourish or perish, cannot be overlooked in reform efforts.

3.5 Chapter Summary

It is evident that the central concepts in this study, explored here through the lenses of key theorists and commentators, are complex. Because this research aims to explore post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy- understood as their
conceptual understandings, their knowledge regarding literacy practices and their experiences of implementing a literacy policy in their schools- it examines ‘literacy’ at conceptual, practical and policy levels. The literature presented in this chapter is considered when analysing and discussing the findings presented in chapters five, six and seven.
4 Chapter 4: Research Design and Approach

4.1 Chapter Introduction

‘Humans are the researchers. Humans are being studied. Humans are the
interpreters, among them the readers of our reports’.

(Stake 2010, p.36)

While the previous two chapters presented pertinent literature relating to the central
concepts in this research, this chapter offers a detailed account of the research design
of this study and the approach I have taken as a researcher. It begins by examining
my philosophical stance, otherwise known as my ontological and epistemological
positioning, in an effort to explain why, and how, this research was conducted
(Smagorinsky 2008). This is based on the understanding that

‘epistemology is intimately related to ontology and methodology: as ontology
involves the philosophy of reality, epistemology addresses how we come to know
that reality while methodology identifies the particular practices used to attain
knowledge of it’.

(Krauss 2005, p.759)

Following an exploration of the philosophies and theories that underpin this study,
including the ontological and epistemological assumptions that I hold as a
researcher, this chapter then reminds the reader of the research questions before
outlining the qualitative nature of the study, focusing particularly on the methods
adopted to address the research questions. Smagorinsky argues that ‘in order for the
results to be credible, the methods of collection, reduction and data analysis need to
be highly explicit’ (2008, p.392). As a result, this chapter presents a detailed account
of the processes involved in data collection, preparation and analysis, before
discussing the steps taken to help ensure validity and reliability in each stage of this
study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical issues and the limitations
of this research design. Table 4 presents an overview of these research design
considerations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consideration</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Some key authors consulted in the literature</th>
<th>Corresponding section in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Relativist and Interpretivist</td>
<td>Lincoln and Guba (2013)</td>
<td>4.2, 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Braun and Clarke (2013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology</strong></td>
<td>Sociocultural and Social Constructivist</td>
<td>Lincoln and Guba (2013)</td>
<td>4.2, 4.3, 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hall et al., (2014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vygotsky (1978)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflexivity and Researcher positioning</strong></td>
<td>Addressing assumptions and biases in design, collection, analysis and reporting stages</td>
<td>Schön (1983)</td>
<td>4.6, 4.10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brookfield (1995)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Cochran-Smith (2005)</td>
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<td>Mullings (1999)</td>
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<td>Hollenbeck (2014)</td>
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<td><strong>Theoretical Framework</strong></td>
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*Table 4: Methodological Issues to be Considered when Conducting Doctoral Research*
4.2 Philosophical, Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in this Study

‘Children are not blank canvases and neither are we’. (Lysaght 2014)

Philosophical and theoretical perspectives influence the research question, the methods used to gather data, the approach taken to analysing data and how the findings are interpreted and presented to the reader. Making them explicit adds to the credibility and trustworthiness of this research but will also introduce important signposts for how this research is conducted (Edward 2012).

Indeed, Lysaght (2014) contends that research is as much about the researcher as it is about the research methods; hence my decision to begin this study by offering my professional autobiography in chapter one. Cognisant of the discussion of relevant literature and theories regarding literacy, beliefs, knowledge and policy in chapters two and three, this short chapter extends that ‘self-examination’ because interrogation of the biographical bases of behaviours and beliefs’ (Cochran-Smith 2005, p.224) is a necessary part of any research design process. Referring to her own research experience, Mullings argues

‘not only had I full authority over the theoretical framework... I also maintained control over the way in which data that I collected were incorporated into the theoretical and empirical analysis. In both endeavours, the situatedness of my knowledge and the knowledge that I derived from an extensive reading of the work of others, shaped my interpretation and presentation of the research’.

(1999, p.347)

The researcher’s philosophies and theories are the ‘lenses we peer through’ (Hollenbeck 2014, pp. 12-13) and so I turn to make my positioning explicit.

4.3 Philosophical Perspectives

4.3.1 Research Paradigms; Positivism and Interpretivism

The two research paradigms or worldviews, described as ‘ways of breaking down the complexity of the real world’ (Patton 1990, p.37), are ‘positivism’ and ‘interpretivism’ and each paradigm is ‘recognised as having its own part to play’ (Thomas 2011, p.74) in social-science research. Positivism assumes that facts exist,
that knowledge is objective, value-free and derived from largely quantitative collection methods. Hypotheses are tested against these facts, in an effort to establish ‘causal laws’ concerning empirical regularities (Robson 2002, p.20). It is an epistemology which seeks to explain and predict what happens in the social world. On the other hand, interpretivists argue that ‘there is no external reality independent of human consciousness; there are only different sets of meanings and classifications which people attach to the world’ (Robson 2002, p.22), that there are multiple ‘realities’. Subjective experiences, thoughts, feelings and opinions are interpreted in an effort to reach an understanding and interpretivists hold that knowledge is context-specific.

Positivists subscribe to ‘realism’, positioning the researcher as an outsider and detached observer, and believe that ‘the world we perceive is straightforwardly the one that is ‘out there’ (Thomas 2011, p.75). By contrast, interpretivists hold the view that the world is not something ‘other’ or ‘real’ that can be observed in a detached manner, but that it is constructed by each of us in a different way and is ‘relative’ to the observer/definer (Lincoln and Guba 2013, p.38). They maintain that if you ‘change the individuals, you change the reality. Or change the context and you change the reality. Or change both the individuals and the context and thoroughly change the reality’ (Lincoln and Guba 2013, p.39).

4.3.2 Ontology

Ontology is described as ‘the consideration of being: what is, what exists, what it means for something-or somebody- to be’ (Packer and Goicoechea 2000, p.227) and the entire research process can be determined by ‘the underlying belief system of the researcher’ or their ‘ontological assumptions’ (Krauss 2005, p.759). The researcher’s belief system or ‘worldview’ is largely shaped by his or her ontological assumptions about how the world is made up and the nature of the world. It is gleaned from life experiences, from our socialisation, our educational and professional experiences and so on.

4.3.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is defined as ‘the systematic consideration, in philosophy and elsewhere, of knowing: when knowledge is valid, what counts as truth and so on’ (Packer and Goicoechea 2000, p.227). It can be described as the relationship that
exists between the ‘knower’ and ‘the known’ and essentially, it asks what counts as knowledge or how knowledge is created (Edward 2012). It is important to consider our epistemological stance as our view of knowledge will determine how we conduct research.

4.3.4 Philosophical Stance in this Study

This study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm. Ontologically I position myself as a relativist, a position that posits that ‘reality’ depends on human interpretation and knowledge, that in fact, there are multiple constructed ‘realities’ and that what is ‘real’ and ‘true’ differs across time and context, so that ‘what we know reflects where and how knowledge is generated’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.27). Epistemologically, I position myself as a constructivist, and hold that knowledge and truth are not objective concepts ‘out there’, but are created or ‘constructed’ rather than discovered (Schwandt 1998). While Piaget (1970) and Bruner (1986) are considered to be key theorists in the realm of cognitive constructivism, Vygotsky (1978) is deemed to be the founder of social constructivism. Wells defines social constructivism as knowledge gained through the ‘constructive mental activity of the individual learner; a process of knowledge which is essentially social and cultural in nature and mediated and facilitated by cultural practices and artefacts of which the most important is discourse’ (1992, p.286). Thus social constructivists contend that knowledge is constructed and that learning is a social and an interactive process where learners engage in collaborative meaning-making (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996; Abbott and Ryan 1999; Hodson 1999; Haenen et al., 2003; Berry 2008; Stobart 2008).

My philosophical positioning, as well as my research question concerning teachers’ conceptual understandings and practices regarding literacy in a specific context, situates this research in interpretivist paradigm. This is largely attributable to the fact that ‘the main point about interpretivism is that we are interested in people and the way that they interrelate- what they think and how they form ideas about the world; how their worlds are constructed’ (Thomas, 2011, p.75).
4.4 Theoretical Perspectives

‘Theories differ in what they emphasise as well as what they set out to do’.

(Barton 2007)

As evidenced in this section, as well as throughout chapters two and three, this study draws heavily on sociocultural perspectives on literacy and learning, informed by scholars who frame literacy as a social practice (Street 1984; Gee 1989; Cope and Kalantzis 2006; Street 2006; Bezemern and Kress 2008; Gee 2015, 2015b; New Learning 2016; Bezemern and Kress 2017; Gee 2017). Perry argues that ‘there is no single sociocultural theory on literacy (and that) it is more appropriate to speak of sociocultural perspectives as a collection of related theories that include significant emphases on the social and cultural contexts in which literacy is practiced’ (2012, p. 51). Examples of some of the major theoretical perspectives discussed in chapter two are theories of multiliteracies and critical literacy theories and in this study, these theories are utilised to analyse the data, considered as particularly salient in relation to adolescent literacy development. However, this study also acknowledges the significance of other key theoretical approaches that relate to and offer insight into literacy development, including cognitive and developmental theories.

Rather than viewing these theories as oppositional, drawing on these theories collectively offers important insights that can support post-primary teachers, policy makers and literacy researchers in their understanding of the complexity of literacy development. In particular, the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study have implications for teachers regarding classroom practice in relation to adolescent literacy development. The models for literacy development already discussed in section 3.3.4 blend a number of theories and approaches. For instance, Fang’s model for adolescent literacy development advocates combining cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic and critical approaches for effective literacy development (Fang 2012). Consideration of these different theoretical perspectives is important throughout this research as the study calls for a balanced and holistic approach to literacy development for adolescents.
4.4.1 Socio-cultural Theories

Turning to the theoretical orientation of this study, as outlined in chapter two, I draw heavily on sociocultural theories of knowledge and learning. Inspired by the cultural historical work of Vygotsky and his colleagues in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996; Holland and Lachicotte 2007), a sociocultural view of knowledge is one that positions knowledge as constructed (Packer and Goicoechea 2000) through active, social and creative processes by ‘doing, talking, thinking, feeling (and) belonging’ (Hall et al., 2014, p.62). It positions learning and understanding as ‘inherently social and cultural activities’ where ‘individuals participate in broader sociocultural practices’ (Cobb and Yackel 1996 pp.184-185). Sociocultural theorists also consider the importance of culture and context, highlighting the situated nature of human experience, learning and knowledge construction (Stoll 1999; Hinchion 2017). I now turn to present how sociocultural theory is utilised in this study.

4.4.2 Socio-cultural Theories of Literacy

As outlined in chapter two, a sociocultural approach to literacy development does not view literacy in the traditional or technical sense (Street 2001) as a purely cognitive phenomenon (Gee 2015b) or as a solitary act. Rather it holds that effective literacy development incorporates cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic and critical dimensions (Fang 2012). Literacy is most effectively developed collaboratively within a community of learners (Zebroski 1994) and in the post-primary context, subject disciplines have the capacity to become a COP (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trainor and Wenger-Trainor 2015) as teachers ‘apprentice’ students to become ‘insiders and experts’ (Manderino and Castek 2016). Adopting a DL approach to literacy development necessitates that ‘students need to learn to do or participate in the discipline rather than acquire knowledge about the discipline … (and therefore) knowledge is constructed and negotiated among members of the disciplinary community’ (Siebert et al., 2016, pp.26-27). DL also acknowledges that disciplines are cultures and have their own ‘Discourses’ and literacies (Gee 2015) and students need to be able to ‘switch’ among linguistic skills, knowledges, and discourses, judging those that are appropriate in each case’ (Wyatt-Smith and Cumming 2001, p.309). Dialogue is essential, thereby extending traditional understandings of literacy as ‘reading and writing’ to incorporate oracy as a DL
approach to literacy instruction positions content area classrooms as discourse communities where novices emulate the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of experts (Collin and Reich 2015; Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). Finally, sociocultural theorists view literacy as a practice and an event that is situated in a particular context (Scribner and Cole 1981; Freebody and Luke 1990; O Brien et al 1995; Wyatt-Smith and Cumming 2001; Fang 2012; Moje 2015; Quinlan and Curtin 2017). Sociocultural views acknowledge the out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents and position students as active participants who ‘make meaning’ of, as well as decode, texts (Smagorinsky 2015). This is crucial in our digital, connected and technological world where students need to be digitally literate to communicate, collaborate and navigate their online worlds (NCCA 2016a) but they also need to be critically literate so that they can question what they find in these spaces.

4.4.3 The Application of Sociocultural Theories in this Study

Sociocultural theory is useful in research of this nature as it has ‘significant explanatory power’ (Hall et al., 2014, p. 42) to explore the worlds of teachers and to examine their ‘worldviews’:

‘to understand and explain human action and the social world, taking the person as an actor in the world and as inseparable from it; it offers a vocabulary and a perspective for the way the social world is; it provides a way of seeing and analysing social phenomena’.

(Hall et al., 2014, p.5)

This study is sociocultural in its approach; it positions teachers as ‘social actors’ (Hall et al., 2014) who hold ‘beliefs, attitudes and values’, and contends that teachers’ professional ‘knowledge’ is the result of teachers’ ‘experiences’, those social and cultural interactions teachers participate in. Teachers ‘shape and are shaped by the world at the same time’ (Hall et al 2014, p.42). A rationale for the exploration of these constructs is offered in the conceptual framework presented in the next section of this chapter, borrowed from another study that also adopted a sociocultural approach. The literature presented in chapter two and three highlights how these terms are understood in this study.

Indeed, the influence of sociocultural theory is reflected in the very organisation of this thesis as the introduction sets the scene for the study, highlighting the importance of the historical and cultural canvas against which this study is set. This
chapter recognises my position of researcher as another social actor, actively engaged in the process of ‘meaning-making’. Sociocultural theories thus influenced decisions regarding the most appropriate research instrument, the semi-structured interview, as well as analysis of the data and organisation of thesis. Nonetheless, it is important to note that other theories outlined in section 4.4.4, also informed data analysis processes as well as the presentation and discussion of the findings in this study. As Ball argues (2006), theories presented in the literature can act as a theoretical ‘toolbox’ and each theory is a valuable tool is utilised to make sense of the data in this study.

Finally, sociocultural theories are also relevant as each school is positioned as a potential site of professional learning. As explored in chapter three, the SSE model positions each school as a learning organisation where professional learning is mediated through the literacy link teacher and the literacy team. In each school culture, it is envisaged that teachers will work together in a COP with the understanding that participation extends our understanding of literacy as a concept and as a practice. Sociocultural theories highlight the importance of considering the context in which reforms happen and offers a lens to explore how LNLL was implemented in post-primary schools in Ireland, examining how broader social and cultural practices can have an impact on reform efforts. As explored in previous chapters, this necessitated a description of the context and culture of post-primary education in Ireland.

4.4.4 Implications of the Theoretical Framework for Adolescent Literacy Development

Given the context of this study regarding literacy development in the post-primary classroom, the suitability of sociocultural theoretical perspectives is clear in enhancing teachers’ understandings of the complexity of literacy. In the post-primary classroom, students and teachers are actively engaged in social and communicative processes that aim to make-meaning of texts. Sociocultural theories position literacy as a social practice (Perry 2012) and all meaning systems, including talk and text, are perceived as meaningful and legitimate. Furthermore, according to sociocultural theories of literacy, adolescent students need opportunities to engage in a wide range of literacy practices and texts. Section 2.5.5.1 outlines how this study is positioned in relation to text, drawing on the theory of multiliteracies. The emphasis is on multiple
communication channels (Cazden et al., 1996; Jewitt 2008; Leander and Boldt 2012; Kalantzis et al. 2016) and multimodal texts (Duncum 2004; Walsh 2006; Bezemer and Kress 2008; Kress and Bezemer 2009; Beach and O’ Brien 2012; Kalantzis et al., 2016). Adolescents are increasingly reading and writing in online spaces, as well as engaging with traditional print texts, with implications for educators in terms of the centrality of digital literacy to adolescent literacy development, as the internet, technology and digital media have transformed how we engage with language and literacy. These theories raise a number of important questions for post-primary teachers regarding their literacy pedagogy. Do teachers examine the texts they utilise in their practice? Do they question the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of texts? Do teachers reflect on the extent to which chosen texts engage students’ out of school literacy practices as explored in section 2.5.5 (Moje 2000; Leander and Boldt 2012; Gee 2015) in an effort to avoid forcing adolescents to live ‘double lives’ (Williams 2005)? Of course, policy makers and curriculum designers also need to be aware of such issues when considering the texts that students will engage in as part of their school experiences. As well as this, sociocultural theorists recognise the shifting and changing nature of society and culture, something that teachers working with adolescents need to consider. Because the nature, structure, language and modes of representation in texts are changing, teachers need to be in a position to support students in navigating those texts. This view is underpinned by the sociocultural perspective that context and literacy are reciprocal; thus literacy and literacy development cannot be separated from the context in which it is situated.

Of course, two of the issues for consideration here, the legitimacy of texts and the importance of positioning students to make-meaning of all the texts they will encounter, takes on new significance when considered from a critical literacy theory perspective. A critical orientation towards literacy positions reading, writing, speaking and listening as ideological acts and highlights the importance of power relations, particularly regarding the agents of power in texts. Rather than being a ‘technical event’ (Freire 1985, p. 19), literacy is the practice of ‘naming the world’, as ‘a way of being’ and a form of ‘empowerment’ for the learner. However, literacy and texts can be tools for duping people, controlling or supervising them (Gee and Hayes). As explored in chapter two, critical literacy theories examine how knowledge is selected, partial and never neutral (Knobel 2001), and subsequently
educators need to support students in their understanding of the influence of ‘different discourses and ideologies’ (Walsh 2006, p.25), and position students to question rather than accept the authority of ‘text’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2006). These theories have particular significance for adolescents whose everyday, out of school literacy practices mean they are increasingly exposed to a range of texts and the opinions, arguments and propaganda therein. Critical literacy theories highlight how adolescent students need to be ‘taught how to second-guess, analyse and weigh, critique and rewrite the texts’ (Elkins and Luke 1999, p. 215), so that they are able to engage with texts in a way that is thoughtful, analytical and discerning. Therefore, theories regarding critical literacy are also regarded as central in this study.

While sociocultural theories emphasise the importance of context and social interaction in the learning process, cognitive theories highlight the role of the learner in the construction of knowledge, and subsequently they are considered in this study as an important part of literacy development. ‘Cognition’ is understood as the process of thinking, and cognitive psychologists explain that

‘cognition refers to all the processes by which sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered and used... such terms as sensation, perception, retention, recall, problem solving and thinking, among many others, refer to hypothetical stages or aspects of cognition’.

(Neisser 1967, p. 4)

Cognitive theorists define literacy as ‘a psycholinguistic process involving component sub-processes such as letter recognition, phonological encoding, decoding of grapheme strings, word recognition, lexical access, computation of sentence meaning, and so on’ (National Research Council 1997, p. 54). Criticism of cognitive approaches to literacy development sometimes concerns how the cognitive approach presents a conception of literacy learning as ‘a matter of individuals acquiring ‘asocial’ cognitive skills’ (Eyres 2017, p. 3) that are decontextualised and acquired through individual effort’ (MacMahon 2012, p. 9). However, any effort to promote a balanced and holistic understanding of literacy and effective literacy instruction necessitates consideration of cognitive theories for a number of reasons. They offer a strong foundation for understanding how students become literate as they learn to read, write, speak and listen, thereby highlighting how post-primary teachers can facilitate and structure explicit instruction to promote effective literacy
development. As outlined across chapters two and three, there is a range of instructional strategies that can support effective literacy development relating to oracy, reading and writing. As explained in section 4.3.4, the theoretical underpinnings of social constructivism are considered as particularly important in this study. Vygotsky’s sociocultural cognitive theory (1978) emphasises how culture and social interaction guide cognitive development and how social interaction and collaboration with more skilled adults and peers is crucial to cognitive development.

In the context of this study— the post-primary school where learning takes place in distinct subject areas— the strength of social constructivism comes from its acknowledgement of the constructed and collaborative nature of meaning-making (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996; Abbott and Ryan 1999; Hodson 1999; Haenen et al., 2003; Berry 2008; Stobart 2008) through interaction with others, and with objects, in a particular culture. This study positions each post-primary subject classroom as a specific culture with its ‘Discourse’ (Gee 1989) or ‘way of being in the world’, one that exerts specific literacy demands on students (Cumming et al., 1999). Post-primary teachers are positioned as discipline experts, fluent in the language, knowledge, processes and texts of their subject and students are ‘apprenticed’ (Murnane et al., 2012; Moje 2015; Manderino and Castek 2016) into the discipline or culture. Such a theoretical perspective highlights the important role of the subject teacher in establishing a classroom dynamic that will scaffold learning to support students into the culture of the subject. For example, models of ‘Explicit Instruction’ (I do, you watch- I do, you help- You do, I help- You do, I watch)(PDST 2014) or Cognitive Apprenticeship (Collins et al. 1986) support learning through observation, imitation and modelling where the focus is on ‘learning-through-guided-experience’ (Collins et al. 1986, p. 5). Such an apprenticeship into a community of learners supports students’ learning as they behave more like other community members (Eyres 2017 p. 5), their More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) (Vygotsky 1978). These instructional approaches sit well with advocates of a Disciplinary Literacy approach to adolescent literacy development (Moje and Handy 1995; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008; Gillis 2014; Moje 2015; Spires et al., 2016; Burke and Welsch 2018) as students are encouraged to read, write, speak, listen and think like artists, literary critics, scientists or historians.
Finally, an awareness and understanding of some pertinent developmental theories are regarded as important in this study to understand and position adolescence as a very particular stage in literacy development (IRA 2012; ELINET 2016) and to consider factors such as motivation, engagement and identity development. For instance, Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development (1968) is presented as a series of stages that unfold over an individual’s lifetime and is a useful point of reference when considering literacy development. Certainly, this theory is sometimes criticised for its linear approach. However, this theory offers a number of interesting insights regarding identity development that can inform adolescent literacy development. As illustrated by Quinlan and Curtin (2017) adolescents can often disengage from learning when they feel that a curriculum or the learning experiences of classrooms are at odds with their own developing selves, and the authors conclude that such a disconnection results in adolescents having to ‘twist, bend and reform their preferred identities’ (p.468). Making efforts to connect learning in classrooms with students’ out of school literacy practices can also be a useful way to address issues of belonging and acceptance by promoting relatedness and autonomy (Daniels 2010), already discussed as crucial factors that motivate adolescent students in their learning. A teacher’s awareness of such developmental theories can enhance and support effective literacy learning for adolescents.

Promoting a holistic approach to adolescent literacy development, as advocated by Cope and Kalantzis (New Learning 2016) and Fang (2012), necessitates the consideration of a number of different theoretical perspectives and has implications for classroom practice. While sociocultural understandings of literacy as a situated and social practice may challenge cognitive understandings of literacy as taking place within an individual’s mind, there is little doubt that the view of literacy as a skill has a place when considering literacy development and teachers needs to support students in the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Moreover, sociocultural theories situate and embed literacy skills and the process of skills-acquisition in a particular context, and position the student as an active participant in their literacy learning. Cognisance of adolescence as a unique developmental stage is also important. Thus, this study draws on a number of sociocultural, cognitive and developmental theoretical perspectives to promote a deeper understanding of
adolescent literacy and the attending implications for post-primary classroom practice.

4.5 An Emerging Conceptual Framework

At this point, it is pertinent to discuss the conceptual framework utilised in this study, understood as a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories that support and inform a research study (Robson 2002). It serves to illustrate ‘the researcher’s understanding of how the research problem will best be explored, the specific direction the research will have to take, and the relationship between the different variables in the study’ (Grant & Osanloo 2014, pp.16-17).

The conceptual framework emerged following careful review of theoretical frameworks and relevant literature and therefore, it evolved over the lifetime of the study. In order to explore teachers’ understandings of literacy, it was deemed crucial to begin by exploring teachers’ conceptual understandings, their beliefs and definitions of literacy. It was also a priority in this research to problematise the assumption in LNLL that all teachers should be literacy teachers and therefore, another central concept concerns teachers’ knowledge relating to literacy, evidenced by the practices utilised in their classrooms. Finally, this research is situated in a specific context, in four Irish post-primary schools during a period of intense educational reform. Because teachers’ beliefs and knowledge cannot be separated from the context in which they live and work, I sought to gain an insight into how teachers had experienced policy implementation in this context, by examining the opportunities as well as the challenges they reported.

This framework replicates the conceptual approach taken in a study conducted in the School of Education in University College Cork between 2007-2010 entitled ‘Learning to Teach Study: Developing curricular and cross-curricular competencies in becoming a ‘good’ secondary teacher’ where literacy was examined as one of the cross curricular strands. One aspect of the report concerned the reading literacy of Irish post-primary student teachers on one ITE programme (Murphy et al., 2013) where the study focused on Pre-Service Teachers’ (PST) beliefs, knowledge and experiences (Murphy et al., 2013, p.331). The sociocultural approach sits well given the philosophical underpinnings already outlined in this chapter and these concepts.
of beliefs, knowledge and experience acted as useful lenses to explore Irish post-primary teachers’ ‘understandings of literacy’.

![Figure 6: Evolving Conceptual Framework](image)

However, in considering these central concepts, it was also essential to consider literacy as the central and contextualising lens through which I was exploring these concepts. Thus, the conceptual framework in this study is a theoretical refinement of the framework that was used in that study to examine reading literacy (Murphy et al., 2013). The existing body of knowledge in the literature and a number of educational theories, as explored in previous chapters, also inform the study, illustrated in Figure 7.

![Figure 7: Evolving Conceptual Framework; Considering the Research Context](image)
Of course, research cannot be conducted in a vacuum and therefore Figure 7 also acknowledges the situatedness of this study and the contextual factors, at both national and international levels, that impact on the participants and the findings.

This conceptual framework was important in identifying and refining the research question, but it also offered a useful frame to help guide and shape the research design, specifically in relation to composing the research sub-questions (See section 4.8) and in designing and refining the interview questions that were posed to all participants during the data collection phase (See Appendix D). While the concepts overlap in many ways and are interdependent (Clandinin 1985; Richardson 1990; Kagan 1992; Alexander 2000; Galton 2007; Fives and Buehl 2016), this conceptual framework made it possible to analyse data with these key concepts in mind, thereby offering me a clear structure to present and discuss the research findings.

4.6 Answering the Research Question: The Research Approach Adopted in this Study

Thinking through a study from beginning to end, ‘rolling out the road map’ of research (Thomas 2011, xv) is a crucial preparatory stage in any research design process. As illustrated in the previous sections of this chapter, I have considered how my ontological and epistemological positioning determined the research question of a study. ‘Since research does not or should not take place in a vacuum, it is important to be aware as to how any study fits into the broader picture, in terms of previous empirical work, theoretical ideas, and recent policy and practice’ (White 2009, p.5). This necessitated that I conducted a comprehensive and critical literature review and chapters two and three presented an overview the pertinent and relevant literature relating to the conceptual framework in this study. The emerging research question ‘determines the appropriate research architecture, strategy and tactics to be used’ (Stone 2002 cited in White 2009, p.92) and this is explored here as I outline how I moved ‘from thinking about asking the questions to thinking in detail about how to answer them’ (White 2009, p.98). An graphical representation of the research design is offered in Figure 8 to assist the reader in navigating the research approach adopted in this study.
Figure 8: An Illustration of the Research Design Adopted in this Study
Adopting a Quantitative or Qualitative Design

In planning this research, I considered both qualitative and quantitative paradigms as ‘if there is one thing that produces poor studies, it is a researcher who is blind to the methodological consequences of research decisions’ (Seale 2000, p.49). For instance, the objective attitude of the positivist may rely heavily on data gleaned from quantitative collection methods, while the interpretivist will be more inclined to accept the subjectivity sometimes characteristic of qualitative methods of research. Quantitative methods might include surveys, experiments (in controlled situations) and structured observation, while qualitative methods rely on unstructured interviews, case studies, participant observation and unstructured observation (Thomas 2011). Therefore, this section explores the methodological choices made in this study.

It is argued that ‘quantitative research…can say a great deal about trends, commonalities and averages’ (Mason 2006, p.16). In the context of this study, PISA is an example of quantitative research and as aforementioned, its findings are highly regarded internationally. Neoliberal marketisation has contributed to an increase in ‘new public management’ movements, resulting in a resurgence of positivist research methods, particularly in the case of policy making and implementation, as governments favour ‘evidence-based policy making practice… to demonstrate which policies ‘work’ and which do not’ (Hammersley 2008, p.49). Critics of qualitative research, on the other hand, question its legitimacy, its reliability and inability to make generalisations. Certainly if a researcher seeks data concerning ‘how many’, empirical methodologies are of use. However, ‘statistics can flatten what is really happening- they don’t reveal why, how or who’ (Hourigan 2014). Furthermore, advocates of qualitative research put forward a compelling case for the legitimacy of qualitative research methods (Denscombe 2007; Hammersley 2008; Creswell 2009; Creswell and Miller 2010; Hourigan 2014).

Danger arises when we seek to dismiss one paradigm over the other or use absolute terms. The qualitative researcher can learn from the ‘positivist discussion of measurement validity, internal and external validity, reliability and replicability… a necessary starting point if methodological awareness is to be developed’ (Seale 2002, p.108). In a similar way, the quantitative researcher must concede that it is a
gross error to assert that all qualitative research is ‘naively subjectivist and biased’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.10).

4.6.2 Justifying Qualitative Research

Mason argues that good research needs to be qualitatively driven to give voice to the complexities of ‘lived experience’ (due to its) ability to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (2006, pp.12-16). Qualitative research methods have the potential to provide what is regarded as ‘thick description… deep, dense, detailed accounts’ whereas ‘thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail and simply report facts’ (Creswell and Miller 2010, p.128). By adopting qualitative research methods in this study, the overarching aim is to illuminate and generate understanding of post-primary teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and experiences pertaining to literacy during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy in Ireland, thereby promoting deeper understanding sometimes missing from statistics alone. Perhaps more importantly, Mason argues that ‘the macro is known through the lens of the micro’ (2006, p.14) and so, gaining an insight into the perspectives of post-primary teachers across four research sites has the potential to offer greater understanding of how literacy is perceived and how policies are implemented in post-primary schools more generally. As well as this, awareness of audience is important and the ‘down-to-earth’ and ‘attention holding’ (Stake 1978, p. 5) qualities of qualitative research can engage readers. ‘Narrative inquiries develop descriptions and interpretations of phenomena from the perspective of participants, researchers and others’ (Flyvbjerg 2006, p.240), potentially informing pedagogy by appealing to practitioners. Furthermore qualitative studies have the potential to contribute to ‘the development of conceptual frameworks, theories or practices useful well beyond the original site’ (Cochran-Smith 2005, p.222). While not generalisable, the principles that emerge in one classroom or school might be ‘applicable’ to another context.

Parker-Jenkins has coined the term ‘ethno-case study’ (2016) to describe research designs that draw on aspects of ethnography and case-study. Since this study is an exploratory one that aims to provide an insight into teachers’ understandings of literacy, it draws on ethnography in its design as it is an enquiry concerning people and employs ethnographic techniques such as interviews (Hammersley 2008). However, it lacks the prolonged period of ‘time spent in the field’ (Parker-Jenkins 2016, p.4) that is traditionally associated with ethnography. Similarly, this research
draws on case study in the sense that it focuses on specific issues, those being literacy and how we do policy, and seeks to illuminate the findings with the type of ‘thick description’ (Stake 2010) traditionally associated with case study. However, this study is not what one might term a ‘pure’ case study, as the research design does not allow for the data to be collected in the natural context (Bassey 1999) of the classroom, it does not focus on an individual unit (Flyvbjerg 2006) nor does it engage multiple sources of evidence (Yin 2009).

Ultimately, qualitative research provides valuable insights into human behaviour that might not be otherwise attainable, and ‘researchers proposing qualitative inquiry do best by emphasising the promise of quality, depth and richness in the findings’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.16). Hence, my choice of qualitative research design and in the following sections of this chapter, I outline the steps taken to acknowledge and honour the principles that underpinned this design.

4.7 The Research Question

I now revisit the question and research objectives that form the basis for this study. As a reminder, the overarching question or research aim is as follows:

‘What are Irish post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy and of implementing a literacy policy?’

The professional biography in the introductory chapter of this study has already addressed how this question emerged as a priority in my professional practice and became the subject of this research endeavour. As a result, this overarching research question might be described as an ‘applied research question’, defined as one that originates ‘in the world of professional practice rather than in academic settings’ and is ‘primarily concerned with addressing a practical problem of immediate concern’ (White 2009 p.29). Following engagement with relevant literature and further reflective inquiry with my supervisors and critical friend, a number of specific research sub-questions were designed with the aim of answering the overarching question and addressing the research objectives at the heart of this study:
I. What are teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept?

II. What literacy strategies do teachers use in their practice, in their subject area as well as through a whole-school approach?

III. What are the opportunities and challenges experienced by teachers at the early stages of implementing a national literacy strategy?

As outlined in section 4.5, this study draws its conceptual framework from the sociocultural perspective adopted in LETS (Conway et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2013). Each research question outlined above pertains to one of these concepts: teachers’ beliefs, teacher knowledge and professional experiences during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy. In an effort to address these concepts, each question has a number of carefully chosen sub-questions that were drafted, edited and refined prior to beginning the data collection phase. These are presented in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objective</th>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
</tr>
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| 1. To Explore Teachers’ **Beliefs** about Literacy as a Concept | • How do teachers define literacy and perceive literacy as a concept in their practice?  
• Whose responsibility is literacy development? |
| 2. To Examine Teachers’ **Knowledge** about Literacy as a Practice | • What do teachers know about literacy as a concept and as a practice?  
• What strategies do teachers use to promote literacy in their classrooms?  
• To what extent is literacy part of teachers’ everyday practice in their subject area(s)? |
| 3. To Examine Teachers’ **Experience** of Implementing Literacy Policy | • Has the positioning of literacy as a concept and practice changed since the introduction of a national strategy promoting literacy?  
• What opportunities were presented during the implementation process?  
• What challenges emerged for teachers during the implementation process?  
• Who or what can support teachers in moving forward? |

Table 5: The Research Objectives and Research Sub-Questions

4.8 **Choosing Appropriate Data Collection Methods**

I now consider the methods for gathering data, selected to suit the research objectives and the style of inquiry that sits well with the researcher (Krauss 2005; White 2009; Stake 2010). Smagorinsky argues that it is essential to give space to
describing the data sources, to be explicit about who conducted data collection and how consistency was achieved, as well as presenting limitations and cautions about the chosen data collection method (2008, pp.394-395).

The primary method of data collection used in this study is the semi-structured, ‘in-depth’ interview defined as ‘a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation’ (Boyce and Neal 2006, p.3). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful when exploring feelings and beliefs, where the research is concerned with values or mind-sets, when seeking to obtain a rich understanding of how an issue unfolded, and it also provides an opportunity for detailed exploration of an issue’ (Newby 2014, pp.359-360). Braun and Clarke agree that interviews are ideally suited to experience-type and practice-type research questions, useful for exploring ‘understandings’ and constructions of things in which participants have some kind of personal investment (2013, p.81). Thus when considering the research questions at the heart of this study, the in-depth interview was deemed to be an appropriate research method. 

In qualitative studies, the researcher is in ‘pursuit of ‘lived experience’” (Silverman 2010, p.128) of the participants, making semi-structured interviews suitable data collection tools. The semi-structured nature of the interview makes it conversational and ‘the role of the interviewer is not to slavishly follow a structure but to stimulate a response’ (Newby 2014, p.360), ‘to understand the experience of those being interviewed, not to predict or control the experience’ (Seidman 1991, p.41). This is in keeping with the social constructivist view of knowledge as co-constructed and collaborative, already outlined in this chapter, and I aimed to create an interview experience that might resemble professional conversations or dialogue between colleagues.

However, in an effort to maintain consistency in terms of interview format and to keep the dialogue focused around the research objectives, an interview guide or ‘topic guide’ was used to highlight areas that would be addressed. (See Appendix D). Patton argues this helps make ‘interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored... it keeps the interactions focused but allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge’ (1987, p.283). It provides the flexibility needed to ensure that
different cases can be analysed collectively as well as individually, while still accommodating follow-up of any individual issues that might arise in the course of the interview. Questions were typically quite open-ended in an effort to promote discussion. Furthermore, topics were not addressed in a specific order. Again, there was a real attempt made to promote rich and authentic professional dialogue. This is another reason why one might choose to conduct individual interviews rather than use focus groups, an alternative data-collection method considered in this study. By conducting one to one interviews, it was deemed more likely that teachers might elicit more open responses. From my perspective as researcher, it afforded me the opportunity to explore particular points of interest, to probe for further details and provide an opportunity for clarification, where necessary.

4.8.1 Interview as a Data Collection Tool

‘If culture involves the hammering of a world rather than merely a sharing of values, negotiation is imperative. And language is the key vehicle for most humans for such negotiation... the dynamic of social interaction- the fact that each utterance in a conversation can influence the next speaker’s decision, turn and utterance-means that the identities that emerge and shift in the moment-by-moment exchanges between people in specific interactional situations can never be predicted to result in the desired effects being achieved’.

(Hall et al., 2014 p.57)

I begin this section with this lengthy observation from proponents of sociocultural theories in an effort to acknowledge the complex, social, participatory and constructed nature of interviews, and to highlight my cognisance that the interview is a ‘construct’, an example of meaning-making. I am also aware of the different positions I occupy as interviewer, positioned simultaneously as insider (colleague) and outsider (researcher). It is imperative to acknowledge the temporal nature of interviews at the outset, something I return to later when I consider the limitations of this study.

One of the potential downsides of the in-depth interview is that the researcher needs to be a skilled interviewer, credible and knowledgeable about the topic at hand because without that knowledge and understanding, follow-up questioning may not be sufficiently penetrating (Newby 2014, p.359). Having over 10 years of classroom experience, my role as a Literacy Link teacher and insights afforded by three years of extensive research regarding literacy, I felt well-placed to conduct the interviews.
Nonetheless, part of my preparation for data collection was extensive research concerning interview skills. I learned to use illustrated examples to help interviewees but not ask leading questions. Another useful strategy was to use a ‘direct announcement’ (Patton 1987, p.322) to signal to participants what I would be asking them about next:

‘Okay so, clearly there are lots of literacy strategies in your practice in your classroom but you might just like to tell me about the approaches taken outside your classroom. How is literacy being made visible across the school?’

Indeed, the success of the in-depth interview is very much dependent on the researcher’s ability to use probes and follow-up questions. Patton (1987, pp.322-327) outlines how the researcher can use ‘detail orientated probes’ such as how, why, who and when; elaboration probes can be used to cue the participant that they should keep talking like a quiet ‘uh-huh’ or ‘could you tell me more about that?’ while clarification probes can seek greater clarity or explanation, for instance ‘You said you thought that the reading initiative was a success. What do you mean by success?’

The process of establishing a rapport with research participants is also crucial to the success of the interview. ‘Rapport involves trust and respect for the interviewee and the information he or she shares’ and the researcher needs to be keenly aware of the principles of apprehension, exploration, co-operation and participation’ (Bloom and Crabtree 2006, p.316). Research into how to conduct interviews certainly helped me to consider how I might best use the time I had with participants and therefore, gather richer data. Another important and practical step that assisted me in the research process and undoubtedly helped to hone and develop my interview skills was the use of ‘pilot interviews’.

4.8.2 Piloting the Data Collection Instrument

Seidman (1991) argues that a pilot interview, where the researcher will ‘try out their interviewing design with a small number of participants’, has a number of functions:

‘(Researchers) will learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision. They will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact and conducting the interview. The pilot can alert them to elements of their interview techniques that support the objectives of the study and to those that detract from those objectives. After completing the pilot,
I conducted four pilot interviews over four months (May-August 2015) before beginning the formal data collection phase of the study, and this pilot phase provided a crucial opportunity to test the research questions as well as gain some practice in interviewing (Majid et al., 2017). I approached a number of colleagues who were practising post-primary teachers that I had worked with in different contexts and, in keeping with the ethical considerations in this study explored in section 4.12, I invited them to be part of the pilot for my study. I presented them with the interview schedule and information letter in advance of the pilot interview, and sought their informed consent but assured them that this was the pilot phase of the study and as such, I would not be drawing on their responses as part of the formal analysis and presentation of findings in the study.

Although it may seem self-explanatory, ‘interview questions are at the heart of interviewing’ (Majid et al., 2017) and one of the principal advantages of piloting the data collection instrument was that it afforded me time and space to review and refine the interview questions and adjust the interview schedule accordingly in advance of the formal data collection phase. In particular, the pilot stage provided an opportunity to revisit the sequencing of questions to ensure that early questions are less probing than later ones to put participants at ease in the early moments of the interview experience. For example, during the pilot phase, my opening question asked participants ‘What is your subject area?’ Upon reflection following the pilot phase, however, this question was edited; as well as asking participants about their subject area, I felt it was also important to ask ‘How long have you been teaching?’ I found this was useful to put participants at ease as, unlike the first question, it often led to more open responses and allowed participants to speak not just about their experience in terms of years teaching, but also in terms of their different experiences working in different jurisdictions and contexts. This provided me with an opportunity to return to some of the points made later in the interview when considering teachers’ experience as teachers of literacy. Editing this question following the pilot stage also helped to establish important background information regarding teachers’ knowledge and experience relating to literacy. For instance, one
participant, a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) at the time of the pilot interview, had experienced an ITE programme that had an overt focus on literacy while other teachers in the pilot phase, working in different schools and at different stages in their career, had experienced the implementation of LNLL in different ways. Ultimately, this question seemed to put participants at ease as they had the freedom to reflect and speak of their experience, if they so wished, in a non-threatening way.

Furthermore, reviewing the questions after the pilot stage provided a final opportunity to ensure that the questions were capable of addressing the research objectives and that the questions were clear (Patton 1987). While the draft schedule used for the pilot asked teachers ‘what are your understandings of literacy?’, a later version of this question, informed by the pilot, was refined to ask participants ‘what do you understand by literacy strategies in the classroom?’ While it remained open-ended, this question was more specific and focused, thereby increasing the likelihood of participants discussing their knowledge and literacy practice, in line with the objectives and research questions at the heart of this study.

As well as ensuring questions were clear and fit-for-purpose in relation to the research objectives, the pilot helped me to ensure that questions were truly open-ended (Patton 1987). For example, in the pilot schedule I asked participants a question that, upon later reflection, could be seen as closed-ended question. Initially, I asked ‘Are you aware of the literacy needs of your students?’ whereas I later adapted this by adding ‘How do you become aware of your students’ literacy needs?’ This modification not only helped to gain more detailed responses, but its specificity allowed me to consider the extent to which teachers collaborate in relation to literacy, something that became a key theme in the findings of this study.

The piloting stage also ensured that I had time to consider and to reflect on my interviewing style and technique. For instance, conducting pilot interviews made me more conscious of the potentially invasive nature of an interview for the participant and how interviews are ‘interventions’ that ‘affect people’ (Patton 1987, p. 354), reminding me of my duty of care to my participants. For instance, the participant in Pilot 1 spoke about the level of fear and anxiety that surrounds literacy for him, both personally and professionally. In a very open and honest account, he expressed how he ‘struggled’ with literacy in school but also how the prospect of speaking at meetings in the staffroom is one that continues to ‘intimidate’ him. Similarly, in Pilot
2, the participant was incredibly confident in how she vividly described her practice but paused in the later stages of the interview to express her own experience of school. She recounted how she was ‘diagnosed with Dyslexia in national school’ and how she felt this hindered her relationship with literacy. I was also mindful of the fact that I knew these participants on both personal and professional levels, and that they might feel more comfortable sharing their worries, fears and anxieties with me as a result. Nonetheless, it alerted me to the need to tread carefully in relation to the interview process; that it could unearth issues and experiences that could expose participants, or make them feel vulnerable.

Pilot 3 alerted me to the importance of taking field-notes as part of the interview process, regardless of the fact that the interview was being digitally recorded, as it drew my attention to the significance of body-language and non-verbal cues in the interview process (Boyce and Neal 2006), things that cannot be captured in the audio-recording. Towards the end of the interview, the participant paused, turned towards me and reflected on a long career as a science teacher where he held out his upturned hands and shrugged before describing his ‘dilemma’ of ‘focusing too much on exam results’ which meant he lost sight of ‘what students were learning’. His tone changed to one that might be described as regretful. He also continued to speak about such dilemmas after I had stopped recording the interview, again highlighting that field-notes are a crucial aid to researchers in the stages following the data collection process. They can support the researcher in their interpretation and analysis of data.

Finally, Pilot 4 helped me to focus on the importance of establishing a good rapport with participants, in keeping with the literature regarding conducting interviews (Patton 1987; Newby 2014; Majid et al., 2017) as a good rapport with participants will not only make participants comfortable, but can also elicit better responses.

Following the first three pilots, I became more aware of using the interview topic guide as a guide and not a recipe (Braun and Clarke 2013), making the interview a natural, professional learning conversation, albeit mindful of resisting the temptation to speak too much, and framing responses as questions wherever possible, encouraging the interviewee to speak. It is a fine balancing act to shape the interview as a purposeful-conversation and not as an interrogation, but ultimately the aim was to make the interview an ‘enjoyable experience’ for participants (Pilot 4). A crucial
contributing factor in achieving this was to allow conversation to flow as naturally as possible.

Across all four pilots, I was presented with a number of opportunities to practice how I framed questions for clarity, to practice navigating the interview topic guide in order to ensure conversation flowed naturally and to learn how to probe participants for further information and to seek greater clarity (Patton 1987) in their responses.

Following this stage in the research process, I met with my critical friend to reassess the data collection tool based on data gleaned from the pilot stage, affording me a final opportunity to refine the interview questions. One issue that arose, and was subsequently rectified, concerned the clarity and purpose of the questions as well as sequencing, as outlined earlier. The decision was also taken to add a question to the interview schedule regarding ‘oral literacy’, a question that was not included in the pilot stage. However, the role of speaking and listening was something that emerged as part of the conversation about literacy during the pilot interview phase. Given the increased emphasis on oracy in policy documents such as subject specifications and LNLL, it was regarded as important that a question focusing on oral literacy would be included as part of the topic guide.

Therefore, the decision to pilot the interview was a crucially important one. This stage in the research design allowed me to review questions so that they were clear, open-ended and related to the research objectives and to subsequently refine the interview topic guide. It also supported me in developing a good rapport with the colleagues who would participate in the main stage of the study. Logistically, it provided an opportunity to see how the interview would be conducted from beginning to end, starting with a welcome and the ethical considerations (such as explaining the nature of the study and acquiring consent). Pilot interviews also allowed me to check that 40 minutes allowed adequate time to engage with all the questions on the interview topic guide and gave me space to test recording equipment and practice note-taking strategies.

4.8.3 Interview Process

In an effort to accommodate the schools that were willing to grant me access, interviews lasted between 35 and 40 minutes, equating roughly to the length of one class period. The location was of the participant’s choosing, and typically occurred
in schools in a classroom or office but occasionally off-site in the homes of participants. An important consideration was trying to avoid any physical barriers such as tables so that it was easier to build a rapport with the participant.

Upon commencement of the interview, initial steps included welcoming and thanking the participant, before presenting them with an information sheet and consent form (Appendix C). I then proceeded to explain the purpose of the interview. I sought to reassure participants that there were no ‘right or wrong answers’ but that the interview provided me with an opportunity to gain an insight into their experiences regarding literacy development. I started with an introductory question that inquired about the participant’s subject area and the amount of time they had spent teaching. While I had a copy of the interview schedule in front of me, it was important that I was very familiar with the document so that I could focus on what the participants said and how I might follow up comments with other questions or how I might probe deeper, as necessary. However, rather than treating it as a ‘tick-box’ approach and a potential strait-jacket in the data-collection process, I followed Braun and Clarke’s advice to see it as ‘a guide, not a recipe to be followed to the last gram’ (2013, p.95). A useful technique involved ‘clean-up questions’ to begin bringing the interview to a close, as they can trigger interesting and sometimes unanticipated data. For instance, I closed the interview by asking ‘What is it to be literate in 21st Century Ireland?’

While all interviews were digitally recorded, I also took some brief notes in my reflective journal regarding things to follow up or things that I felt were interesting or repeated, as well as listing major points and recording some points ‘in quotation marks to capture the interviewee’s own language’ (Patton 1987, p.352). The journal also recorded detailed information about the time, date and setting of the interview. Moreover, these field notes served as an early form of analysis because by capturing significant statements in the field notes, I was in a position to begin posing questions of the data. I recorded field notes immediately after the interview based on how I felt it went, and attempting to remain mindful of anything note-worthy regarding physical behaviours or reactions. I first noticed this in the pilot stage of the data collection process when the participant’s body language completely altered after the digital recorder had stopped when he started to reflect back on a particular aspect of his career:
As I turned off the recorder and thanked him again, Simon turned in the chair and faced me. He paused. He put out both hands in front of himself, they were upturned. He said ‘I focused too much on exam results’. I was struck by his openness and honesty. I couldn’t help but notice that there seemed to be a tone of regret in his voice, but also by the way he shrugged his shoulder, as though he was uncertain himself. In this moment, I realised the power of establishing a rapport and being open.

(Reflective Journal: Pilot Interview 3:16th July 2015)

During the data collection stage, I reflected on instances where one participant clicked a biro incessantly at one particular point in the interview, something I noticed during the transcription process. Curious, I returned to listen to the entire interview again, mindful of this and looking for instances of this behaviour. Upon revisiting the transcript, a pattern became apparent where he clicked the biro more frequently, something I noted in my reflective journal:

I felt at times that this participant was asking me questions, challenging me and my thinking about literacy. He ended several statements with ‘You know?’ or ‘Right?’ and gestured for me to share my thoughts. On one occasion where he spoke about veteran teachers not wanting to ‘let go’ of ‘didactic things’ like ‘chalk and talk’, something he attributed to a power issue for teachers who may ‘not want to hand power over to kids’ stating ‘they’d find that very tough’, he asked me ‘Wouldn’t they? Would you agree?’ Looking at the moments together, my interpretation of the clicking biro seemed to coincide with moments where the participant may have been hesitant, uncertain or uncomfortable and sought my opinion and thoughts.

(Reflective Journal: Data Immersion, Birch 7:17th June 2016)

The decision to record the interview was one that was given much consideration and while there are arguments that recording the interview might inhibit participants and their responses, ‘by preserving the words of the participant, researchers have their original data’ (Seidman 1991, p.87). I think the second example from my reflective journal and field notes cited here also illustrates how certain things can be missed or overlooked in the moment of the interview. Having a recording affords researchers additional opportunities to probe deeper and ‘make-meaning’ of the ‘raw’ data. This is an important contributing factor towards reliability and rigour, further explored later in this chapter. Seidman argues that the researcher should avoid any in-depth analysis of interview data until all interviews have been completed to ‘avoid imposing meaning from one participant’s interview on the next’ (Seidman 1991, p.86). While I did take note of emerging themes and commonalities between participants during the interview process, formal analysis of the interview data transcripts did not take place until all data had been collected. The interview closed
by thanking the participant, asking them if they had any questions and giving them a small token of appreciation for their time (a box of chocolates). I also gave them a copy of an oral-debriefing sheet (Appendix C).

4.8.4 Participant Sample

Participants were drawn from four post-primary schools in a particular geographical region in the south-west of Ireland. Purposive Sampling (Cohen et al., 2011, p.156) was utilised. Since the study seeks to gain an insight into the beliefs, knowledge and experiences of post-primary teachers during the implementation stage of LNLL, it was essential that the recruitment process purposefully sought participants in particular settings in order to access the knowledge and experiences of post-primary teachers. In this way, sampling attends to the research questions and to the research design in this study:

‘Purposive sampling is precisely what the name suggests. Members of a sample are chosen with a ‘purpose’ to represent a location or type in relation to a key criterion. This has two principle aims. The first is to ensure that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered. The second is to ensure that, within each of the key criteria, some diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored’.

(Ritchie et al., 2003, p.79)

With this in mind, a total of seven post-primary schools with diverse contexts were considered geographically accessible for the purpose of this study. One school was excluded from consideration due to personal involvement in an attempt to reduce the potential of researcher bias. The remaining six schools were approached, initially with a recruitment letter on 2nd September 2015 (Appendix B), followed up with a phone-call in the weeks that followed. Four schools responded positively and agreed to participate in the research.

4.8.4.1 School Contexts in this Study

‘To conduct a piece of research, scholars must necessarily narrow their scope, focus their view, and formulate a question far less complex than the form in which the world presents itself in practice’.

(Shulman 1986, p.6)

Research findings can only make sense when ‘sufficiently contextualised’ (Smagorinsky 2008, p.404) so in keeping with the sociocultural approach adopted in this study, I now present a brief contextualisation of the four research sites in this
study. Ball and colleagues outline the different contextual dimensions that need to be considered in educational research about policy enactment; the situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts and external contexts (2012, p. 21). The external context has already been considered in terms of the national and international background explored in the introductory chapter. The short contextualisation offered regarding each school here attempts to address the ‘situated contexts’ of the schools in this study, offering insights regarding locale, school intake and school history. While professional cultures (values, teacher commitments and experiences and policy management in schools) and material contexts (staffing, budgeting, buildings, technology and infrastructure) are not explored here, they were considered when analysing the data, and offer useful lenses to discuss the findings in this study.

The information presented here was obtained from school documents, school websites, inspectorate reports, interview transcripts and from conversations with participants in the study as well as school management. It provides some insight into the school background and the curriculum that is on offer in each school. The numbers enrolled in the school may vary over time but the number of students enrolled as reported here relates to the school enrolment number for the academic year 2017/2018. The accounts offered here were verified by gatekeepers in each research site. It is important to note that due to a commitment to preserve confidentiality and anonymity, I am ethically bound to present only details that will not make schools identifiable so that schools cannot be traceable from the data presented about them (Saunders et al., 2015). For that reason, any identifying features have been excluded from these short accounts.

4.8.4.1.1 Ash High

Ash High is a post-primary, interdenominational and co-educational school with a total enrolment of 470 students. It offers the Junior Cycle/Certificate, including the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), an optional TY programme, the established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). As well as a principal and deputy principal, there are 40 teachers in this school.
4.8.4.1.2 Birch College

Birch College is a post-primary, interdenominational and co-educational school and has an enrolment of 370 students, of mixed abilities and drawn from both urban and rural backgrounds. The school is part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan of the DES, part of their social inclusion strategy to help children and young people who are at risk of or who are experiencing educational disadvantage. The school offers the Junior Cycle/Certificate, including the JCSP, an optional TY, the established Leaving Certificate, LCA and LCVP. As well as a principal and deputy principal, there are 45 teachers in this school.

4.8.4.1.3 Cedar College

Cedar College is a post-primary, co-educational, interdenominational school and current enrolment is 427 students. In addition to Junior Certificate/Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate, the school offers the option of a TY programme as well as LCVP. As well as a principal and deputy principal, there are 33 teachers in this school.

4.8.4.1.4 Elm High

Elm High is a post-primary, co-educational and Catholic school. Currently, enrolment stands at 703 students. The school offers the Junior Cycle/Certificate, an optional TY, the established Leaving Certificate and LCVP. As well as a principal and deputy principal, there are 53 teachers in this school.

Following discussion with school management, an information sheet (see Appendix C) was sent to each school and shared with teaching-staff to ensure all potential participants were fully briefed concerning what the study would involve. Participation was entirely voluntary. Once participants had consented to their involvement, I scheduled interviews for a time and venue deemed convenient and comfortable for participants. Table 6 presents details of the research participants, including the pseudonym assigned to them for discussion in this study, their subject area(s) and the number of years they have been teaching. Participants are grouped by research site.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Site/Interview No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>Number of Years Teaching</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ash 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Eimear</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Áine</td>
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<td>Brendan</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Ash 6</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Construction/DCG</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gráinne</td>
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*Table 6: The Research Participants*
4.8.5 Determining an Appropriate Number of Interviews

Having discussed my research design at length with my supervisors, I aimed to conduct interviews with at least five, but not more than ten teachers from each school. Braun and Clarke argue that a sample size of between 15 and 30 individual interviews tends to be common in research that aims to identify patterns across data (2013, p.55). This was deemed an appropriate ‘sample size’ due to a number of factors.

Seidman argues that there are ‘two criteria for enough’ when conducting interviews. The first is ‘sufficiency’, arguing that there needs to be ‘sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it’ (1991, p.45). In this study, participants came from a range of subject areas and from different school-contexts. Furthermore, the intention to collect ‘rich’ or ‘thick’ data promotes the likelihood of readers being able to relate to the experiences described. Seidman’s second criterion is saturation of information, ‘the point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported’ (1991, p.45). While reflecting on the interview process ‘in action’, the researcher is able to recognise recurring themes and issues for participants. Using the interview schedule allowed me to ask multiple participants the same questions, and I observed how themes were recurring in response to the interview questions as the interview-process progressed. Boyce and Neal agree with this approach and contend that ‘the general rule on sample size for interviews is when the same stories, themes, issues and topics are emerging from the interviewees, then a sufficient sample size has been reached’ (2006, p.4). It is important to point out that data saturation is another crucial contributor to the validity of the findings in a study, explored further in section 4.10.

4.8.6 Challenging Generalisability

One of the principal criticisms made of qualitative inquiry is that due to its lack of empiricism, any generalisations made are unfounded. However, returning to the problems associated with the terms or language of social science research, it is argued that ‘generalisation is a word that should be reserved for surveys only…extrapolation better captures the typical procedure in qualitative research’ (Alasuutari 1995 cited in Silverman 2010, p.150). This argument is reiterated by
Charmaz who contends that ‘good naturalistic studies have findings (that) can be extrapolated beyond the immediate confines of the site, both theoretically and practically’ (Charmaz 2005 cited in Tracy 2010, p.845). Rather than relying on generalisations, qualitative research achieves ‘resonance through transferability’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985) or naturalistic generalisation (Stake and Trumbull 1982), processes that are performed by readers of the research (Tracy 2010, p.845). ‘Transferability’ (Guba and Lincoln 1989) is based on the premise that ‘there is no single correct or ‘true’ interpretation in naturalistic inquiry’ (Tobin and Begley 2004, p.392). Rather, by offering detailed and rich discussion of what is studied, the reader can see links and draw comparisons and contrasts between their own experiences and those of the research participants. To promote transferability, steps have been consciously taken to provide rich and detailed accounts of not only the research process in this methodology chapter, but also of the participants’ responses in the findings and discussion chapters.

While there is certainly potential to draw ‘fuzzy generalisations’ (Bassey 1999) in a study of this nature, interpretative research ‘makes no grand claims about generalisability or causation’ (Thomas 2011, p.77). Nonetheless, ‘interpretivists do not approve unbridled subjectivity or absolute relativism’ (Mabry 2008, p.221). This raises issues regarding credibility and rigour in qualitative research projects and the next section of this chapter examines validity and reliability in this study.

4.9 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Inquiry

If research is to be regarded as rigorous and findings are to be deemed ‘trustworthy’, then a study must address questions of validity and reliability. However, qualitative researchers must first overcome the obstacle of language problems. The social sciences have been ‘long dominated by techniques from the experimental sciences’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.1) and ‘reliability and validity’ are terms that would ‘locate the author within the modernist scientific paradigm’ (Seale 2002, p.98) of positivism. When considering applying the traditional criteria to qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln use the analogy of ‘Catholic questions directed to a Muslim audience’ (Tracy 2010, p.838). Denzin agrees, arguing that there is a ‘new language’ associated with some qualitative methods where words like ‘theory, hypothesis, concept, indicator, coding scheme, sampling, validity and reliability’ (cited in Seale
2002, p.98) no longer apply. In social science research for instance, triangulation is often used as a means of validating the findings of a study. Inspired by the practice of maritime navigators who once used several objects along coastal regions to get their bearings and fix their positions, triangulation in research refers to having more than one kind of evidence or data collection method (Thomas 2011; Bell 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). However, Denzin contends that there are four types of triangulation and while the researcher can triangulate across sources, there are other types of triangulation such as self-triangulation and triangulation using multiple eyes of different investigators. These methods are utilised in this study and discussed shortly.

4.9.1 Rigour and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

This study draws on the work of Guba and Lincoln (1989) who outline four criteria for rigour and trustworthiness within research reports by replacing the criteria traditionally associated with the positivist paradigm with an alternative terminology. Although they are interdependent, for the sake of clarity each is given individual treatment here.

‘Credibility’ seeks to ascertain that the researcher has provided a fair and accurate account of events and that the researcher’s version of events is in keeping with the ‘reality’ of participants. ‘Member Checks’ were employed as a form of respondent validation in this study to give participants the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions. Peer review (drawing on the perspectives of a critical friend as well as my supervisors) was also utilised as a tool to question assumptions and challenge representations. Closely related to credibility, ‘dependability’ is something that is achieved by clearly outlining the steps taken in the research process in an effort to ensure readers that the study is indeed reliable and rigorous.

Thirdly, ‘confirmability’ is concerned with ‘establishing that data and interpretations are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination’ (Tobin and Begley 2004, p.392). Again, many of the strategies outlined above are important in this regard, including member-checking, the peer review and of course, critical reflection through the use of the reflective journal. ‘Transferability’, as noted earlier, relates to the extent to which the findings reported in this study could offer an insight into teachers’ understandings of literacy more widely. Transferability is promoted through the
inclusion of detailed and thick descriptions, positioning the reader to make links and connections across contexts.

Guba and Lincoln later added a fifth criterion that they refer to as ‘authenticity’ (1989, 1994). ‘Authenticity… is demonstrated if researchers can show that they have represented a range of different realities’ (Seale 2000, p.46). This study sought to explore teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and experiences regarding literacy from a number of subject areas and school contexts in an effort to promote authenticity. This is based on the assumption that ‘research accounts do no more than represent a sophisticated but temporary consensus of views about what is to be considered true … authenticity is demonstrated if researchers can show that they have represented a range of different realities’ (Seale 2000, p.46).

Creswell and Miller argue that the researcher can use different lenses to contribute towards credibility by using the lens of the researcher, the lens of study participants and the lens of people external to the research to promote validity in this research study (2010, p.126). Each credibility check was considered at the very early stages of the research design as part of the research ethics application process. This is in keeping with effective practice for high quality research as advocated in the literature as ‘reliability and validity should not be evaluated at the end of a project but should be goals that shape the entire research process, influencing study design, data collection and analysis choices’ (Cohen and Crabtree 2008, p.335). The manner in which they were utilised in this study are discussed here.

4.9.2 Member Checking

Member checking is ‘a particular aspect of qualitative inquiry used for increasing trustworthiness’ (Carlson 2010, p.1102) and ‘a process vital to qualitative research’ (Stake 2010, p.127). Lincoln and Guba describe member checks as ‘the most crucial technique for establishing credibility’ (1985, p.314). Also referred to as respondent-validation, it consists of ‘taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account’ (Creswell and Miller 2010, p.127) by asking them for correction and comment (Stake 2010).

Interview data was transcribed from a digital audio file to a Word document and returned to participants who were asked to confirm that the transcription was a fair
and accurate account of the conversation that took place. Following research concerning the process of member checking, I drafted an email and sent it directly to all 26 participants in May 2016 (Appendix E). I explained the transcription process, as Carlson (2010) highlights how participants might be unsure of what to expect:

‘I have transcribed the interview verbatim, including filler words, pauses, false starts and repetitive phrases. This is to fully capture the conversation that took place between us. Your contributions here are rich and meaningful and I respect what you said and therefore, I wanted to capture it as accurately as possible...I hope... that you feel the transcription is a fair and accurate account of the conversation that we shared’.

(Extract from email to participants, May 2016)

I invited participants to comment on, change, question or edit, if they so wished, any aspect of the document. I urged participants to contact me before the end of term if they had any further comment and but also assured them that there was no onus to respond suggested that if I didn’t receive a response, I would politely take it that they were happy for me to proceed in analysing the data that had been generated. Ten of the 26 participants replied, affirming that all was in order and that they were happy for me to proceed with the next stage of data analysis. Such a process adds to the ‘internal validity’ (Guba and Lincoln 1994) of a study and aligns with the view that research is a negotiated process between the researcher and research participants. Using Creswell and Miller’s ‘lens of the participant’ (2010) contributes to the credibility, dependability and confirmability of this study. In honouring participant voice, it also contributes to the ethical integrity of a study, something that is explored in detail in the final section of this chapter.

4.9.3 The Audit Trail

An audit trail is a clear and systematic attempt on the part of the researcher to document their research activities to promote rigour, credibility, dependability (Guba and Lincoln 1989) and transparency. I have established an audit trail by ‘documenting the inquiry process through journaling and memoing, keeping a research log of all activities’ and as outlined in section 4.9, by ‘developing a data collection chronology and recording data analysis procedures clearly’ (Creswell and Miller 2010, p.128). Furthermore, reflective writing can act as ‘a critical source of interpretive understanding as concepts are dissected and ideas explored … invaluable in pointing to arguments to support (the researcher’s) conclusions in that it provides
an audit trail of how those conclusions were reached’ (Bazeley 2009, p.19). Thus the study can be understood through the Creswell and Miller’s (2010) lens of the reader.

4.9.4 Thick Description

Geertz coined the term ‘thick description’ (1973) which, Lincoln and Guba argue, adds to the trustworthiness of a study and makes transferability possible, as ‘the researcher provides enough description of a context so that the reader can determine whether the findings apply to his or her context (2013, p.105). Stake argues that thick description should describe the situation well, have emphatic understanding, and compare and present interpretations with those in the research literature’ (Stake 2010, p.49). My efforts to provide thick description in this study included giving detailed accounts of the participants’ attitudes, practices and experiences, as well as offering detailed accounts of the data collection and analysis phases, thereby providing people who are external to the study a clear insight into the research process. Rich and detailed description promotes credibility and transferability, explicitly highlighting how the study is a representation of ‘reality’ but it also provides an opportunity for readers to reflect, make links and see where the beliefs, practices and experiences of the teachers in this study may be consistent with or diverge from their own beliefs, practices and experiences.

4.9.5 Researcher Reflexivity

At this point, we return to the earlier discussion on reflexivity, to the ‘swampy lowlands’ researchers must inhabit to ‘deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems’ (Schön 1982, p.43). Reflexive validity procedures encouraged me to see beyond my ‘convictions, principles and prior experiences’ (Hollenbeck 2014 p.1) to explore both the tacit and the formative theories that inform, colour and ultimately influence the choices made in all stages of the research process (LeCompte 2000). Tacit theories are those that come from our experiences. They guide our behaviour, explain the past and predict what will happen next. Formative theories also guide behaviour, but these are more formal and found in research. This study adopts three reflexive validity procedures that are integral to the credibility and confirmability of this research; peer reviews, reflective journaling and keeping analytic memos.
Peer Reviews

Peer reviews offer the potential to triangulate the data using the lens of different investigators (Creswell and Miller 2010) as ‘having ‘multiple eyes’ is one of the most important triangulations’ (Stake 2010, p.127) in qualitative research. I engaged the perspectives of three critical friends, two of whom acted as supervisors in this project and the third was a colleague. My supervisors not only provided support but also challenged my thinking as a researcher, confronted my assumptions and helped to question my findings and interpretations. Such a process ‘creates added awareness of dimensions in the data and prompts fresh ideas, with new questions to pursue’ (Bazeley 2009, p.7). My critical friend was in a position to remain detached from the research as he did not have the same level of interest in it. Also referred to in the literature as ‘debriefing’, Lincoln and Guba define this technique as

‘the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind’.

(1985, p.308)

Rigour was promoted through engaging the perspective of my critical friend in analysing ‘clean’ copies of the transcripts using a coding frame reference, as advocated by Wilkinson (2000), explored in the next section concerning data analysis. Stake argues that researchers should ‘look again and again’ (Stake 2010 p.123) in an effort to promote triangulation because ‘evidence that is triangulated is more credible’ (Stake 2010, p.125). Looking ‘again and again’ continued during the data collection, transcription, coding and analysis phases of the research process in an effort to promote credibility, confirmability and dependability.

Reflective Practice

‘We see all things by means of our human head, and cannot chop it off.’

(Nietzsche 2008, p.20)

Reflective practice is understood as ‘a deliberate self-questioning about the grounds for a belief’ (Dewey cited in Thomas 2011, p.19) or as ‘a high order analytic process through which to identify what has occurred and why…experience and outcomes are assessed and reassessed’ (Newby 2014, p.668). In interpretivist research, the researcher is ‘the instrument’ (Hollenbeck 2014) and since ‘selectivity cannot be
eliminated’ (LeCompte 2000, p.146), reflective practice aided me identifying, analysing and justifying my choices in an effort to confront philosophical and theoretical assumptions and to promote methodological robustness. The primary reflective tool was my reflective research journal. The journal was used to record, but moreover to question and clarify many of the thoughts, assumptions, biases, concerns and uncertainties that arose over the course of this study, particularly during data collection and analysis stages. This act of ‘explicitly disclosing biases, assumptions and aspects of (our) backgrounds that could influence the interpretations (we) make’ (Carlson 2010, p.1104) is one way to reduce the impact of researcher bias. It presents the researcher with opportunities to ‘ask critical questions’ and ‘write about critical incidents’ (Kamler and Thomson 2014, pp.75-79):

‘A reflexive scholar is one who applies to their own work the same critical stance, the same interrogative questions and the same refusal to take things for granted as they do with their research data. Developing a reflexive disposition is profoundly about the being and doing of scholarship’.

(Kamler and Thomson 2014, p.75)

I maintained a reflective journal over the course of the research process, but particularly during the data collection and analysis period, the purpose being ‘to keep a record of the changes occurring to the researcher- the human instrument and meaning-maker- both about the research and not’ (Lincoln and Guba 2013, p.112). As a result, my journal presents reflections on the processes and practices of data collection, field-notes following interviews, and analytic insights that occurred during the different stages of data analysis. By using a research journal, Creswell and Miller’s lens of the researcher (2010) supports the process of validation. In this way, ‘subjectivity is not seen as something to be eliminated, but as an essential element of understanding human activity’ (Stake 2010, p.29).

Indeed, my initial decision to engage in reflective journaling arose from my concerns about objectivity and researcher bias. Efforts to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings visible and consciously acknowledge them as part of the research process could contribute to transparency (Ortlipp 2008; Tracy 2010; Tuval-Mashiach 2017) and trustworthiness (Jasper 2005), and form part of the audit trail (Creswell and Miller 2010; Braun and Clarke 2013). In this way, I believed that the research journal had the capacity to ‘raise the curtain’ (Tuval-Mashiach 2017) on some of what are commonly regarded as the ‘behind-the-scenes’ aspects of
qualitative research. In the early stages of the research design, I recorded my understanding of different research paradigms and methodologies, and how the literature and studies I was reading were subsequently shaping and influencing the final research design. Thus, my decisions were recorded and transparent. For instance, I initially considered adopting a mixed methods approach in this study, combining data from teacher questionnaires with data generated from focus groups. However, upon reflection following consultation of the literature, I questioned if I could gather rich and comprehensive data regarding teachers’ lived experience from paper-based questionnaires and wondered if participants might feel more vulnerable, and therefore, be less likely to speak openly, in the group setting of a focus group. I felt that philosophically and paradigmatically, interviews offered the most suitable method for data collection. In this way, reflective journaling helped me to clarify my research aims, as well as the ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations in this study, therefore showing how I arrived at my final design approach.

Regarding my methodological approach, I was conscious that this study relied on data generated from interviews, and because I conducted the interviews, I was essentially the ‘instrument’ (Lincoln and Guba 2013; Hollenbeck 2014) in this part of the research process. I believed that the reflective journal could offer space for consideration of my experience of conducting interviews. As outlined in section 4.9.1, the interview is one of joint meaning making between the interviewer and the participant. Ethically, I needed to not only ensure that participants were fully informed, but also that they were comfortable in engaging in the interview process. An unanticipated experience that I had was where one participant, Eamon, (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2) did not want the interview to be digitally recorded. Keeping a research journal allowed me to record this incident with clear guidelines regarding how I took notes in the absence of a digital recorder, a step that supported me during the transcription process:

*Perhaps I should have anticipated this but naively, I thought that having received the information sheet, participants would understand that the interviews would be recorded. As ever, I began the interview by explaining how the interview would progress and asked the participant to sign the consent form (he signed it so I was unaware at this point of any issues) but upon mentioning recording, the participant did not wish to record the interview. Admittedly I was thrown but hoped that I did not show my disappointment to the participant. Instead, the participant asked to go*
through the questions and I was happy to oblige here, albeit concerned that he may not want to participate in the interview following this. Once I had read out all of the questions, the participant said ‘I’ll answer and you can take your notes’. This involved reading through the questions one by one and I noted comments in my research journal. Anything that was captured ‘verbatim’, reflective of the actual words used by the participant, is indicated by ‘inverted commas’. Any other comments captured here as notes are my own words and shorthand. As a result, I think that this interview needs to be transcribed immediately so as to capture as much of it as possible. For clarity, and because limited time meant that not all questions were addressed, I have noted the questions addressed on this participant’s interview guide. Surprised and initially disappointed by the participant’s reluctance to engage fully in the interview! However, I completely respect his right to participate in a way that he is comfortable and think I’ve captured the essence of the conversation.

(Reflective Journal, 22\textsuperscript{nd} January 2016)

Drake speaks about the importance of using his research diary to balance and offset any biases and assumptions that he held, but also how he used the two methods, the research diary and the narrative story accounts together to promote rigour in research:

‘The diary was a useful memory jogger but more than that, by contrasting what was written in it with the stories constructed for the public domain from the interview accounts, it was possible to see the choices that might have been made in the selection and editing of the material and the partial truths that eventually become public’.

(2010, p 97)

Using a reflective journal provided space to identify and record my own views, beliefs, assumptions, experiences and questions as I engaged in the research process, which subsequently encouraged me to critically reflect on them. Therefore my reflective journal provided space to ‘hunt assumptions’, our ‘taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it’ (Brookfield 1995, p. 2). Sometimes this was done alone, while other times I raised these points with supervisors and critical friends. In such instances, I often found it useful to provide captions for my journal entries. One such entry was entitled ‘Competing Goals in Education’ (Reflective Journal, December 2015). At this point in data collection, I had conducted and transcribed 15 interviews from two research sites and had begun asking tentative questions of the data. A number of my ‘noticings’ (Braun and Clarke 2013) included common or recurring ideas and central preoccupations, as well as competing ideas. My own philosophies as well as those of some of the participants are explored in the following entry:
Competing Goals in Education?

Perhaps in response to recently revisiting Dewey’s ‘The Child and the Curriculum’, the data raises a number of questions regarding the purpose of education. Dewey contends that problems arise when educators separate the needs of the CHILD from the demands of the CURRICULUM; it would appear that there is a tension between what teachers feel is best for their students’ ‘learning’ and what is best for success in ‘examinations’. Indeed, examinations and learning are intricately interwoven throughout conversations while, interestingly, literacy is often viewed as an ‘add-on’. Bringing these things together then, it is interesting how literacy is valued as important for students’ engagement with the world and society, but not as a discrete part of the ‘curriculum’ per se... it is seen as less valued in relation to exam success (beyond an ability to engage with questions)... There appears to be a binary of ‘literacy for life’ OR ‘literacy for the leaving cert.’... these goals seem to be competing rather than complimentary... Is it not possible to have both? This raises a number of questions for me regarding our educational values, regarding our philosophies, regarding the PURPOSE of education.

(Reflective Journal, December 2015)

Thus my reflective journal provided a space for me to critically reflect on what was ‘in the data’, but also on my own position and how my views could influence early observations and interpretations. Referring to the theorists that I was reading served as useful later in my discussion of the findings, but furthermore, they are indicative of the theories and ideologies that influenced the research process.

As discussed in section 4.9, I spent a considerable amount of time preparing for the data-collection phase, by conducting pilot interviews, reassessing the data-collection instrument and researching interview technique. All of these steps were recorded in my reflective journal, documenting the research processes and my practices as a researcher (Ortlipp 2008) by recording what I did, how I did it and why I did it (Tuval-Mashiach 2017). For example, my reflective journal entries clearly allow me to trace the evolution of the interview questions following the pilot of the data collection instrument, as discussed in section 4.9.2. An extract from my journal reads as follows:
Today I met with (critical friend) to evaluate the data collection tool and assess the suitability of the questions posed to participants. In particular, we focused on the legitimacy of the questions and the capacity of the questions to address the objectives in the study... I discussed the order of questions and the need to consider, in light of the pilots, the need to put participants at ease from the outset. I also indicated how a slight re-phrasing of questions would help promote clarity. He agreed and observed how participants may need greater scaffolding, based on some of the pilot responses. I’m immersed in this (the literature concerning literacy and the reforms introduced by the policy) whereas teachers may need greater clarity around what is being asked... He felt that the schedule ‘definitely needs a question on oral language’ and this change will be made also.

(Reflective Journal, 4th June 2015)

However, my engagement in reflective practice did not exclusively focus on methodological rigour and transparency; keeping a reflective journal supported me as a researcher in other ways. During the data collection phase of this research I used my reflective journal for a number of reasons; to record observations that could not be captured on audio, to highlight points that participants stressed during interviews and to document early interpretations and hunches. These field notes served as useful starting points for the reading and familiarisation stages of data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013). Following this immersion in the data, I recorded detailed reflections of potential emerging themes based on my impressions and interpretations of each individual interview, then of each research site and finally, of the dataset as a whole. In terms of structuring these reflections, I used the research objectives and research sub-questions to guide my reflection and ask questions of the data. It was my experience that this ordering and reordering of impressions and ideas in my journal ‘impose(d) a hierarchy’ on my interpretations, ‘as well as creating a permanent record that can be returned to and contemplated’ (Jasper 2005, p. 252).

This reflective activity informed later stages of data analysis, particularly as I began to make connections across the dataset. Initially, the early entries supported the naming of codes (or nodes in NVivo) and later, the entries supported the categorisation of codes and the manner in which themes were formulated. In particular, I created a number of conceptual maps (Reflective Journal, May-July 2017) to bring codes and categories together, as illustrated in Appendix G. Such graphical representations assisted the organisation of the discussion of the findings in this study, as these reflective practices allowed me to organise my thoughts and interpretations in line with the research sub-questions. Keeping these in my journal
supported the organisation of the data at various stages and offered a record of codes that I included or excluded, as well as a rationale for taking such an action.

Therefore, my reflective journal was utilised in a number of ways in this study. In particular, it highlighted my awareness of my own position in the research process, but it also helped me to trace, evaluate and clearly make methodological choices. It allowed me to document decisions taken and by recording all the analytical processes and outputs, reflective journaling supported me in presenting my findings in a way that are coherent, representative and relevant in terms of the research objectives. Ultimately, ‘a hallmark of good research (is) understanding and reporting relevant preconceptions through reflexive processing’ (Cohen and Crabtree 2008, p.333) and this was greatly supported by reflective journaling.

Another aspect of my reflective practice in this study involved creating analytic memos within NVivo to record ideas during the analysis phase of the research process, but also to increase the transparency and reliability of my findings. It is a useful way to record ‘thoughts and hunches and the evolution of our analytic ideas and frameworks’ (Newby 2014, p.496) while Braun and Clarke contend that the memo can record insights with greater depth and complexity than codes (2013). Below is an extract from an analytic memo that I created in NVivo while considering how teachers perceived ‘digital literacy’. Although LNLL explicitly refers to digital literacy, there were some mixed reactions from teachers during interviews. As I coded references to technology and computers under the node ‘digital literacy’, I began to reflect on teachers’ collective comments and I labelled this memo ‘Digital Natives’ (Prensky 2012):

**Extract from Analytic Memo ‘Digital Natives’**

> Interestingly, many teachers see digital- technology, kindles, TV, portable devices- as a real obstacle to literacy development. It is set up as something that is challenging. Spell-check and texting on phones are seen as CONTRARY to literacy development.

> This belief may result from a belief in a more traditional form of literacy, literacy as reading and writing in traditional pen and paper format... Michéal refers to how he might be a 'luddite' for holding this view and Shannon explicitly states that box-sets and kindles have an adverse effect on children engaging in reading- tension here between policy and philosophies!

> LNLL makes specific reference to digital literacy; Also the digital strategy aims to address digital learning. 2016 review of LNLL to how Dig Lit needs attention; the Junior Cycle Framework also; part of literacy when we examine the ‘key skills’.

(Analytic Memo ‘Digital Natives’ extracted from NVivo)
In terms of using the analytic memo as a reflexive tool, the practice allows the researcher to pause and reflect on different issues as they travel along an analysis route, questioning and interrogating our biases and assumptions, and this is how memo writing was utilised in this study, as a complimentary approach to the use of a reflective journal.

Finally, to address my own biases and assumptions, I include a reflective professional biography as a prologue outlining my own positioning in relation to the research. This is another effort to promote reflexivity and to contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Such efforts to actively facilitate ‘an in-depth consideration of events or situations’ allowed me to give ‘critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively’ (Bolton 2010, p. xix).

4.9.6 A Check-list for Credibility

To conclude this subsection of this chapter concerning the research design and approach adopted in this study, I return to the issue of credibility in qualitative research. Tracy (2010) outlines eight criteria that provide a ‘useful pedagogical compass’ to challenge the arguments of those who ‘regard qualitative research as just a good story’ (p.849). As outlined in Table 7, I have considered these criteria and used them as a checklist of procedures for consideration at various stages in an effort to add to the validity and reliability of this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Application in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Worthy Topic</td>
<td>The topic is relevant, timely, significant and interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Rigour</td>
<td>The study uses theoretical constructs, time in the field, as well as rigorous data and analysis processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerity</td>
<td>The study is characterised by reflexivity and transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>The study is characterised by thick description and showing rather than telling, as well as member checking or respondent validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resonance</td>
<td>The research moves readers through evocative representation and transferable findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Contribution</td>
<td>The research provides a contribution theoretically and practically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>The research makes a number of ethical considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Coherence</td>
<td>The study achieves what it purports to be about, uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals and meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions, findings and interpretations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Eight 'Big Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research; Ensuring Validity and Reliability

4.10 Data Analysis

‘Qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data in terms of the participants’ definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p.537). Data analysis is often regarded as ‘the most difficult and most crucial aspect of qualitative research… (since it involves) a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorising’ (Basit 2003, p.143). While there is no single or correct way to analyse and present qualitative data, Guest et al. (2012) argue that

‘thematic analysis is still the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual dataset (as it offers a) ‘rigorous, yet inductive set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible’.

(2012 pp.11-15)
The method used to analyse the data in this study was Thematic Analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke outline seven stages to TA (2013, pp.202-203) as presented in Table 8 and each will be addressed in the following sub-sections of this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Reading and Familiarisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Coding- complete across the entire dataset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Searching for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Reviewing themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Defining and naming themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Writing; the final analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8: The Seven Stages of Thematic Analysis*

4.10.1 **Stage One: Transcription of Interviews**

‘Instead of being viewed as a behind-the-scenes task, the transcription process (should) be incorporated more intimately into qualitative research designs and methodologies’ because ‘transcription is a powerful act of representation (that) can affect how data are conceptualised’.

(Oliver et al., 2005, p.1287)

With this argument in mind, I would like to present the steps taken during the transcription phase of this study. I conducted and digitally recorded 26 one-to-one interviews, each lasting 35-40 minutes, using a Sony digital recorder, model number ICD-PX333. Following each interview, I connected the digital recorder to a desktop computer and copied the digital recordings to the computer hard-drive, saving them as Windows Media Files. I organised my interviews into folders, grouped by each research site. I then began to engage in the process of transcription. Transcription took place between November 2015 and May 2016. The transcribing process involved listening to the interview as a media file using headphones and Windows Media Player provided me with a function to slow the playback speed to 50%. Using the media keys on my keyboard, I was able to play, pause and rewind the audio file as I typed what I heard directly into a Microsoft Word Document. Each interview took between 2.5 and 3.5 hours to transcribe.
Once I had transcribed the interview verbatim, I added a pseudonym (using the anonymous name of the school and the number that indicated the stage at which the interview took place, for example ‘Birch 6’). I noted the length of the interview, the word count and distinguishing the words of the researcher from those of the participant using different font styles. I also changed any identifying information, such as colleagues’ names, the name of the school or other identifying factors. It was this final transcript that I shared with each participant as part of the member checking process. Literature regarding transcription in qualitative research guided my decisions about how to transcribe and capture participant voice as accurately as possible. For instance, I noted ‘involuntary vocalisations’ such as laughing, some ‘non-verbal vocalisations’ such as sighing, shrugging and hand gestures and ‘response tokens’ such as ‘hmm’ … ‘okay’…’uh-huh’, some of which might note agreement with the interviewer, but others might signify that the participant was thinking or considering their response (Oliver et al., p.1283-1285). Such involuntary and non-verbal vocalisations can provide insights and offer meaning in the data. Having researched this prior to commencing the transcription process meant I applied a consistent and a standardised approach to the transcription of all interviews.

4.10.2 Stage Two: Reading and Familiarisation

Once the data is collected and organised, reading for familiarisation is a starting point with the intention of noticing things that are relevant to the research question (Bazeley 2009; Braun and Clarke 2013). Other authors refer to this ‘immersion’ in the data as gaining a ‘general understanding’ (Kuckartz 2014, p.49) or as an opportunity for the researcher to pose the question ‘What is this about?’ (Richards 2009, p.92). Of course, ‘in qualitative research there is not a very strict distinction between the phase of data acquisition and that of data analysis’ (Kuckartz 2014, p.51). In fact, data analysis is ‘an all-encompassing activity that continues throughout the life of the project’ (Basit 2003, p.145). For instance, while conducting the interviews it could be argued that ‘informal’ analysis had already begun and I recorded reflections in my research journal. Furthermore, my familiarity with the data was enhanced by the fact that I transcribed all the interviews myself.

Throughout analysis stages, I attempted to remain cognisant of the importance of adopting an ‘analytic sensibility’ defined by Braun and Clarke as
‘the skill of reading and interpreting data through the particular theoretical lens of your chosen method. It also refers to being able to produce insights into the meaning of the data that go beyond the obvious or surface-level content of the data, to notice patterns or meanings that link to broader psychological, social or theoretical concerns’.

(2013, p.204)

They argue that an analytic sensibility is ‘essential for moving beyond a surface, summative reading of the data’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.205), promoted by asking questions of the data. I returned to the research question and sub-questions at the centre of this study to guide my engagement with the dataset at this stage in the analysis. This more formal reading and familiarisation stage, or ‘process of immersion’ involved taking each transcript and making note of any impressions as I read them. I did this manually, with paper copies of the transcripts, grouped by research site, and this took place over the course of one calendar month (See Appendix F for an example). Saldana recommends that first-time researchers should initially code manually on hard-copy printouts to become very familiar with the data rather than focusing mental energies on the software (2016). Gibbs maintains that this paper-based approach grants the researcher ‘the kind of creativity, flexibility and ease of access that is important at the early stages of analysis (2010, p.40). As I read each transcript, I recorded ‘short notes or more reflective comments regarding the content which act as building blocks for the research project’ (Kuckartz 2014, p.52) in my journal. These certainly aided the more systematic approach taken later in the data analysis process. One of the most interesting ‘noticings’ (Braun and Clarke 2013) I made was that there was a great deal of tension or dichotomous language in one participant’s responses. I noted these in my research journal as follows:

Lots of tensions or dualities/dichotomies are apparent in this transcript;

‘teacher vs teacher; teacher vs public perceptions; teacher vs policy makers; teacher vs inspectorate; policy vs reality; teacher as carer vs teacher as technicist; education for holistic development vs education for the purpose of exams’

There is an overall sense in the transcript of a teacher who finds herself in a dilemmatic position; she believes in the importance of literacy as a value and the strategy has ‘legitimised’ many of the practices she has engaged in for years BUT it has arrived in the midst of a wave of reforms, with repeated reference to fear related to external pressures, public perceptions, change and accountability.

(Reflective Journal, Ash 1, Eimear; 8th June 2016)
It is important to note that while this is not ‘systematic engagement’ with the data, I was engaging with the data ‘actively, analytically and critically’ (Braun and Clarke 2013 p.205). Extensive engagement with relevant literature certainly contributed to my ability to read the data critically as I engaged in a reciprocal and reflexive process. In fact, many of the reflections and memos that I recorded aided me in labelling codes and nodes in a systematic way as I moved towards the next stage in data analysis and began coding the data.

4.10.3 **Stage Three: Coding (Complete) across the Dataset**

While the terms ‘coding’ and ‘analysis’ are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Rather, coding is argued to be a crucial step towards analysis (Richards 2009) or the ‘critical link between data collection and the explanation of meaning’ (Charmaz cited in Saldana 2016, p.3). Braun and Clarke present two approaches to coding; complete coding and selective coding. They describe ‘complete coding’ as an instance where the researcher aims to identify everything and anything of interest or relevance to answering the research question within the dataset. Selective coding, in contrast, is an approach whereby the researcher will ‘select’ instances from the data based on pre-existing theoretical and analytic knowledge that helps the researcher identify particular analytic concepts. In a similar way Gibbs uses the terms ‘open coding’ to describe completely open or data driven coding approaches, while he explains that ‘concept driven coding’ results from the researcher’s hunches and impressions that are based on their experiences, their engagement with relevant literature and previous studies (Gibbs 2010). The reality is that ‘most researchers move backwards and forward between both sources of inspiration during their analysis’ (Gibbs 2010, p.45) making data analysis a truly iterative process. In this study, a blend of both complete coding and selective coding approaches were utilised when coding and analysing the data; inductive TA was used when analysis was based on instances ‘in’ the data, while deductive or theoretical TA was used when analysis was guided by the theories and concepts (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 175) outlined in chapters two and three of this study.

This stage was aided by the work of Saldana who states that ‘coding is not a precise science; it is an interpretative act’ (2016, p.4). First cycle coding involves creating codes and grouping them into categories. To assist in this process, Saldana proposes that the researcher can make use of one or more of 26 First Cycle Coding Methods.
and I choose the four that I deemed most appropriate and applicable to the research questions in this study and in keeping with the paradigmatic, conceptual and methodological considerations. In fact, one of the hallmarks of doctoral study involves moving beyond description of phenomena to analysis. Therefore while descriptive coding was used to generate a sufficient list of subtopics- what is talked about- it can be limited in that it ‘generally does not offer the analyst insightful meanings about the participants and their perspectives’ (Saldana 2016, p.76). Furthermore, Saldana argues that using more than one coding method enhances accountability as well as the depth and breadth of findings. The coding methods utilised were ‘Descriptive coding’, ‘In Vivo coding’, ‘Values coding’ and ‘Versus coding’ and acted as lenses through which I peered while coding the data. The rationale for choosing these four coding methods is outlined in Figure 9:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Coding</th>
<th>In Vivo Coding</th>
<th>Values Coding</th>
<th>Versus Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Asks ‘What is going on here?’</em></td>
<td><em>Also known as 'literal' or 'verbatim' coding</em></td>
<td><em>What is held in high regard or deemed important?</em></td>
<td><em>Appropriate when datasets suggest strong conflicts or competing goals within, among and between participants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Leads to the development of a 'basic vocabulary'</em></td>
<td><em>Useful in studies that prioritise participants' voice</em></td>
<td><em>A note of caution; 'values coding is value laden'</em> (Saldana 2016)</td>
<td><em>Dichotomies can range from actual to conceptual</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Can deepen our understanding of their worldviews</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Useful to explore power issues</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9: The Four Coding Methods Adopted at this Stage in the Study*

Thus, I began the formal coding process manually on paper transcripts, using highlighters and coloured pens. Having already printed copies of the 26 interview transcripts for reading and familiarisation, I was in a position to apply data-derived (inductive) and researcher-derived (deductive) codes to the data. I read each extract and made a note on the transcript of a topic word or ‘code’ that I would apply moving forward. I was always mindful of Saldana’s four coding approaches and this allowed me to move from descriptive to more analytical coding. Figure 10 presents an example of how Saldana’s coding approaches were utilised to label or ‘code’ the data while Figure 11 gives examples of some of the codes that were generated using the different coding approaches.
Following this phase of the data-analysis process, I generated a ‘coding frame’. Also referred to in the literature as a ‘code book’ (Wilkinson 2003; Gibbs 2010; Saldana 2016), a coding frame is essentially ‘a list of codes and the rules for their application that results from qualitative analysis’ (Gibbs 2010, p.39). Table 9 presents the steps taken in developing a coding frame in this study (adapted from Wilkinson 2003, p.80).
1. Take a sample of interviews (usually 20-30%)

2. Read through transcripts several times

3. Identify an exhaustive list of emerging codes and number them

4. Group linked codes into categories

5. Create a coding frame reference by providing examples from the themes on a separate sheet of paper

6. Ask a colleague/friend to take your coding frame reference and the same sample of interviews and recode the interviews

7. Compare your coding (you should attempt to have 80% accuracy in your coding)

8. Re-code if necessary

9. Apply the coding frame reference to all the remaining interviews

| Table 9: Developing a Coding Frame |

A sample of six interviews was chosen, representing 20-30% of the dataset as recommended by Wilkinson (2003). Following extensive reading, a list of 80 codes was generated (Appendix H), positioning my critical friend to code the same sample from the dataset and we engaged in a professional conversation about our experience.

4.10.3.1 Coding in NVivo

Saldana recommends that once a researcher has spent some time developing their experience with hardcopy coding and has developed an understanding of some of the fundamentals of qualitative data analysis, they might consider working with electronic software known as Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS). While ‘computer and text analysis packages do not do the analysis for the researcher (and) the user must still create the categories, do segmenting and coding and decide what to retrieve and collate’ (Basit 2003, p.145), as explored shortly, there are a number of advantages to using computer software as part of the analytic process.

I completed the ‘Introduction to NVivo’ course in May 2015 and learned how to import documents and code data. Equipped with these skills, I loaded NVivo 11 onto my computer and created a project entitled ‘PhD Data Analysis’. The transcripts, already saved as Microsoft Word documents, were reformatted as Rich Text Files.
I imported all 26 files into NVivo and Figure 12 illustrates how my data was organised.

![Figure 12: Organising the Data in NVivo](image)

To ensure that focus on the questions was maintained, I borrowed from Richards (2009) who suggests that we ask a number of questions when coding and analysing the data. If I thought ‘That’s interesting’, I followed with a question; ‘Why is it interesting?’ or indeed, ‘Why am I as a researcher interested in this?’ This not only maintains the focus of the coding and analysis process but ensures that coding is analytic; that through reflection and interpretation, we can begin to generate themes that may have more far-reaching applicability or ‘transferability’ (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Conscious of Richards’ argument that recoding clean copies of transcripts will promote consistency (Richards 2009), I coded each transcript individually once more. I adopted a complete coding approach as I applied both data derived (inductive TA) and research derived (deductive/theoretical TA) codes to the data (Braun and Clarke 2013). I highlighted words and phrases and labelled the segment with a ‘Free Node’. I was able to open my list of nodes using the CTRL, FN and F3 shortcut and this made the process much quicker. If a particular segment was something that related to a new ‘node’ that had not been previously highlighted during this process, I created a new node or label for the segment. This would then be added to a growing list of ‘nodes’ in the ‘Free node’ folder. If the node already existed, I could simply code this segment at a pre-existing code. There was also an option to code the same section at a number of ‘nodes’ by clicking on the relevant ones. Figure 14 highlights how nodes were organised within NVivo.
I continued this iterative process for all 26 transcripts. If I assigned a ‘new’ node to the dataset, I would revisit earlier transcripts and use the ‘Search and Find’ functionality of the software package to seek any evidence of this node. Ultimately, this process led to the emergence of 83 free nodes, outlined in the Node Structure Report generated in NVivo (Appendix I).

There are a number of advantages afforded by the use of a computer programme for data coding. In her exploration of the appropriateness of manual or electronic coding approaches, Basit contends that ‘the segmentation of field data and retrieval of marked data segments is a valuable resource in the management of qualitative data… They substitute rapid and comprehensive searching supported by software for the uncertain and slow process of manual searching and filing’ (2003, p.145). The dataset consists of 26 interviews, ranging from between 2,500 to 5,000 words so NVivo allowed me to conduct comprehensive searches. Figure 14 illustrates how the nodes were organised, highlighting the extent to which an issue or topic emerged in
the interviews as well as highlighting the frequency with which an issue arose across the dataset.

Another advantage of using CADQAS is that it may increase transparency of the qualitative research process by presenting clear ‘audit trails’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.219). Figure 15 presents an example of how I could search for and retrieve data coded under a particular node. One area of interest in this study was the role of the literacy team and once I had coded all references to ‘Literacy Team’ as a node, I was able to quickly, and systematically, retrieve all examples from the dataset.
The systematic approach outlined here promoted the emergence of ‘a comprehensive set of codes that differentiate between different concepts, issues and ideas in the data which has been applied consistently to the dataset’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 211). However, the difference between descriptive summary and critical analysis is when the researcher moves beyond the ‘coding’ phase and begins to identify patterns across the data by searching for themes that ‘produce new, higher order insights’ (Cohen and Crabtree 2008, p. 335).

4.10.4 Stage Four and Five: Searching for and Reviewing Themes

Themes are defined as the ‘outcomes of coding, categorisation and analytic reflection’ (Saldana 2016, p. 175) as the researcher must interpret, develop analytical explanations and underpin the overall analysis with appropriate theory (Gibbs 2010). The complexity of the process of searching for themes is highlighted in the literature and while the analytic steps involved in data analysis are treated here as separate stages TA is ‘an iterative and complex process’ (Kisber 2010, p. 30). While
‘searching for themes’ is presented as the fourth ‘stage’ in the analytic process, it could be said to have begun as early as during data collection when I recorded observations in my reflective journal. During the ‘reading and familiarisation’ stage, at the end of each group of interviews (grouped by research site) I took some time to reflect on the data from participants in that school. Following manual coding of each transcript, I reflected back on the six interviews with teachers in my first research site and recorded the following thoughts in my research journal, what could be viewed as ‘potential themes’:

- **CPD:** A desire among teachers for subject specific CPD. Some expressed concerns regarding a lack of professional knowledge regarding subject literacy.
- **Policy:** Lack of engagement with the actual policy document. Why is this?
- **Awareness:** Growing awareness of literacy as a concept and part of student learning in all subjects BUT still quite a traditional or ‘text-based’ view of literacy.
- **Strategies:** Overwhelming focus on keywords and reading. Oral and digital mentioned but to a much lesser extent. Strategies couched in relation to state examinations.
- **Silo-effect in subjects is evident. Professional identity is explicitly linked to one’s subject area. What does this mean for the success of whole-school reforms such as LNLL?**
- **Conscious competency/accidental adequacy?** Teachers claim to not have the ‘words’ the ‘jargon’ or the ‘fancy labels’.
- **The potential of this research as a space for professional dialogue: Eimear, Bridget and Donagh made explicit reference to how the interview or ‘professional conversation’ gave them time to discuss and reflect on literacy.**

(Reflective Journal, 14th June 2016)

In terms of a systematic approach, Saldana argues how ‘codes’ can be grouped into ‘categories’ and how this will eventually lead to the development of ‘themes’ (2016, p.175) and this is illustrated in Figure 16.
While ‘frequency of occurrence is not necessarily an indicator of significance’ (Saldana 2016 p.41) and ‘more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial’ (Braun and Clarke 2006 p.82), taking the time to examine which nodes occurred the most frequently in NVivo was a useful starting point to consider potential themes.

Moreover, when determining themes, an important factor to consider is the ‘keyness’ of the theme in relation to ‘whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.82). The very fact that ‘literacy and reading’ was the most frequently occurring node in this dataset (as illustrated in Figure 17 where 118 references are noted) was something to explore. However, the
appropriateness of themes also relates very much to the research objectives in this study regarding post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy. Therefore, utilising the conceptual framework was crucial as part of the process of searching for themes in the data.

4.10.4.1 One Example of how I Arrived at a Theme

Figure 18 illustrates the processes involved in arriving at themes in this study. Guided by the over-arching or ‘global’ research question, this research necessitated critical engagement with relevant literature including national and international studies, as well as theories concerning literacy, beliefs, professional knowledge and policy implementation. The literature thus acts as a ‘conceptual toolbox’ (Ball 2006), and I borrowed from theory to help me make sense of the data. For instance, one of the research aims was to gain an insight into teachers’ classroom practices regarding literacy development and engagement with relevant literature allowed me to form a number of descriptive or topic codes. As these codes (referred to as nodes in NVivo) were grouped together, a number of observations were made and a category was formed entitled ‘classroom practices’. This category ‘classroom practices’ relates to teachers’ professional knowledge regarding literacy development, literacy as practice.

However, when considering teachers’ professional knowledge relating to literacy, a number of other codes and categories also align as both frequent and interesting. Considering the narrow and traditional understandings of literacy evident in the data, coupled with the fact that participants expressed a lack of confidence regarding literacy strategies and that they felt unsupported regarding literacy, the importance of CPD for teachers came to the fore as a central theme. As a theme, it relates directly to the research question concerning teachers’ knowledge but also teachers’ experiences in implementing a literacy strategy. This is in keeping with Saldana’s approach (2016) to arriving at the themes as outcomes of coding and categorisation, interpretation and reflection. The arrow at the bottom of the illustration represents how engaging with the literature permitted such interpretation and reflection and the theory acts as ‘a set of thinking tools, visible through the results they yield’ (Bourdieu 1989 cited in Thomas 2011, p.67).
Figure 18: Arriving at a Theme in this Study

Research Question:
What are post-primary teacher perceptions of literacy?

Sub-Question:
What classroom practices do teachers adopt to promote literacy development?

Theory as a ‘tool to make sense of the data’ (Ball 2006) (As outlined in the literature review)

- Adopt Rather than Adopt (Gilby 2014)
- Constructivist Approaches to Teaching and Learning (Vygotsky 1978)
- The Pedagogy of Telling (O’Brien, Stewart and Maje 1995)
- ‘We treasure what is measured’ (Brilliant)

Codes
Talk as a tool for learning
- Reading
- Keywords
- Technology as a useful resource and teaching aid
- Textbooks as a resource
- Exam preparation

Categories
- Classroom Practices
- Traditional understanding of literacy
- Lack of confidence regarding literacy development
- Lack of CPD

Theme
The centrality of CPD in implementing educational change

Reflections
- Dominance of keywords
- Dominance of high-stake assessment
- Narrow conceptualisations of literacy as reading and writing
- Literacy miniatures vs. changing pedagogy
- Genetic approaches vs. related systemic strategies
As I thematically analysed the data, I developed many ‘potential themes’. However, a crucial part of data reduction involved organising, reviewing and refining the themes in line with the research aims in the study. I carefully examined the collated data that related to each theme, looking for patterns, before revisiting the entire data set with these themes to the fore. The purpose of this is two-fold; firstly to ascertain that the themes ‘work’ in relation to the dataset, but also to code any additional data within themes that may have been missed in earlier coding stages (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.91). Figure 19 presents a thematic map that illustrates the different themes and how they relate to the three central concepts as it is imperative that ‘data within themes should cohere together meaningfully while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.91). This stage of reviewing and refining themes was supported and enhanced by using thematic maps.

At this point in the study, I was in a position to consider the key themes in relation to the data set and I could begin to consider some of the key preoccupations and findings of the study. In my research journal, I recorded 16 areas of interest that I considered presenting as themes in the study, briefly outlined in Table 10.
Figure 19: Thematic Map illustrating Potential Themes Aligning with Conceptual Framework
Potential Theme | Central Preoccupation
---|---
Change | Change in relation to literacy; value, responsibility, awareness.
Definitions of Literacy | Many understandings but largely traditional
Professional Dialogue | Interview as a tool for professional transformation?
Professional Knowledge | Lack of confidence coupled with narrow menu of literacy strategies
CPD | Value of CPD among many but lack of CPD relating to literacy highlighted frequently
Classroom Strategies | Generic despite subject specialism and predominantly keywords
Whole-school Strategies | Awareness and support; predominantly reading initiatives
Tensions and Dichotomies | E.G. policy vs practice, grades vs group-work and literacy for exams vs literacy for holistic development.
Context is King | JCSP programmes feature strongly in two schools regarding literacy development
Literacy and English | Is the link between them truly broken? Teachers state yes but some hesitate and it is implied that there is still a close connection
Ideological Dilemmas | The dilemmatic positions teachers occupy; ‘we’re caught’ and ‘the system’ promotes one type of learning and one view of knowledge. Renders literacy as ‘bolt-on’
Teacher Identities | Deprofessionalisation? Struggles that teachers face. Sense of anxiety is palpable. Subject identities very obvious
Subject Silos | Teachers present themselves as masters of their subjects; subject identities. ‘Compartmentalised’, ‘departmentalised’. Obstacle to literacy development? 1. Content is prioritised and 2. Teachers are isolated by cultural barriers
External Perceptions | The power of parents- their perceptions and values. Defending literacy development.
Opportunities of Implementation | Awareness!
Challenges | Time, course content, focus on exam preparation, lack of CPD.

Table 10: Potential Themes and Rationale Relating to the Research Question

Conducting a review of the themes helped to reduce or ‘master’ (Rice 2018) the data, enabling me to present it in a way that is comprehensible, purposeful and possible, given the scope of the study. However, it is important that the reader is aware of the criteria for selection, ‘the principles by which an author has either eliminated data or selected something representative’ (Smagorinsky 2008, p.397). There are three
reasons as to why particular themes were selected for discussion in this thesis. The first and primary reason for representation of a theme relates to its appropriateness and relevance to the research question and sub-questions. The second criterion relates to numerical relevance or incidence of a particular issue or concern for teachers. If an issue was cited by over 50% of the research participants, it was deemed to be of significance as a central preoccupation and thereby warranted attention and discussion. Finally, unexpected or surprising themes-sometimes diverging from the literature or from the experiences of other participants- that were still of relevance to the research questions were also given attention.

4.10.5 **Stage Six: Defining and Naming Themes**

I now present the eight key themes that will be the focus of the findings and discussion chapters. Table 11 illustrates how these themes map directly onto the conceptual framework, but also relate to the research question and sub-questions. My design decision to adopt and refine an existing framework offers a frame through which the data is analysed in an effort to move beyond description to ‘cohesive and purposeful analysis’ (Bazeley 2009, p.13). Defining and naming the themes was aided by using the four different coding methods and the initial categorisation and consideration of potential themes. Once the themes were reviewed, the collated data extracts pertaining to each theme were compiled and organised in an effort to present ‘a coherent and internally consistent account with accompanying narrative’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.92). The results of this process are presented as the research findings in this study.
Table 11: Defining Themes in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>How do teachers define literacy and perceive literacy as a concept?</td>
<td>1. Definitions and Understandings of literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whose responsibility is literacy development?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Knowledge</td>
<td>What do teachers know about literacy as a concept and as a practice?</td>
<td>2. Strategies: Classroom Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To what extent is literacy part of teachers’ everyday practice in their subject area(s)?</td>
<td>3. Strategies: Whole-school Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of Implementation</td>
<td>Has the positioning of literacy as a concept and practice changed since the introduction of a national strategy promoting literacy?</td>
<td>4. Change relating to Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What opportunities were presented during the implementation process?</td>
<td>5. Opportunities: Platform for champions, Awareness, Professional Dialogue, Reading Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What challenges emerged for teachers during the implementation process?</td>
<td>6. Challenge: Culture of schools ‘Balkanisation’ and Subject Silos in Irish Post-Primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who or what can support teachers in moving forward?</td>
<td>7. Challenge: Resourcing: time, course content, exams and accountability, support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Adequate resourcing and the role of CPD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.10.6 Stage Seven: Writing as the Final Analysis

The last stage of a TA approach is to present the work in a written report, and this final analysis is presented in chapters five, six and seven. Braun and Clarke argue that it should provide a ‘concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tells… with sufficient evidence of the themes within the data’ (2006, p.93). However, it also needs to offer

> ‘an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story you are telling about your data and your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data and make an argument in relation to the research question’.

(Braun and Clarke 2006, p.93)
The written report must also be compiled ethically, focusing on the possible impact on participants, but also mindful of my responsibility to the research community. Such considerations are explored now in the final section of this chapter, which relates to ethical considerations in this study.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Professional research associations and academic institutions insist on researchers reflecting on the ethical implications of their research from the outset to ensure ‘a standard of conduct that is both moral and professional’ (Denscombe 2007, p.142). The British Educational Research Association (BERA) ‘considers that educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research they are undertaking’ (2011, p.5). Attending to ethics is something that should be considered at every stage of the research process:

‘Ethics should be seen as an integral part of all stages and aspects of research and being an ethical researcher involves not only adhering to minimum standards set out in ethical codes of conduct but also developing a broader ethical orientation that informs your research practice’.

(Braun and Clarke 2013, p.61)

Ethical clearance to proceed with this study was sought and obtained from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC) in the University of Limerick in March 2015 (Appendix A). The process of applying for ethical clearance to conduct my research provided an opportunity to consider any ethical issues that might arise over the course of data collection, analysis and dissemination stages during the life of this project.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2015) outline six key principles of ethical research. Participation must be voluntary and informed, and participants’ confidentiality and anonymity must be protected. The research itself should be worthwhile for all involved, including the research community, and it should ensure standards are met. Any conflict of interest or partiality must be made explicit. I have used these guidelines as a framework to examine the ethical considerations made in this study looking at the considerations made for the research participants, as well as for the wider research community.
4.11.1 The Research Participants

Although it was envisaged that this study would not pose any physical, psychological or emotional risk to participants, there were a number of ethical considerations regarding the research participants in relation to clarity, confidentiality and consent. ‘Qualitative studies intrude into settings as people adjust to the researcher’s presence’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.90) and in relation to the primary research tool in this study, Patton contends that

‘interviews are interventions. They affect people. A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge and experience not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee. The process of being taken through a directed, reflective process affects the persons being interviewed and leaves them knowing things about themselves that they didn’t know- or at least were not aware of- before the interview… People in interviews tell you things that they never intended to tell’.

(1987, pp.354-355)

In an effort to show respect and care for those participants who gave so freely of their time and knowledge, the first consideration that I needed to make involved my inter-personal skills and developing a rapport with the research participants that was respectful and considerate. All researchers must be aware and capable of ‘building trust, maintaining good relations, respecting norms of reciprocity and sensitively considering ethical issues’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p.85). This involves being polite and sensitive, while remaining authentic and ultimately ensuring that ‘you do no harm’ (Parker-Jenkins, 2014).

Another consideration regarding the relationship between researcher and participant concerns the power dynamic between the two parties. Certainly, I occupied the position of ‘insider’ in terms of identifying myself as a teacher and a colleague. However I was also keenly aware of how I might be perceived as an ‘outsider’ as a researcher and as someone who was, at the time of the interview, seconded to work in a HEI while also working as an associate with JCT. Much of the trusting relationship we develop with our participants can depend on clarity and transparency on the part of the researcher. For instance, it is crucial that I was clear with participants concerning the purpose of the research, hence my decisions to provide an information sheet about the nature of the study in advance of the interview and an oral-debriefing sheet to conclude each interview (Appendix C). Finally, I provided contact details should the participant wish to seek further information.
Regarding consent, I needed the consent of school managers or ‘gatekeepers’ to gain access to teachers and to conduct this research and consent from any teacher who volunteered to participate in interviews. Denscombe (2007, p.146) suggests that the consent form should (a) identify the researcher and the nature of the research, (b) outline the researcher’s expectations of participants, (c) assure them of the right to withdraw and (d) outline a commitment from the researcher concerning confidentiality. This was signed by both researcher and participant and a copy of the consent form utilised in this study is available in Appendix C. Of course, the fact that participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw at any time, contributes toward it being ethical. Participants were assured of this in the information sheet, recruitment letter and orally at the start of each interview.

Following data collection, researchers still have ethical responsibilities. They need to protect the interests of the participants by ensuring the confidentiality of information that they gather. Participants in this study were assured of complete confidentiality and part of this involved removing all identifying details of schools and individual teachers from transcript excerpts. All audio files were deleted from my digital recorder following upload to a computer and the files were subsequently stored in password protected files on my computer. Upon completing transcription, the files were deleted. Pseudonyms are used in the write up of the final report and any other potential publications or outputs.

Finally, we need to consider the voice of the research participants and demonstrate respect for them when we report on findings by adopting a tone that is both representative of the data and the conversations that took place but also respectful of the participants. In participating, these teachers gave so generously of their time, shared both personal and professional stories and oftentimes, laid their professional identities bare. Engaging in a study such as this, then, requires an awareness of and inclination towards what Banks and Gallagher refer to as ‘Professional Wisdom’:
‘Professional wisdom involves professionals responding to the nuances and complexity of professional practice, engaging with technical rational and professional artistry views of practice and tolerating the uncertainty and ambiguity of the ‘swampy lowland’ of everyday professional practice... It involves professionals ... exercising technical and humane judgement and making and acting on decisions. Professional wisdom is a very necessary virtue ... that enables professionals to be ethical in practice, to aspire to be flourishing and to be for the good’.

(2009, p.95)

4.11.2 The Research Community: Being a Responsible Researcher

Researchers also have a responsibility to the research community. For instance, researchers have a responsibility to those who follow us in their own research endeavours. When recruiting schools as part of this study, I was surprised when one principal stated unequivocally that he had no desire to participate in my research as a result of a negative experience in a previous research project with someone from the same institution. In an effort to prevent situations like this, Tobin and Begley argue that in any rigorous study, the researcher must be capable of demonstrating ‘integrity and competence: it is about ethics and politics, regardless of the paradigm’ (2004, p.390).

Another concern arises when we consider interpretations of experience and issues of representation as we collect the data, analyse it and report on our findings. ‘Analysis involves interpretation which is informed by particular subjective and theoretical (and political) lenses. This means the product of our analysis is often far removed from the ‘raw data’ we receive’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.65). However, as outlined earlier in this chapter, many steps have been taken to make the interpretation, the representation of teachers’ experiences, as authentic as possible.

Finally, the relevance of a study and its potential value must be considered. This study seeks to explore the beliefs, knowledge and experiences of the teachers who ‘enact policies’ (NCCA 2016) with a specific focus on literacy, literacy development and literacy policy implementation. This study has the potential to make a contribution to knowledge and to the research community in exploring and examining teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy and their literacy practices, and also provides an insight into the successes and challenges that they have experienced while implementing literacy as policy. This study has implications
for policy, practice and future research, making it an ethical endeavour and a justifiable encroachment on participants’ lives.

During design, data collection, analysis and write-up stages, consideration was given to ensuring ‘a dual commitment to scientific validity and participant protection’ (Fisher and Anushko, in Alasuutari et al., 2008, p.106) and every effort was made to ensure this research was an ethical endeavour.

4.12 Limitations of the Research Design in this Study

‘No proposed research project is without limitations; there is no such thing as a perfectly designed study’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999, p. 42). As a researcher, I have been cognisant of the need to outline and make explicit the steps taken and the decisions made throughout this chapter and now turn to addressing the methodological limitations of this study.

4.12.1 Limitations of Qualitative Studies

One of the principal criticisms made of qualitative research inquiry concerns its inability to make generalisations. However, returning to the problems associated with the terminology and language of social science research considered earlier in this chapter, generalisation is a word more closely associated with quantitative studies (Silverman 2010). Rather, qualitative research achieves ‘resonance through transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) or naturalistic generalisation (Stake and Trumball, 1982), processes that are performed by readers of the research (Tracy 2010, p. 845). This study, as an example of interpretative research, ‘makes no grand claims about generalizability or causation. What it does instead is to take from the local experience and illuminate and influence the local experience’ (Thomas 2011, p. 77). While the intention of this study was never ‘to represent typical cases’ but to ‘maximise understanding of unique cases’ (Stake 2010, p. 16), it must be acknowledged that one cannot generalise the results beyond the given population pool (Mertens 2010, p. 325). Given the nature of this study and the limitations posed by purposive sampling (discussed further in 4.12.5), a potential limitation of this study is that the participants’ views represented in this thesis are not generalisable and their experiences cannot be regarded as representative.
4.12.2 **Limitations due to Researcher Positioning**

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the researcher is an instrument (Hollenbeck 2014) in the design of this research and in keeping with arguments that it is impossible to remove subjectivity from qualitative research, researcher positioning must be acknowledged as a potential limitation of this study.

My personal, professional and philosophical positions have unavoidably coloured how I viewed the research, how I constructed the research questions and assigned codes and categories during the analysis phase. For instance, this chapter has explored the complexities of the social, participatory and constructed nature of interviews and I am cognisant that the interview is a ‘construct’; an example of human negotiation and meaning-making. I am also aware of the different perceived positions that I adopt in this role, positioned simultaneously as insider (colleague) and outsider (researcher). While I have carefully outlined my epistemological and ontological positioning, should another researcher analyse and interpret the same data, they could potentially generate different findings. Section 4.10 outlines the validity and reliability procedures that were employed to ensure that this study is credible, dependable, confirmable, transferable and authentic (Guba and Lincoln 1989, 1994) and clearly indicates the measures that were taken to offset researcher bias and make the processes involved in this research transparent. However as Nietzsche (2008) argues, it is ultimately impossible to ‘chop off’ the human head as part of qualitative research and researcher positioning must be acknowledged as a potential limitation of this study.

4.12.3 **Limitations of Interviews**

The choice of the semi-structured interview as the primary data-collection tool was one I arrived at following a number of considerations. Early design proposals incorporated a mixed-method approach to this research and as aforementioned in this chapter, the early design considered the use questionnaires and focus groups or interviews to collect data. However, utilising a questionnaire would not provide opportunities to ask clarifying questions (Patton 1987), nor would it present me an opportunity to probe participants’ responses (Seidman 1991; Braun and Clarke 2013). Another data collection instrument considered in the early stages was classroom observation. While observation of teachers’ practice certainly grants
researchers ‘here-and-now experience in depth’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 273) and offer direct insights into teachers’ literacy practices, it would not provide insight or understanding about how they position themselves as literacy teachers or how they have experienced policy implementation. I was also conscious of being perceived as the outsider/researcher who was essentially ‘invading another person’s space’ (Hopkins 2008, p. 77). I considered using a focus group as a data collection method, but felt that conducting one to one interviews would be more likely to safeguard participants in terms of their own vulnerability regarding literacy, while also hoping that participants would be more comfortable in sharing their thoughts, individual and diverse, in an open way (Heary and Hennessy 2006, p. 61). In fact, ‘no one qualitative method is the solution to all our research problems’ and while any of these instruments offered methods to gain insight into teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and experience regarding literacy, ‘the ultimate choice of method may depend on the purpose of the study’ (Heary and Hennessy 2006, p. 61). I contend that the in-depth interview was deemed the most appropriate data collection tool in terms of what was manageable but more importantly, in terms of its suitability in relation to the research questions and research objectives in this exploratory study.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to using interview as the primary research method. The interviewer becomes co-constructor of the discourse that takes place in the interview and this can lead to issues surrounding clarity and relevance. Furthermore, given the choice of data collection method, the examination of teachers’ understandings of literacy in this study relied on teachers self-reporting and participants may want to construct and project particular identities (Loxley and Seery 2008). For example, in an attempt to address the first research objective concerning teachers’ beliefs about literacy, this study explores teachers’ philosophies and it is possible that during data collection, teachers might have wanted to espouse constructivist beliefs despite the fact that these aren’t reflected in their practices. As well as this, it must be acknowledged that interviews are temporal and are therefore transient, situated and partial. While the interview itself is a lived experience, my write-up in this thesis is a representation of this lived-experience (Edwards and Holland 2013). Finally, Boyce and Neal contend that interviews can be ‘time-intensive’ since it takes time to conduct, transcribe and analyse the data (2006 p. 3). These are some of the limitations of interviews as a data collection method.
4.12.4 Limitations of Thematic Analysis

One of the greatest criticisms of Thematic Analysis (TA) is that, if not used in an existing theoretical framework, it lacks the interpretive capacity of other forms of analysis such as Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the early stages of the research design, I considered adopting a GT approach to collecting and analysing the data. However, I was cognisant that the aim of this study was not to develop a theory grounded in the data (Bogdan and Biklen 1992) but rather to provide conceptually-informed interpretations of the data (Braun and Clark 2013) with the overall aim of gaining insight and understanding. Although some researchers contend that TA is a useful, procedural, rigorous, transparent and credible (Guest et al., 2012) form of analysis, there is a concern that it is difficult to engage in higher level or interpretative analysis. This is something I was acutely aware of during the formal analysis stages; to move beyond description to interpretation, a process that was supported by Saldana’s (2016) approaches to manual coding. Finally, because the focus is on patterns across datasets, there is a risk of losing the ‘voices’ of individual participants (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 181). Certain codes (For example, ‘Lack of support for literacy at home’), categories (For example, ‘Literacy and Additional Educational Needs’ (AEN)) and themes (For example, ‘Initiative-Overload’: The impact of other policies and Junior Cycle Reform) - although they were interesting and had the potential to highlight important issues- needed to be excluded from the final discussion due to a lack of relevance in relation to the research objectives in this study. Furthermore, given the limited scope of this study, judicious editing meant that all voices are not included or represented (Edwards and Holland 2013) in the final presentation and discussion of the findings.

4.12.5 Limitations of Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate and feasible method of sampling in this study since this study seeks to ‘acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011 p. 157). There are also practical exigencies such as time and money, essentially what is ‘doable’ in a research endeavour that is conducted by a single doctoral student. However, this sampling method is perhaps the main limitation of this study. The participants involved in this research were based in schools in a relatively small geographical area and the sample is drawn from schools that were willing to grant
access for this research. Therefore, the participant sample cannot be said to be ‘representative’ of all post-primary teachers in Ireland.

4.13 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the research design adopted in this study. A necessary step in this process was my endeavour to make my position explicit by outlining my philosophies relating to knowledge, learning, literacy, teaching and research. I have also given an account of the theories from which I have borrowed and explained how these perspectives will act as the lenses through which I analyse my data and present my findings, discussion and conclusions. In the words of Lincoln and Guba, ‘my assumptions and positionings have been confronted,… disclosed and plumbed for meaning’ (2013, p.40).

My conceptual framework, emerging from my ontological and epistemological positionings, has an impact on every aspect of this study, including methodological considerations in the research design process. This chapter has illustrated how a qualitative design was adopted in this study. The primary data collection tool utilised in this study was the in-depth interview and I have provided a thorough and comprehensive account of the steps taken in collecting, transcribing, coding, reducing, analysing and presenting the data. In an effort to promote validity and reliability, a number of models and frameworks were utilised to promote robust and rigorous research. I have highlighted how I remained cognisant of my role as ‘instrument’ in the research process and attempted to make explicit my positioning through reflexive practices. As illustrated, ethical issues were considered at every stage of the study. Finally, this chapter acknowledges some of the limitations and potential weaknesses in the research design of this study. The next three chapters are devoted to the presentation and discussion of the findings that arose from the methods described in this chapter.
5 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Beliefs about Literacy

5.1 Presenting the Discussion of the Findings in this Study

This is the first of three chapters that address the research objectives in this study, as presented in Table 12. The findings presented here result from the data collection, analysis and reduction processes explored in the previous chapter and draws on Smagorinsky’s advice:

‘Explicitly stated research questions need to be answered through the methods employed in the research. Results need to be specifically linked to method so that it is clear how results have been rendered from data and how the theoretical apparatus that motivates the study is realised in the way the data are analysed and then organised for presentation’.

(2008, p.408)

The study provides an insight into post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy, understood as teachers’ beliefs, teachers’ knowledge and teachers’ experiences relating to literacy during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy. Goodson states that researchers need to ‘reconceptualise educational research’ to ensure that the ‘teacher’s voice is heard, both loudly and articulately’ (1992, p.112). Therefore, quotes from the transcripts of participant interviews are used to support the points made but moreover, to bring teacher voice to the centre of this study. Pseudonyms are used to preserve participants’ anonymity. Each quote is followed by a notation which includes the participant’s pseudonym, their school and their subject area. Text in bold font represents moments of emphasis in participants’ intonation. Aside from minor adaptions and editing, the words of participants are presented as authentically as possible in an effort to honour teacher voice. An ellipsis (...) signifies that material was consciously omitted, while text in brackets and non-italicised represents my own words. Such decisions were made in an effort to add to the coherence of the extract.

As aforementioned, there is interdependence, indeed, an inseparability, between the central concepts in this study and they overlap in some obvious and interesting ways. However, for the purpose of clarity, I discuss each concept -beliefs, knowledge and experience-in separate chapters. With this in mind, I return to the research objectives
and sub-questions at the heart of this study regarding teachers’ understandings of literacy to illustrate how the findings are presented, outlined in Table 12.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objective</th>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
<th>Section in this Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To Explore Teachers’ Beliefs</strong></td>
<td>How do teachers define literacy?</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Concept</strong></td>
<td>How do teachers understand literacy as a concept in their practice?</td>
<td>5.3, 5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whose responsibility is literacy development?</td>
<td>5.4; 7.3.3; 7.4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have teachers’ beliefs about literacy changed since the introduction of the national literacy strategy?</td>
<td>5.4; 7.5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To Examine Teachers’ Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>What do teachers know about literacy as a concept and as a practice?</td>
<td>6.2; 6.3; 6.4; 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Practice</strong></td>
<td>What strategies do teachers use to promote literacy in their classrooms?</td>
<td>6.4; 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To what extent is literacy part of teachers’ everyday practice in their subject area(s)?</td>
<td>6.4; 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To Examine Teachers’ Experiences of Implementation</strong></td>
<td>Has the positioning of literacy as a concept and practice changed since the introduction of a national strategy promoting literacy?</td>
<td>5.5; 7.5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Policy</strong></td>
<td>What opportunities were presented during the implementation process?</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What challenges emerged for teachers during the implementation process?</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who or what can support teachers moving forward?</td>
<td>7.4; 7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 12: How the Research Concepts, Research Objectives and Research Sub-Questions are Addressed in this Study*

5.2 Chapter Introduction

My first research objective is to explore teachers’ beliefs about literacy and as outlined in the literature review, this ‘messy construct’ (Pajares 1992) is bound up with teachers’ personal and professional experiences. These experiences contribute to teachers’ philosophies about teaching (Brookfield 1995) and these views will ‘constrain’ how teachers ‘appropriate new ideas about teaching and learning’ (Grossman et al., 1999, p.22). Therefore, one immediately recognises a clear link between teachers’ experiences, which shape their beliefs and knowledge, thus affecting their willingness to engage with educational ideas and concepts. For
instance, the literature contends that the personal literacy confidence of teachers can have a significant impact on teachers’ beliefs and on teachers’ practices (Louden and Rohl 2006; Murphy et al., 2013). Towards the end of each semi-structured interview, I invited participants to share their feelings about their relationship with literacy, asking if it was something about which they felt confident. The range of answers is diverse, unsurprising given the nature of such a question. Some teachers offered rich and in-depth reflections on childhood memories, formative moments and professional experiences, while others side-stepped the question or spoke broadly about cultural or societal understandings of literacy.

5.3 A Preface: Vignettes that Offer Insight into Teachers’ Beliefs

What follows here are two vignettes that provoked my thinking, both during the data collection stage and upon reflection during transcription and formal analysis stages. It is not suggested that either of these literary narratives can be considered indicative or representative of the larger participant sample. Rather, they aim to support literacy research by offering rich insights into teachers’ realities, what might be referred to as ‘stories of the self’ (Hall et al., 2014), but also encourage readers to consider the complex and constructed reality in which we attempt to implement policies. The accounts explored here are therefore valid in a study that seeks to give voice to teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and experiences.

These vignettes act as a preface, framing the discussion about teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept, and point to the embeddedness and complexity of our beliefs and understandings about literacy. They also raise a number of questions about how our understanding of literacy can be shaped by early experiences, experiences that occur well before our formal training as teachers. Thus, they demonstrate that ‘changing peoples’ attitudes towards literacy is not a simple or easy task’ (Hawisher et al., 2004, p.677). Moreover, in keeping with the literature regarding teachers’ practice, these vignettes clearly illustrate how a teacher’s formative experiences not only shape their beliefs, but can also potentially influence their professional practice in relation to literacy.
5.3.1 Eimear Draws from her ‘Well of Personal Experience’

Literacy for me- okay. I was very, very lucky... When I was very, very small, for orthopaedic reasons, I was hospitalised a lot and my family was very conscious of giving me the gift of reading. And throughout my teenage and adolescent life, when I spent long periods of time in an orthopaedic hospital, (it was) my sanity, my joy. I never remember a bad day because every two days, my grandmother would arrive with the next book from the mobile library. It was all the classics, so the ‘Jane Austens’ were bed companions for me. And it was only as a young adult that I realised the deliberate and successful attempt that there was to ensure that I was okay by giving me the world of books. And I suppose then, somebody put the label of literacy on that; it was part of the reason I went on to study English and it is part of the reason that I am still in love with my profession, my classroom, my practice, my subject and my school. 33 years later at 53 I am still enthused, right?

So really to me, at a personal level, (literacy) is the key to everything...literacy is the key to your child’s self-esteem and education because for me, the world of books, for the child who wouldn’t be social, apart from literacy and articulation and the whole fact that kids who read do better and that whole sense of reflection and maturity that comes with experiencing the world of literature; I also am aware that if I provide a cosy corner, an opportunity for a child to read a book, some of those children have left behind a horrific household and it gives them a chance for escapism and a chance at a better life. Now-all subjects do that so that when people say that we are all teachers of literacy I say, yeah, I believe that...

You’re talking to the converted really. And it is coming out of a well of personal experience around literature and literacy that when we wouldn’t have had many a thing at home, there always seemed to be an availability of books. It is personal. Particularly in teaching because it challenges so many different areas of your personality and whatever and fine, you take on a persona, because you have to. But you still go in as a person, day in, day out, so you do take it in with you.

Literacy is my life because as I said... without that love of language that was fostered, (pause) you see I don’t believe it was in me... I don’t believe I was born an English teacher. Literacy allowed me to think and believe that there was nothing I couldn’t do or achieve. Literacy really was the key for me to believing that, in spite of any situation, there was no reason I couldn’t island hop for 12 weeks because it was something I had already done in literature. I don’t believe literary people are born or it’s a gift or a talent; it’s nourished, it is nurtured, it is fostered and I feel duty bound to give (it to) children in my care, including my own children; I know that I nurtured and nourished them by holding them and reading them a book. There is no child alive that doesn’t want that engagement with a caring adult. And it is the same with kids in school. Literacy is the key to telling a child that you can do anything.

(Eimear, English- Ash 1)
5.3.2 Bronagh Reflects on her ‘Negative Experience with Literacy’

I suppose, I would have had a very negative experience in Primary school with literacy. And I suppose I’m very aware then, I’ve a few students who don’t like reading in class and I don’t go there. If I do go there, I’m standing right beside them and if they do stutter or have a problem, I’ll step in for them. I’m not going to - draw what happened me in Primary school onto them (pause). There is one student in my class and I’ve spoken to her a few times and she’s not willing to read and I’m not putting that pressure on her. I’d prefer her to come in and to learn in my class and to feel comfortable in my class than to have fear of ‘is she going to ask me today to read?’

I wouldn’t do work in my class unless I pre-read something myself. But I do understand how important it is. I do read books at home. I would prefer the newspaper. I do use my (laughs) tablet to read newspapers. But newspapers were always in my house growing up as a child. And I do, for my child, and I do want him to see a newspaper. I find it shocking when students come in and say ‘we don’t get newspapers’. I find that quite hard… So yeah. For my child, I appreciate how much literacy is (important)... I suppose for myself (pause) yeah, just as long as I’ve pre-seen something, I’m comfortable with it... And I think that’s an element of it, your own competency.

It’s funny because I don’t know why but I was only driving home thinking about this yesterday evening and maybe it was in relevance to this (interview) but yeah, my mom was told to do extra work with me over the summer so we had to read every day, which was just torture, but I was never tested for anything at all. Then in secondary school, there was absolutely nothing at all like. But I think it was just that one teacher, it was that one teacher who just took - And even my mum will now say, yeah, maybe she should have gone up and spoken to the lady. (Pause) It was a different culture then. The teacher was right. But I don’t think (my mother) actually realised how severe it was either on me until later on... when I kind of maybe (spoke about it). See, I don’t do that to my students then as a result of that. I don’t make them (read) if they don’t want to read.

(Bronagh, Business- Birch 3)

Gomez recalls how she sought opportunities to encourage student-teachers ‘to analyse their personal views of literacy, their experiences with it and their literate paths’ (2005, p.95), and presents a compelling argument for teachers to do some ‘soul-searching’ about the link between our ‘public and personal literate selves’ (2005, p.96). These vignettes seek to offer some insight into moments where these teachers reflected on their own ‘literacy histories’ (Gomez 2005) or ‘literacy narratives’ (Brandt 2015). Cremin has also explored how the personal reading practices of teachers can influence their professional practices (Cremin et al., 2009; Cremin 2011). The literacy narratives of these two teachers act as a vivid and
complex backdrop to this chapter that seeks to explore teachers’ understandings about literacy, all the time cognisant of the link between beliefs, knowledge, practices and experiences.

5.4 Teachers’ Beliefs: Conceptual Understandings of Literacy

‘Words matter and the word ‘literacy’ too often creates all the wrong impressions’.

(Barton 2013, p.1)

Figure 20: Central Concepts in this Study

I open this section by presenting ‘definitions’ of literacy that were identified in the data, generated directly from the codebook used during data analysis. Given that this study was conducted in the Irish context during the implementation stage of LNLL, I begin by returning to the definition presented in the policy document:

Traditionally we have thought about literacy as the skills of reading and writing; but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media. Throughout this document, when we refer to “literacy” we mean this broader understanding of the skill, including speaking and listening, as well as communication using not only traditional writing and print but also digital media.

(DES 2011, p.8)
To an extent, this definition acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of literacy and as is evidenced in the 19 labels or codes that are presented in Table 13, there is significant variety in how literacy is described by participants. However, what is most obvious is evidence of traditional understandings of literacy among participants. Contrary to the understanding of literacy in policies and the broad and varied understanding of ‘literacies’ explored in the literature, particularly in relation to adolescent literacy, there is an obvious association of literacy with reading, and to a lesser extent, with writing. Drawing on the findings, the terms ‘reading’ and ‘literacy’ were frequently used interchangeably. This section presents an argument that teachers understand literacy in a largely traditional way and that they elevate the ‘book’ or traditional print media above other forms of text, despite the multi-dimensional understanding of literacy presented in the LNLL definition, one that is reflective of contemporary understandings of text. There is more focus on reading and writing, to the detriment of oral and digital competencies. In the discussion of these findings, these conceptual understandings are interrogated, and drawing on pertinent literature, I offer a number of tentative suggestions as to why this may be the case.

Therefore, the discussion in this section draws on the definitions and understanding of literacy as presented in Table 13. Given the limited scope of this study, it is not possible to examine all of these definitions in detail and as a result, the understandings of literacy that occur most frequently, as well as those mentioned the least, are explored here. Furthermore, the understandings that converge or those that are at odds with the definition of literacy outlined in LNLL are explored in an effort to understand the impact of the strategy on shaping teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practice. Adopting this approach ensures that I address the research objectives of the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code-Name</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and reading</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>References that suggest literacy 'is' reading; some are quite explicit and some are more implied and subtle; when literacy is associated with reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and exams</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Initially this node focused on looking at 'Exam literacy' but due to repeated references to exams in a conversation that sought to focus on literacy, it widened to included references to exams. This node refers to references to exams as well as exam literacy and examination vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as understanding</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>References here relate to literacy as reading words or word identification as well as looking more at literacy as understanding concepts or as a gateway to learning and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as subject specific</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>References to disciplinary literacy (sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly); where teachers speak about how the 'literacy of their subjects' is unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as vocabulary</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Focus on words; linked to reading although not synonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as writing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>References here to writing as an integral component of literacy or oftentimes, key alongside reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and oracy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>References here to speaking and listening as part of literacy development or indeed, absence of same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Special Educational Needs (SEN)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Where teachers associate literacy difficulties with students with SEN. Some explicitly state that the SEN and literacy difficulties do not necessarily anticipate each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Literacy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>References here to the literacy of technology, 21st century living, particularly phones and mobile devices but stretching to computers. Links to multimodal discussions about literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as grammar and spelling</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>References here to spelling and grammar as a priority in learning. Sometimes literacy is equated to an ability to spell. Other times, literacy is referred to as using the English language. Several references to 'text speak' also as indicative of literacy issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-Name</td>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>Code Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as 'bolt on' activity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>This node refers to instances where literacy is seen as something to do 'as well as' or 'on top of learning'. It is viewed as additional or an add-on. Time is frequently referenced as an obstacle as well as course content. There are clear delineations between subject areas and the 'appropriateness' of literacy for some more than others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as 'the basics'</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>The word 'basic' is used explicitly here by participants although the understanding of what 'basic' is tends to vary, from spelling and grammar to keywords to an appropriate reading age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as a means to enhance quality of life</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Literacy is seen as a social and moral good; it is perceived as something holistic, that can give students a better chance in life or assist them in having a better quality of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as social and communicative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>References here frame the communication aspect of literacy as something that is essentially social, that will assist students to take their place in society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as a 'Buzzword'</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>References to how literacy is a recent reform and a 'buzzword'. The phrase 'buzzword' is explicitly used by participants. Links to 'literacy as buzzword' but also to 'change'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as visual or graphicy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>References to literacy as moving beyond traditional 'text' to a more multi-modal approach, focusing specifically on images, the visual or graphical. How 'texts' are presented graphically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as functional/practical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>References to literacy regarding what it can help you to 'do'. Focus here is on literacy as a skill, as a practical and useful tool to navigate the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as confidence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>References to student development; that literacy is an essential part of personal growth and promotes confidence in students. Similarly that confidence is necessary for students to perhaps fully engage in literacy development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy as complex and critical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>References to the complex and multifaceted nature of literacy; possibly more about literacy as a concept than as a practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 13: How Participants Describe their Understanding of Literacy*
5.4.1 Traditional Understandings of Literacy

‘If they don’t have literacy, we’ve kind of failed them because if they can’t read and write, they’re not going to function properly in society. So I think that if the only thing we teach them is literacy, we’ve done our job’.

(Gobinet, English - Elm 5)

Gobinet’s words used as an epigraph above illustrate three ideas that are typically threaded and embedded throughout the findings of this study. Firstly, the research participants are aware of the importance of literacy for students’ learning, but also for their quality of life. Secondly, her words are illustrative of a general consensus that, as illustrated later, teachers feel responsible for literacy development. The third point is that literacy is predominantly associated with reading and, to a lesser extent, writing. While reading is an integral part of literacy, it is problematic if literacy is limited to or equated with ‘reading and writing’. These ideas are explored and discussed in this section.

5.4.1.1 Literacy as Reading

As explored in the literature review, traditional understandings of literacy often closely associate literacy with reading and writing (Scribner 1984; Street 2001; Lankshear and Knobel 2006; Gee 2015b) and it became evident early in the data collection phase in this study that reading formed the basis for much of the conversation during interviews. Table 13 illustrates how there were 118 separate references to ‘literacy as reading’ coded across 24 sources, significantly the most commonly coded term during data coding and analysis. In fact, so entrenched is this view of ‘literacy as reading’ among the participants that when asked two questions in particular (about how they value literacy and their own relationship with literacy), they equate literacy with reading by responding with explicit references to reading, and to a lesser extent, writing. Roisín (English/Religion- Birch 9), Bridget (Business/LCVP- Ash 4), Bronagh (Business- Birch 3) and Eamon (English/History/ Irish- Cedar 2) remark on how for them, literacy is associated with ‘reading books’. Eimear comments ‘when I think of literacy, I think of reading and literature... it’s what I love and what I’m good at’ (English- Ash 1). This understanding of literacy as reading was even more apparent when participants were asked about their relationship with literacy, as many participants reflected on their personal experiences as readers (Sorcha, English/History/SEN- Cedar 3; Eimear,
Eoghan and Shannon describe reading as a central part of their formative years:

‘I was mad into sport and my dad would always give me the sports page and I would read the report of the match we had watched the night before and that’s what probably encouraged me to become an English teacher in a way as I got more and more interested in reading’.

(Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1)

‘I totally value it, I always would have. Growing up our family would have been very much into reading and it was something that was promoted at home and it was just something that you did, you know? It was the norm... we grew up with books and as a result, have a love for them’.

(Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4)

These extracts illustrate three points of interest given the focus of this chapter. Firstly, they illustrate the close association between literacy and reading. This is similar to findings reported by MacMahon (2012) as when asked to define literacy, his participants focused on the ability to read, with the majority confining this to the reading of words only. However, the terms literacy and reading are not synonymous (Alvermann 2002) and ‘while reading is part of literacy, literacy is a much bigger concept which is continually changing due to the ever-increasing forms of literacy that are developing’ (Ewing 2016). A potential explanation for this could be that participants’ conceptual understandings are very much rooted in the traditional understanding of literacy they have experienced as students, as teachers and in their lives outside of school. It is worth noting that these views are expressed by teachers who range from early to late career, suggesting that this is not generational. Secondly, it suggests that the definition of literacy as outlined in LNLL is not being fully engaged with by participants. A disproportionate focus on ‘literacy as reading’ necessitates that the many other meanings of the term (Street 2005a) can be marginalised at best or perhaps not actualised. Finally, these extracts highlight that literacy as a concept is one that is deeply embedded in teachers’ social and cultural experiences from an early age, suggesting that literacy is understood as more than a cognitive skill (Moje 2000; Duncum 2004; Moje and Luke 2009; Bialostok 2014) but rather as an experience. Literacy as reading is presented as a cultural practice that has been normalised and legitimised for participants through their own lived experiences. The close association of literacy with reading presented here goes some
distance in explaining the reading materials that teachers cited as resources that they use in their teaching.

5.4.1.2 **Reading Materials and their Associated Values**

![Word-Cloud Illustrating Reading Materials Discussed by Participants](image)

*Figure 21: A Word-Cloud Illustrating Reading Materials Discussed by Participants*

The word-cloud presented in Figure 21 graphically illustrates the reading materials that teachers referenced as they discussed the reading habits of their students, as practiced and as idealised. Such instructional materials are regarded here as ‘artefacts of the classroom’ and they offer us a way to consider teachers’ attitudes to literacy (Molden 2007). The types of text referenced most frequently included fiction, past State Examinations Commission (SEC) examination papers and school textbooks. The emphasis on the centrality of these texts raises interesting questions about the types of texts that are valued in teachers’ practice. For instance, the dominance of fiction links well to understandings of literacy as reading and more so, as reading for pleasure. Again, perhaps this is the experience that teachers have had themselves, and this influences their practice. It may also stem from an availability of resources
in schools, whereby fiction-books might be more accessible or readily available. The focus on exam papers as reading material is suggestive of the dominance of examinations as part of school culture (Devine et al., 2013; Smyth 2016a). Textbooks are often regarded as the central learning resource in post-primary classrooms (Alvermann 2002), something that is characteristic in the Irish experience of education (Coolahan et al., 2017). Taken collectively, for the most part the texts reported adhere to the traditional understanding of text as written messages and symbols in the forms of books, magazines, and newspapers (Larson 2008, 2009, 2010). This is more recently explored by Moje:

> 'In schools, students typically have the opportunity to work with a limited number and type of texts, and their access to a range of media in varied forms to represent and read information is equally limited... many classrooms are print dominant or make little use of multimodal formats for accessing or representing knowledge'.

(Moje 2015, p.264)

The findings of this study reveal a very clear emphasis on alphabetic, print reading and this understanding of text is in stark contrast to the contemporary meaning of text as outlined in section 2.5.5. There is an obvious emphasis on reading fictional books and reading for pleasure, artefacts and an activity that are highly valued by teachers in this study. Beliefs regarding what counts as knowledge, what is deemed legitimate as a ‘text’ and how students engage in ‘reading’ are shaped by how teachers value or choose one medium or mode over another. Reflecting on and challenging text-choices is important as teachers’ choices reinforce and reproduce a particular set of values and have the potential to send powerful messages about what texts are ‘legitimate’ or ‘valuable’ to students. For instance, Jones and Woglom (2016) explore how different materials can orient us towards learning in particular ways when they used a graphic novel to encourage student-teachers to consider how knowledge is constructed and to promote powerful discussion about deconstructing narratives. The choices we make about classroom materials can mean that identities, values, assumptions and practices are then ‘idealized and held up for others to aspire to’ (Bialostok 2014, p.517). This is something explored further when considering teachers’ knowledge and practice relating to literacy in the next chapter. As illustrated throughout this study and particularly in section 2.5.5, there is an emphasis in the literature, in numerous research studies and in policy documents on the educational value and importance of exposing students, particularly adolescents,
to a mélange of print, multi-modal and digital texts. However, this study finds that for the most part, participants do not subscribe to contemporary understandings of text. Rather there is an overt emphasis on traditional print texts at the expense of other types of text.

5.4.1.2.1 Reading Fiction for Pleasure and Confidence

Reading is perceived by participants as an activity that promotes confidence, self-esteem and well-being, and many international studies highlight the benefits of reading for adolescents (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Clark and De Zoysa 2011; Sulkunen 2013; Smyth 2016; National Library of New Zealand 2017). Bronagh states ‘there’s a lot to be got from reading’ (Business- Birch 3) and Eimear (English-Ash 1) argues that it is ‘the key to telling a child you can do anything’. Erin (English/History- Birch 2) comments on how ‘reading out their answers works well’ to develop confidence and Gráinne refers to how private reading promotes ‘confidence with words’ (Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1).

The findings outlined here also highlight how texts that are valued in relation to reading for pleasure are generally the more traditional format of printed texts. As illustrated in the word-cloud in Figure 21, the most commonly cited reading materials that teachers positioned as texts that students are engaging with in school (or perhaps as aptly, the texts that teachers feel students should be engaging with) are fiction, textbooks and newspapers. This is indicative of more ‘traditional notions of reading’ where ‘the content and the authority of single texts’ (Beach and O Brien 2012b) is emphasised. Lankshear and Knobel present a critique of ‘text-centricity’ or ‘book-space’ when discussing understandings of literacy (2006, p.52) and of the ‘book as text paradigm’ arguing that ‘the book in no way comprises the text paradigm in the emerging digital media space’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.52).

An inordinate focus on reading as the reading of ‘books’ means that we are not engaging with students’ ‘mediascapes’ because the ‘modal dominance of writing and print-based medium of schools stands in stark contrast to the multimodal spaces of leisure (e.g. games, film, online spaces) out of school’ (Jewitt 2008, p.262). This finding is not unique to this study. Several studies reveal how ‘conventional print literacy pedagogy proceeds independently of the everyday multimodal social and communicative worlds of many urban children’ (Jewitt 2008, p.253) and ‘book reading is privileged’ in post-primary classrooms, thereby elevating the importance
and value of academic reading’ (Alvermann 2002, p.190). An EU report outlines how students are ‘less likely to find their preferred reading materials at school’ (EU 2012, p.74), partly due to the fact that teachers are often ‘committed to the importance of children reading words in books’ (Bialostok 2014, p.502), but also as a result of the prescriptivist preoccupation with the great canon (McLaren 1988). Certainly there are obvious benefits to reading for pleasure, as recognised by teachers here, yet there is also an ‘institutionalised notion of reading’ (Beach and O’ Brien 2012b) evident in these findings, where reading fiction is privileged. Furthermore, the way teachers discuss reading is presented as silent, seated, linear and individual rather than as a ‘social and collaborative’ (Zamora 2016). Perhaps this is a legacy issue, stemming from older syllabi and the privileging of the great canon of literature. It may also stem from teachers’ own experiences of what it means to ‘read’. Access to resources may also compound this issue, where schools have access to traditional forms of printed texts but may not have access to digital or multimodal resources. Nonetheless, as outlined in section 2.5.5.5 the uniqueness of adolescence as a stage in literacy development needs to be acknowledged by post-primary teachers. As such, consideration needs to be given to the types of texts valued in classrooms, ensuring that they are varied as well as relevant to adolescent learners. Any efforts to motivate and engage adolescent students in literacy learning must consider ways to bridge students’ out-of-school literacy practices with the texts and practices that they encounter in schools.

5.4.1.3 **Literacy as Understanding**

‘Literacy’ and ‘understanding’ were words that were regularly connected in the data (as illustrated in Table 13) with 17 participants making connections between reading and understanding in their responses. Donagh refers to students ‘being able to understand what they read in front of them’, (Construction/DCG - Ash 6) a sentiment echoed by Bronagh (Business- Birch 3), Donal (Engineering/DCG- Birch 6) and Gobinet (English/Geography- Elm 5). Donal focuses on students’ ability to ‘understand the terminology and the language used’ (Engineering/DCG- Birch 6) and this was something echoed by Bronagh, (Business- Ash 4) Sinéad (Maths/Science- Birch 8), Ryanne (Religion- Cedar 4), Enda (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) and Síle (Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3). Bridget describes comprehending as the ability to read ‘the words written on the page’.
Serafini argues that ‘interpretation is a contested concept … and terms such as comprehending, understanding, constructing meaning and making sense are often used interchangeably to define the act of interpretation’ (2010, p.155). However, the views of comprehension presented here seem to position reading comprehension or reading for understanding as ‘a simple and unproblematic concept’ (Snow 2002), as a cognitive act of decoding text (Duncum 2004; Walsh 2006). While decoding is a crucial step towards understanding, it doesn’t promote the ‘deep comprehension skills’ (Murnane et al., 2012) or ‘critical reading skills’ (Liu 2010) that students need to fully engage with texts. To a lesser extent, there is evidence of a deeper understanding of comprehension as participants discuss the importance of ‘understand(ing) the words and (being) able to use them in context’ (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5), and to ‘understand the difference of language in the context of the situation they are in’ (Erin, English/History- Birch 2). This is indicative of a view of comprehension as more than decoding.

Across the dataset however, ‘understanding’ was frequently positioned directly with understanding examination questions. In the final moments of our conversation, Brendan defines literacy as ‘understanding the question that’s put in front of you. It’s as simple as that’ (Maths/Business/History- Ash 3). Furthermore, as illustrated in the word-cloud in Figure 21, exam papers feature quite prominently in teachers’ conversations about reading and understanding. Many teachers make reference to the importance of students being able to understand the language of tests and exams (Áine, Art/SEN-Ash 2; Brendan, Maths/Business/History-Ash 3; Donagh, DCG/Construction-Ash 4; Erin, English/History-Birch 2; Sinéad, Maths/Science-Birch 8; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN-Elm 2; Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE-Elm 3) and to the importance of explicitly teaching ‘exam language’ (Donagh DCG/Construction- Ash 4; Erin, English/History-Birch 2; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL-Cedar 1; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN-Elm 2). The importance of reading as a means to navigate exam papers was clearly captured by Erin when she was invited to comment on her understanding of literacy:
My understanding of literacy I suppose really is (pause) I look at it in terms of students being able to get through an exam situation because at the end of the day, we have accountability so; are they able to take texts, are they able to go through an exam paper, are they able to achieve academic success?

(English/History -Birch 2)

The link between literacy and understanding was cited by several maths and non-maths teachers in relation to the recent introduction of Project Maths, viewed as a particularly challenging examination for students in terms of literacy levels:

‘Before, questions were an awful lot more simple. You were asked to ‘find the equation of a line’ given two points. Now, there could be a big long spiel in literacy terms asking them to do the exact same thing... it flummoxes the best of students...’

(Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3)

Many teachers concluded that it is the complexity of the language used, and students’ inability to understand the language rather than a lack of content knowledge, that causes issues for students:

‘They could actually attempt the question but they don’t understand the language’.

(Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN-Elm 2)

‘They have to be able to understand ... what they are asked in the question because if they can’t understand the question, they won’t be able to understand how to do it’.

(Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8)

In fact, after ‘literacy and reading’, ‘literacy and exams’ was the most frequently coded term in relation to teachers’ explorations of literacy as a concept. There is a strong association between literacy and reading, but also between reading and comprehension, particularly in relation to the importance of being able to navigate exam questions and this is evidenced, as aforementioned, by frequent reference to exam papers as reading resources.

Comprehension is thus perceived in a narrow way, as a one-way process from text to reader (Liu 2010) with a focus on decoding alphabetic signs and symbols. This view remains focused on the cognitive dimensions of comprehension (Fang 2012), thereby remaining in the ‘operational domain’ of literacy development (Green 1988) and positioning the reader as ‘user’ or ‘navigator’ of text (Freebody and Luke 1990; Serafini 2010). Naturally, teachers seek to assist their students in every way possible to navigate exam papers in an effort to achieve academic success and this is
something that resonated very powerfully in the data. In the worlds of Berliner, ‘we treasure what is measured’ (2011, p.299). Of course, it could be argued that the format and construction of the exams themselves is problematic in terms of promoting broad understandings of literacy. Exams that are still largely paper and print based appear to elevate reading and writing, and can act as a ‘brick wall… that functions as a watchdog over flat literacy practices’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.240). This is supported by Bialostok who argues that existing policies and structures can promote instruction that inadequately serves the needs of students in an era of new literacies, making schools ‘problematic sites for enacting multiple and new literacies’ (2014, p.502).

5.4.1.4 Moving Beyond the Traditional ‘Text’ to Multimodal Texts

LNLL does not make explicit reference to ‘multimodal’ texts, yet it does refer to ‘various forms of communication’ as well as ‘printed text’ (DES 2011, p. 8). As a result, it does appear to have a broader conceptualisation of text than traditional understandings of text as alphabetic print or books alone. While the phrase ‘multimodal’ was not one that was used by study participants, there are references (albeit in the minority) to different modes of representation something that is explored in greater detail in the next chapter of this study:

‘(Literacy) was reading, writing, you know? That was literacy but it has changed dramatically. You can communicate with a graph now in science … but it’s still literacy, they still have to read the graph even though it’s numbers.

(Seamus Science/Maths–Birch 7)

Technology teachers seem particularly open to the multimodal nature of texts in their subject areas, suggesting that they may have an understanding of text that aligns more with the contemporary meaning of text outlined in section 2.5.5. Donagh speaks about how in DCG and Materials Technology Wood, ‘every text, every logo, every safety sign has both text and images’ and in Construction Studies ‘you go from an explanation to give a visual explanation or a sketch or something so that’s part of it as well, to be literate’ (Ash 6). Donal mentions that in working with drawings, students have to ‘decipher a drawing; read the instructions, read the measurements, look at the symbols… it’s all literacy, all over the place’ (Engineering/DCG–Birch 6). Enda speaks about how ‘a lot of what we do is visual as well’. (Engineering/DCG/TG–Cedar 5). In fact, when collecting data Enda invited me to
his classroom to conduct the interview as he felt that what he was promoting in his subject was ‘more of a practical literacy’ (Researcher’s Journal, 22nd January 2016) and he could ‘show (me) as well as tell (me) about the practical and theory elements’. As a result, he chooses to display examples of student work and projects around the room, he uses video clips to show a blast furnace in action, he highlights the importance of balancing animations ‘rather than just the theoretical, sentences and paragraphs’ and he keeps a model of a four-stroke engine in the classroom. In science and technology subjects therefore, teachers appear to report broader interpretations of text and of reading text.

‘Graphicy’ is defined as the ability to understand, use or generate graphic images such as maps or diagrams’ (Merriam Webster 2017). The term was first coined by Balchin and Coleman in 1966 who contended that graphicy was a particular skill that had the capacity to complement literacy and numeracy but needed explicit instruction. Developments in literacy studies proposed that graphicy should be viewed as part of literacy development (Anning 2003), with arguments that different modes serve different functions, create different experiences and are dependent on each other (Bezemer and Kress 2008) as ‘the world shown is different from the world told’ (Serafini 2010, p.86). This is also explored by Jewitt:

> ‘What can be done and thought with image or writing or through action differs in ways that are significant for learning. In this regard, the long-standing focus on language as the principal, if not sole, medium of instruction can at best offer a very partial view of the work of communicating in the classroom’.

(2008, p.256)

Although there is a broader understanding of text among science and technology teachers, there appears to be an overwhelming dominance on ‘flat textual practices’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.239). The texts most frequently cited are fiction, exam-papers and newspapers and while they may be multi-modal, they subscribe to a traditional understanding of text. The world of reading is incredibly different from the past (Garcia 2016). In a UK study that assessed the impact of access to an E-books platform on pupils’ reading motivation and skills over one academic year in the UK, findings from surveys, interviews and focus groups reveal how both reluctant and motivated readers admit to regular reading on digital devices (Picton and Clark 2015). The findings presented here highlight the need to bridge the gap between students’ in-school and out-of-school reading practices (Young and Moss
2006) by broadening our range of reading ‘artefacts’ so that students are exposed to a
balance of traditional print as well as texts that align with the ‘new literacies’ as
multimedia, multimodal and digital. Certainly, the authority of written texts is
difficult to escape since this is the most available and dominant text form for over
half a millennium (Cope and Kalantzis 2006), but the limited range of reading
materials cited in this study is suggestive of a lack of awareness of textual diversity.
This is in keeping with findings from an empirical study conducted in the UK,
calling for teachers to ‘widen their reading repertoires’ (Cremin et al., 2009, p.18).
In an attempt to engage and motivate adolescent learners, as well as help them to see
the relevance of their school literacy practices to their lives outside of school, there is
a need to ensure breadth and balance in terms of text-types in all subject areas.

These findings also encourage us to question the messages that are being implicitly
communicated to students through the hidden or ‘unwritten curriculum’ (Wren 1999)
since the texts that we value are reflective of the ideologies that sometimes discreetly
guide our beliefs and practices. Privileging primarily print and established forms of
text (Cope and Kalantzis 2006) inadvertently devalues other texts. The focus on
printed word, what Apple (1993) refers to as ‘the official knowledge of curriculum’,
can unintentionally reproduce inequalities and injustices and result in an ‘imposition
of values’ (Apple 2013, p.55). McLaren (1988) also points to how a focus on
particular texts can be part of the prescriptivist effort to promote one cultural
ideology over another and stresses the importance of how curriculum content must
be relevant to ‘the socio-political reality and life situations of learners’ (1988, p.228).
Therefore, it is important to consider reading artefacts and instructional materials for
reading as they are powerful symbols of ‘what is allowed to count, to whom and for
what purpose’ (Jewitt 2008, p.253). For adolescent learners in particular, many of
whom experience a lack of motivation and subsequently disengage with learning in
school, it is essential that they are able to identify with the texts they encounter and
see them as relevant in their lives. They also need to feel that the literacy practices
they value and engage with outside of school are valued in the classroom. In an
effort to prevent them from feeling that school is ‘alien’ to them (Curtin and Quinlan
2017), there must be greater consideration given regarding the type, range and
variety of texts that students encounter across different subjects.
5.4.1.5  Reading for Criticality

Thus far, it is suggested that this study reveals quite narrow and traditional understandings of literacy, relating literacy closely to reading to decode in the most basic sense. This is further emphasised due to a notable lack of reference to critical literacy in the data. LNLL contends that students should be in a position to ‘critically appreciate various forms of communication’ (DES 2011, p.8), to read critically (DES 2011, p.31) and respond critically (DES 2011, p.58). In an era of ‘fake news’ (Wendling 2018) and deliberate misinformation, we need to question whether or not students are equipped to interrogate and engage fully with the texts that are part of their lived realities (McLaren 1988). As argued by Duncum (2004) the internet presents readers with a ‘highly seductive experiences’ that are not necessarily in their best interests and young people are often ‘prey to manipulative texts’ (Freebody 1992). While a number of participants acknowledged that literacy is complex, only one teacher explicitly commented on the importance of critical literacy:

‘Literacy is not the basic everybody thinks, how you read, write and spell... it’s all the different communication elements, all the elements of being able to analyse what you see and hear. It’s not just the basic ‘can you read or can you not read’; it’s ‘can you decipher the politics? Can you create an argument for a thing?’

(Clíodhna, English/LL-Birch 5)

Clíodhna, the Literacy Link teacher in her school, makes a very obvious reference here to the power of literacy to help students challenge assumptions and ideologies, to understand the constructed nature of texts (Green 1988; McLaren 1988; Apple 1993). She contrasts this with the ‘basic’ view that she believes is commonly held by teachers. The views of literacy presented in this section seem to sit in the operational and cultural dimensions (Green 1988), as well as align with the first three domains in the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke 1990; Serafini 2012). However, the critical dimension, and the understanding that text readers/viewers should also be text analysts/interrogators, appears to be largely absent in the data.

5.4.1.6  Literacy and Writing

As explored in the literature review, traditional understandings of literacy pay much attention to reading and, to a lesser extent, to writing as the traditional model of education was based on the 3 R’s of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. While the data reveals an overwhelming focus on reading, it became apparent during data
analysis that there were significantly fewer references to writing. Nonetheless, some interesting issues emerged.

5.4.1.6.1 The Relationship between Reading and Writing

‘If you can read and write, you’re on the right track; whatever happens after that’.

(Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4)

It is perhaps unsurprising that many participants in this study frequently spoke about the practice of reading and writing together. Gráinne speaks about how literacy development can contribute towards helping students become ‘more confident readers and writers’ (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1) while Erin refers to how any effort to promote literacy must equip students with the ‘basic literacy, reading and writing skills’ (English/History- Birch 2).

In fact, Erin’s reference to ‘basic’ is interesting. During the data analysis stage, it was noted how this was word is used by 11 participants in the study, and therefore was identified as recurring. When examining how the word ‘basic’ was used by participants, it was generally associated with reading ages, definitions and keywords in content-areas, the ability to read instructions or to read exam questions, spelling and grammar. Gobinet refers to how sometimes students ‘don’t have the basics; the keywords, the spelling and really simple literacy’ (English/Geography- Elm 5) and this aligns with traditional understandings of literacy, what Kalantzis et al. refer to as the ‘old basics’ which focused on reading and writing, phonics, correct spelling and grammar and standard forms of English (2016, p.5).

Although participants weren’t asked to elaborate on their understanding of this word during interviews, it might be inferred that there is an association between ‘the basics’ and the ‘3 Rs’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011) understood by Cope and Kalantzis (2006) as a system that promotes standardisation and accuracy and distinguishes between right and wrong answers. It is reflective of a particular view of knowledge and education, where teachers are authoritative, students are passive and instruction centres around transmission, often with a focus on practices such as drill and repetition. While Kalantzis et al. (2016) acknowledge the importance of the ‘3 Rs’, they argue that educators need to avoid relying purely on the basics. Rather, they use the term ‘new basics’ to ‘catch the flavour of a more contemporary, relevant and inclusive approach to knowledge’, where ‘literacy is not simply a matter of
correct usage... (but also) a means of communication and representation of meanings in a broader, richer and all-encompassing sense’ (Kalantzis et al., 2016, p.4). The pervasiveness of the ‘3 Rs’ model is evident in the privileging of reading, and to a lesser extent, writing by many of the participants in this study.

5.4.1.6.2 Writing and Language Conventions

When participants speak about students’ writing practices, there are many references to the importance of ‘writing full sentences’ (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5) and spelling (Bridget, Business/LCVP-Ash 4; Iona, Irish- Birch 4; Sinéad Maths/Science –Birch 8). As is explored in 6.4.3, engagement with technology is perceived as having a negative impact on students’ ability to write, particularly in relation to the ‘whole-sale experimentation, hybridisation and rule-breaking’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2007, pp.13-14) that characterises digital texts. This signifies a break with standardised and ‘accepted’ uses of language in schools, or schooled literacies (Blake and Blake 2005). This view is perhaps best illustrated by Roisín:

‘Facebook and social media, you know... that’s affecting their writing because when they’re writing messages they’re not writing those messages as we would expect them to write for example, an English essay. Their language technique is different, completely and that’s coming into the English lesson then and their writing in general’.

(English/Religion- Birch 9)

Controversially, Smagorinsky argues that there can be an over-emphasis on standardised English. While acknowledging that there are conventions around grammar, he contends that the rules have limitations and that students need to become ‘chameleons of convention: speakers who can adapt to new situations- from baby talk to Spanglish to formal English to sports jargon’ (Smagorinsky 2015, p.143). While this argument has existed for more than half a century, oftentimes there is only one single version of English regarded as acceptable.

5.4.1.6.3 Teachers Acknowledge that Students Struggle with Writing

The literature refers to writing as a complex task (The College Board 2003; NCTE 2008; Myhill and Fisher 2010; Gee and Hayes 2011) and a number of teachers in this study identify how many of their students struggle with writing. Gearóid comments on how he recognises students who are struggling with writing:
‘It could be the traditional, kind of dyslexic confusing letters, writing some letters backwards, it could be very, very poor spelling, it could be not able to write in sentences... it could be that it is very immature, what they are writing. You know, it could be anything’.

(English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2)

Furthermore, for many post-primary students writing is central to success in assessments, given the overwhelming focus on traditional pen-and-paper tests in Irish education. In a number of State Examinations, students demonstrate their understanding solely through writing (Smyth and Calvert 2011, p. 4) and students’ ability to write for the purpose of examinations is something that was an obvious concern for teachers. They comment on how many students struggle to express themselves in writing. Sinéad refers to how

‘some of them would nearly perform a lot better by asking them questions than in a written exam, ... it doesn’t translate in the exam... they totally would understand the science part or the maths part but they just can’t seem to put it on paper’.

(Maths/Science-Birch 8)

Síle supports this view by arguing that ‘sometimes they can’t translate what they said onto paper; it’s not even that they miss the point but that they can’t articulate it’ (Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3).

5.4.1.6.4 The Purpose of Writing

An interesting question that arises from these findings, therefore, concerns beliefs about the purpose of writing in the post-primary school. As illustrated by Sinéad and Síle’s comments above, there is an obvious connection between writing and examinations, a view shared by many other participants. Indeed, it is worth noting that explicit references to writing as an activity and a skill, other than writing for the purpose of examinations, were few, and this is explored in further detail in the next chapter. Such beliefs about writing are in keeping with the findings reported from other studies internationally (Kiuhara et al., 2009; Gillespie et al., 2014) that highlight this as a ‘functional’ view of writing, as an activity that allows you to ‘do’ things. However, functionalist approaches to writing do not necessarily afford students opportunities to analyse and interpret, to engage in writing as a form of ‘sense-making’ (Hinchion 2016), nor do they view writing as an end in itself. It is note-worthy that although participants highlight how students struggle with writing,
there is a notable lack of reference to explicitly teaching writing in the data. Again, this is explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

Considering the largely traditional understandings of literacy expressed thus far, literacy appears to be perceived as technical, skills-based and functional, one that draws on the autonomous model of literacy (Street 2001). This has clear implications for pedagogy. If teachers perceive literacy purely as cognitive skills (Fang 2012) that are associated with reading and writing, then effective literacy practice might be understood as the transmission of ‘a set of skills from teacher to child, often beginning with what would be considered ‘the basics’’ (Lambirth 2011, p.72). This can often limit literacy learning to a focus on the technical features of language and discrete skills’ (Blake and Blake 1995, p.163), without considering other aspects of literacy learning. Alternatively, sociocultural theories understand literacy as social, situated, cultural and ideological, something that is enacted in social practices (Street 1984; Gee 1989, 2015) and consider students’ out-of-school literacy practices as legitimate and valuable. Furthermore, a sociocultural approach positions literacy not purely as cognitive skills but as ‘concrete practices’ (Gee 2015 p.39) or as literacy events. This issue is explored further in chapter six when the findings relating to teachers’ professional knowledge and practice pertaining to literacy are discussed.

5.4.2 Literacy as Speaking and Listening

As aforementioned, speaking and listening are two skills explicitly identified as part of the definition of literacy presented in LNLL. As a result, study participants were invited to share their thoughts on whether or not they perceived oracy as part of literacy development and significant variance was observed regarding teachers’ beliefs.

5.4.2.1 The Value of Speaking and Listening

The data reveals how some participants view oracy as ‘very important’ (Gearóid English/Geography/SEN - Elm 2), as ‘underrated’ (Eoghan, English/Irish/LL - Elm 1) and as a fundamental part of literacy. When asked to elaborate on why oracy was important participants presented a number of reasons. In keeping with the literature, (Oliver et al., 2005) the importance of being a ‘strong’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP-Ash 4) or ‘good communicator’ (Roisín, English/Religion- Birch 9) frequently emerged in the data (Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch 7; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL -
Elm 1; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2; Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). When Erin was asked about the value literacy held for her, she responded emphatically:

'I suppose really then to be able to express yourself, to be able to communicate; it’s the big one for me. I think that when you strip everything else back, you can have fifty degrees, but if you can’t speak to the person beside you, if you can’t express yourself, you’d be going nowhere. So for me, it’s all about communication’.

(English/History – Birch 2)

Speaking in front of their peers promotes confidence, builds communication skills and gives students an opportunity to share their opinions, something deemed important by participants (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Gobinet, English/Geography, Elm 5). To a lesser extent, oral activities present opportunities to engage students in playful performance. Eoghan spoke about how his 2nd years enjoyed performing O’ Casey’s ‘Shadow of a Gunman’. Moreover, the value he has for oracy is evident when he speaks about his English classroom:

'I suppose with English, it’s always you know, the reading, the writing part of it... but I would hope that if you came into my class that you would hear their voice more than you would hear mine and I always try that. I think (pause) I think that’s something that has to be valued... that’s what school has to be. Or English class has to be’.

(English/Irish/LL - Elm 1)

Furthermore, speaking is viewed as an unconstrained skill ‘something you can get better at’ (Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1) and one that ‘has to be explicitly taught and sometimes you have to go all the way up, even for senior cycle’ (Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4).

5.4.2.2 Building on Solid Foundations; the Classroom as a Space for Dialogue

The literature review of this study outlined the value of ‘exploratory talk’ (Barnes 2010) and certainly, class discussion is seen as a way of promoting speaking and listening for many teachers in this study. Gearóid speaks about facilitating discussion, ‘getting them talking with each-other and getting them talking in a group and getting them listening to each-other; these (practices) are all part of literacy’(English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). Shannon argues that ‘a lot of the time, discussion about something really helps some kids... They just learn better that way’. (French/Spanish- Elm 4). Michéal references how ‘religion lends itself to (oracy) so
well because that’s where you’re having debates and discussions’

(English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). A clear example of the value of class discussion for teachers is evident in Clíodhna’s reflection:

‘I absolutely hated group-work. I used to shy away from group-work, it took up my time, it took me off course, I felt that there was no value in it and I felt that then, I wasn’t giving them a wad of information to go home and learn that they could all regurgitate and get their marks…The Instructional Leadership course opened up a world to me of how ‘think-pair-share’ and ‘the placemat’, has a place in helping people to develop their own critical thinking skills’.

(English/LL- Birch 5)

In these instances, there appears to be an understanding that ‘learning is deepened through dialogue’ (Brindley and Marshall 2015) and teachers recognise oracy as a social as well as a psychological tool (Vygotsky 1978). Such an awareness of the potential of structured speaking and listening opportunities can certainly go a long way to fostering a learning environment where dialogue is valued (Alexander 2006; Mercer 2006; Mercer and Howe 2012; Mercer and Dawes 2014).

5.4.2.3 Oracy as Scripted; Presentations and Interviews

Interestingly however, there is unanticipated emphasis on speaking rather than listening in participants’ responses when analysed collectively. Participants regularly refer to student engagement in formal presentations such as delivery of speeches and interviews. There is an overwhelming focus on presentational talk as students ‘prepare and stand and speak and they articulate at the rostrum’ (Eimear, English-Ash 1) and similarly Gráinne (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1) refers to how her 2nd year English students regularly ‘prepare a topic and speak for 30 seconds’. Gobinet refers to how she encourages 2nd year and TY students to deliver speeches but recalls how

‘confidence levels were at rock bottom and they just hated it. And even when they were speaking, it was reading off the sheet; there wasn’t any feeling in it, it was just trying to get through it as quickly as possible. So I moved away from presenting to getting debates going, and getting them to talk and trying to formulate their issues and try to figure out what they want to say and how to say it correctly’.

(English/Geography- Elm 5)

Bridget is aware of how students who might pursue business after school would have to present, which is why she believes oracy has a place in her classroom.

(Business/LCVP- Ash 4). Gobinet also thinks about preparing students for life after
school so her students ‘can present themselves well, speak correctly, and eventually get a job and do well’ (Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5). Oracy as a life skill was a particular priority for Gearóid:

‘(Speaking and listening skills) are all part of ‘life skills’ that as a teacher, you want to try and promote. It’s very important I think. For a lot of our kids, for the weaker kids, they go on to the workplace and the only way of assessing them for the workplace is the interview and they have to be able to talk... so I think it’s important that they are able to express themselves’.

(Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2)

Indeed, it has been suggested that ‘some teachers may have a narrower understanding of what oracy entails and think about oracy only as speaking and pronunciation, forgetting that listening is just as important’ (Goh, in Mah 2016, p.400). While there were significantly fewer references to listening, participants did discuss ‘listening tasks’ (Eimear, English- Ash 1), listening to peers as part of whole class discussion (Gearóid English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1) or even ‘listening to the radio’ (Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1). It could be assumed that facilitating class discussion as cited here would acknowledge the roles of both speaking and listening. However, the fact that there was greater emphasis on speaking rather than listening is noteworthy. Interesting also, and as is evident in the data cited here, many of those teachers who spoke most positively about oracy were language teachers, particularly English teachers, something that that is explored further in chapter six.

There is little doubt that teachers see the value of oracy and certainly think of creative ways to promote speaking and listening in their classrooms. However, while ‘performance speech plays an important role in introducing students to the formal end of the oral language continuum’ (Oliver et al., 2005 p.219), a disproportionate focus on presentations as ‘outputs’ of oracy development is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, oracy is both a ‘means of learning and an aspect to be developed and refined in its own right’ (Jones 2007, p.577). There is less emphasis on the cognitive benefits of oracy as there is on oracy for communication skills. This links to a second point which is that a focus on presentational speech does not fully exploit the potential of what Barnes referred to as ‘exploratory talk’ (2010). Furthermore, if oral language manifests itself purely in terms of performance, it can be argued that ‘in many ways, this is tantamount to producing written language in an
oral form, rather than generating good communication skills’ (Oliver et al., 2005, p.212; See also Wilkinson 1970; Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993; Hibbin 2016; Mah 2016). A useful finding presented here suggests that there is greater emphasis on presentational talk, rather than valuing and exploring the full potential of the exploratory talk. Such an approach constructs a ‘reductionist model of oracy’ (Haworth 2001, p.22) whereby oracy is presented as subservient to reading and writing and ultimately, ‘expressive ‘orality’ has been given a back seat’ (Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993 p.310). Indeed, if we are to subscribe to the sociocultural view of literacy as a social construction, then the place of oral language needs to be emphasised rather than be seen as something that can be left to chance (Stinson 2015). Finally, this data suggests that oracy might be perceived more as speaking than listening. These issues need greater consideration if teachers are to truly engage with speaking and listening as part of adolescent literacy development.

5.4.3 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is explicitly acknowledged as a key aspect of literacy in LNLL. Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on digital literacy as a key ‘literacy competency’ for students in the 21st century meant that exploring teachers’ understandings of digital literacy was regarded as vital in this study. During the initial phase of data analysis and coding, any reference made to digital learning, digital devices or how technology impacts on literacy or learning was coded with the node ‘digital literacy’. As a result, 14 of 26 participants were linked to this code. However upon further analysis of the data, the references associated with the ‘digital literacy’ node were predominantly concerned with how technology has changed society, increased access to devices (particularly phones), student engagement with social media, and the use of DLT as a teaching resource. It became apparent that the understanding of digital literacy as outlined in the literature was notably absent in the data, with the exception of one participant.

Technology is widely acknowledged as an important part of students’ learning (Asselin and Moayeri 2011; Kivunja 2014; Prensky 2012; Nachimuthu 2010; Leu et al 2011; Mill 2016) and most participants expressed an awareness of the place of digital technologies in students’ lives, making repeated references to digital devices, touch-screen technologies and social media. One teacher in particular was keenly
aware of the changes that have taken place in society and how it is having an impact on teaching and learning:

We have to adapt like they have adapted to their society... With TYs we use Google classroom, so it’s adapting our teaching and changing the way we teach ... they can interact and they can ask questions and everything is completely different... compared to when I graduated in 6th year in 2008... The teacher called out the notes... We took them down and learned them. When we came back, she gave us more notes. We learned those. We wrote essays. But there was no interaction. We were learning what she believed... (technology) is kind of changing the dynamic of teaching, that it’s guiding them towards what they believe rather than telling them, ‘this is what to think’.

(Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5)

Interestingly, Gobinet, a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) at the time this data was collected, was the only participant who engaged with formal literacy instruction as part of her ITE programme. Such exposure may have made her more aware of the multi-faceted nature of literacy and the capacity of digital technology as a way to promote literacy. She is also the only participant whose understanding of digital literacy aligns with the literature, where technology and digital learning advocates position students as collaborators as well as consumers.

Some participants speak about an awareness of digital elements that would be considered part of digital literacy (Leu et al., 2011; Beach and O’ Brien 2012; Mills 2016). Seamus shares his understanding of how technological changes impact the way we communicate with others, ‘whether it’s a text, whether it’s Facebook... It’s everything really’ (Maths/Science; Birch 7) while Eoghan refers to how students communicate more by email than by letters in English (English/Irish/LL- Elm 1). However, close analysis of the data reveals three recurring ideas regarding digital literacy, ideas that are closely linked to previously documented conceptual understandings of literacy as ‘reading and writing’. At its most positive, technology is perceived as a useful teaching tool, others perceive it as a competing influence but at its most negative, technology is perceived as an obstacle to literacy development.

5.4.3.1 Technology as a teaching tool; old wine in new bottles?

As aforementioned, references to the use of technology to promote literacy development are largely absent in this study. Rather, when exploring teachers’ beliefs about digital literacy, technology is framed as a tool for sharing information:
‘The use of technology in classes, you know, to be able to have my PowerPoint up there (points to a slide displayed on the board), to have the keywords on slides and to be able to talk about whatever it is you’re talking about’.

(Rionach, Religion-Ash 5)

‘For some of the experiments now, I’d show the experiments say, on YouTube and they will... maybe interpret, pick up, how to do the experiment from looking at it’.

(Seamus, Maths/Science- Birch 7)

‘This is a blast furnace. This is probably the most important section in Junior Cert theory... I would have one of those on YouTube so that they can see it working. I have it on my PowerPoint’.

(Enda, DCG/Engineering-Elm 5)

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 refers to how ‘the integration of ICT into teaching, learning and assessment is a complex and challenging process’ (DES 2015 p.14), making explicit reference to how the presence or use of ICT equipment does not necessitate quality learning for students. Indeed, the literature argues how computers are tools that can be used in ‘didactic or constructivist ways’ in the classroom (Carroll 2011, p. 29). Therefore, we ‘need to focus on practices over tools’ (Lewis 2007), interrogating how we use technology to support learning in general and, in the context of this study, literacy development. PowerPoint slides or video clips, coupled with a projector, as mentioned in the data certainly replace the black or whiteboard, but teaching and learning processes remain unchanged. O’ Brien, Stewart and Moje call this ‘the pedagogy of telling’ (1995, p.450) drawing on Sizer’s concept (1984) which suggested that teachers rely heavily on recitation and lecture in efforts to cover content. The manner in which participants reported their use of technology in this study suggests it is linked to a more traditional approach to curriculum delivery than one might initially think.

This view of technology as a teaching aid rather than a specific means of ‘tapping into and developing students’ digital literacy’ has been explored in previous Irish studies (Murphy et al., 2013, p.340). As explored by Leander (2007), such use of technology emphasises the position of the teacher as authority over knowledge and gathers students around one common textual interface, thereby reinforcing traditional pedagogical practices. Furthermore, it negates the potential of media as a vehicle for
empowerment. This means that technology is used in a consumerist manner (Lankshear and Knobel 2006; Asselin and Moayeri 2011), positioning the teacher as expert, ‘disciplinary insider’ or ‘gatekeeper’ of knowledge (Manderino and Castek 2016, p.79) and the student as consumer of knowledge, and positioning learning as passive rather than participative. This is in contrast with the aims of digital literacy development outlined previously, which highlight the centrality of the student as ‘producer’ as well as consumer of text. (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007; Carroll 2011; Poore 2011; Burnett and Merchant 2015; Manderino and Castek 2016; Mills 2016; Castek and Manderino 2017). Even in instances where teachers encourage students to use technology as tools for learning themselves, such as use of ‘spellcheck’ in a word processing software package (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2), the focus remains on the technical components of language.

5.4.3.2 Technology as a Competing Influence

As noted earlier in this chapter, participants in this study value the ‘stable textual order’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, p.38) of print texts. This becomes even more apparent when considering participants’ comments about reading on digital devices, through web-browsing and E-reading. While the literature contends that digital reading involves a number of different reading practices, strategies and platforms but is a valid substitute for reading traditional printed texts, some participants question the legitimacy of digital reading:

‘You don’t need to buy a newspaper now; if you hear about a story you just Google it and everything about it is going to come up in front of you... You don’t even have to physically sit down and read it! I think it’s sad, everything like that is going. Even the Kindles now are taking over, very shortly we won’t have the actual physical book in our hands; and that’s the nicest part. I just don’t think (pause) it doesn’t (pause) it’s not the same really’.

(Roisín, English/Religion-Birch 9)

I think that having an emphasis on literacy is really important... it’s even more important today, than it was in 2011 I think ... because so few kids now as a pasttime, read. They just don’t do it; they will scroll through their iPod, their iPad, their whatever... their laptop is in front of them. And what they’re reading is textspeak. They’re not (pause) - Reading a novel is this big burden that they have to undertake in school now ... and they really don’t like it, they don’t see the value of picking up a book ... They just don’t have a love for it’.

(Shannon, French/Spanish - Elm 4)
In these accounts, it is worth noting that students are not rejecting *reading*, but the traditional printed text as a *vehicle* for reading. Opting for screen based texts is often perceived as the ‘initial point of departure with print literacy’ (Nachimuthu 2010 p.3) and for these teachers, it is presented as an uncomfortable and unfamiliar space. It is different to the accepted norms regarding reading; for example reading novels from the great canon of literature, reading printed texts, reading alone and reading quietly. These teachers’ accounts certainly seem to align with a ‘perception that computer-mediated practices are not serious enough… too easy- too intellectually empty’ (Williams 2005, p.704). Both teachers cited here use quite emotive language; Roisín (English/Religion- Birch 9 ) describes the move from conventional and stable forms of print media as ‘sad’, while Shannon (French/Spanish- Elm 4 ) juxtaposes the ‘reading the novel’ with ‘scrolling’ and ‘text-speak’ and seems to view it as an inferior form of reading. Indeed, participants view reading digital texts as something that is at odds with the traditional understanding of ‘reading’, encourages us to question the legitimisation of one text type over others. Rather than recognising and building on students’ repertoires of textual practices (Burnett and Merchant 2015), and drawing on the out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents to motivate learning as discussed in section 2.5.5, these findings suggest that ‘digital reading’ is seen as inferior to traditional understandings of reading, while digital texts are perceived as less legitimate than traditional print texts such as newspapers or novels.

The perception of print texts as superior to digital texts is actually contrary to findings of a number of research studies. For instance, Darrington and Dousay (2015) outline the advantages of multimodal writing activities over traditional writing assignments, Bezemer and Kress (2017) highlight the learning afforded through writing on Facebook and Elmore and Coleman (2019) explore the potential of memes to promote critical reading literacy. However, such activities are not only absent from teachers’ discussion of digital literacy in this study; they are positioned as contradictory to literacy learning and as a result, dismissed as neither relevant or legitimate in the learning process. In the Irish post-primary context, such a philosophy is in stark contrast to the aspirations of post-primary policy documents and syllabi such as the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020* (DES 2015a), the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) and the Junior Cycle English Specification.
These documents are replete with references to the centrality of digital learning and literacy to the adolescent student in 21st century Ireland.

Certainly there are differences in terms of experience and approaches to reading digitally as opposed to traditional printed texts (Beach and O’ Brien 2012; Murphy-Paul 2013; Wright et al., 2013; Korbey 2014; ). However print and digital reading experiences can be complimentary (Carr 2013) ‘as a device offers a viable distribution platform for the written word, not printed on paper but displayed in pixels’ (Vosloo 2010). In fact, a study conducted by Margolin et al. (2013) involving 90 participants aged between 18-25 sought to examine the impact of different media platforms on reading comprehension. The study involved engaging participants with ten experimental passages, five expository and five narrative texts, were presented to three groups of 30 undergraduate students, each group reading from either an E-reader, computer screen or paper text. The research indicated no significant differences in comprehension accuracy across different media presentation types.

Contrary to the belief that students don’t read, as expressed here, Gee and Hayes contend that ‘reading and writing are, if anything, increasing in the digital world, but they are also changing’ (2011, p.21). Students are reading, but there is a rejection of traditional black-and-white text for devices that have the capacity to offer full colour, images and embedded videos and audio means that students are reading a different type of text, one that is ‘multimodal’. New literacies such as digital literacy present us with new forms of reading, ‘new forms of decoding and producing meaning from symbols and representations (Gee 2015, p.108). Students need guidance in navigating the hyperlinked, random access, digital sources that are available online and this is something that we need to consider if we wish to promote students’ digital literacy (Kivunja 2014; Evans 2017). The same can be said for writing, as students engage in digital composition practices. Over a decade ago, Williams made reference to the impact of online and digital technologies on the literacy practices of adolescents, with specific reference to reading and writing:

‘Out-of-school literacy practices, for many students, happen primarily online. In chat-rooms, email lists, online role playing games, webpages, blogs, text messaging and email, many of our students use their free time in some form of reading and writing. Computer technology has resulted in a generation as deeply and consistently immersed in writing as any in years’.

(Williams 2005, p.703)
Finally, Roisin and Shannon’s views are illustrative of a perception of digital devices as ‘primarily media consumption tools’ (Johnson 2013) and while this certainly can be the case, digital technology also has the capacity to promote learning through communication, collaboration and creation. This is evidenced by a number of studies conducted regarding adolescent literacy development with digital texts, platforms and practices (Darrington and Dousay 2015; Bezemer and Kress 2017; Elmore and Coleman 2019). However, such potential is widely unexplored by the majority of participants in this study.

5.4.3.3 Technology as an Obstacle to Literacy Development

At its most negative, technology is discussed as something that is not only as a competing influence or distraction, but as an obstacle to students’ literacy learning. Furthermore, as illustrated in the excerpts below, literacy is discussed in a way that it is almost synonymous with reading, again supporting the findings from the previous section:

**M:** ‘The amount of (students) that just, that do not (pause) that are so alien, even just to basic parts of literacy like reading books, they just don’t want to know.

**R:** And why is that?

**M:** Technology I suppose. PlayStation and things like that at home. Like if you say, spend 15 minutes reading that’s 15 minutes they don’t have on Snapchat. That’s what they’ve told me ... it’s very hard for them to sit down and read a book because ... they have their phone and they have the internet and it just... it just rules the roost, you know, and that’s what it is.

(Míchéal, English/RE/Music- Elm 6)

‘We are so preoccupied with technology and it is to the forefront, and it has been an obstacle for a lot of kids to overcome to be literate and to be able to sit down and to say, to read a book... definitely there is competition there. You’ve the book competing with the console, the Wi-Fi and in this day and age, it’s just the way things are gone, its 21st century Ireland’.

(Iona, Irish- Birch 4)

These statements certainly align with the assertion that many people are concerned about the impact of digital media and technology on reading. However, what is evident is how again, digital reading practices, such as those involved in gaming (Gee2015b), are not understood as ‘reading’. It is difficult to advocate for digital literacy when the ‘digital’ is perceived as contrary to ‘literacy’.
Technology is also perceived as a ‘major problem’ and as ‘an obstacle’ to literacy development when considering writing. When discussing their students’ engagement with technology, participants often attribute their writing difficulties to technology, how ‘Facebook and all these social media... is affecting their writing’ (Roisín, English/Religion- Birch 9). In fact, there are several references to how technology negatively impacts writing, with a specific focus on spelling and grammar:

\[ \text{I would say that spelling, from texting you’d notice from some of the kids in school, spelling is dire!} \]

(Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4)

\[ \text{‘They’re so used to texting and nearly making up their own kind of language’.} \]

(Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8)

\[ \text{I’d say the only negative thing, I’d be thinking, is the texting and all of that... the spellings, you know the way they abbreviate and that’.} \]

(Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4)

\[ \text{As a result (of technology) everything else suffers. Grammar (pause) and spelling because of shorthand text messages; ... they actually use them... LOLs and stuff are in there... You really have to tell them ‘that’s not how it works’.} \]

(Míchéal, English/RE/Music- Elm 6)

Fears that engagement with technology can undermine students’ reading and writing, thereby impacting on literacy, have received much media attention where there is an argument that texting in particular can blur the lines between colloquial use of language and standard ‘English’ (Paton 2011). Such a concern regarding unconventional use of language was verbalised by several participants. However, a number of studies have highlighted that such fears are unwarranted. Studies have revealed how ‘textisms’, (abbreviated and non-standard written word forms such as ‘C U l8er’ or ‘2morrow’) can have a positive effect on spelling (Powell and Dixon 2011). The use of SMS (Short Message Service) can potentially improve literacy through extra exposure to word composition outside of school, as well as promote students’ language confidence through engagement in playful mixing of written and spoken language features that characterise text language (Plester and Wood 2009). Many of the positive outcomes are attributed to how these activities have the potential for honing learners’ phonological skills (Wood et al., 2009). These studies conclude that there is no support for arguments that speculate about the negative
impact of mobile phone use and text language on literacy development. In fact, ‘acquiring new ways with words, something people do all the time, can increase rather than decrease people’s language skills (Gee and Hayes 2011 p.132). It is hardly surprising that there is such an emphasis on linguistic standardisation and grammatical accuracy, something that was held in high regard in the early printing era of the 16th century (Cope and Kalantzis 2006). However, in our digital world, teachers need to be mindful of the variety of accepted and legitimate forms of expression in subcultures and peer-cultures, of local and regional dialects:

‘Literacy as the formal, standardised stuff of proper expression - correctly spelt words in properly formed sentences measured against the standards of official standard languages and literate middle class expression - will no longer suffice.’

(Cope and Kalantzis 2006, p.34)

While many participants in this study acknowledged technology as an integral part of students’ lived realities, only one demonstrated an understanding of digital literacy as outlined in relevant literature. At its most positive, references to the use of technology in the classroom appear to support transmission-teaching practices and the pedagogy of telling rather than explicitly promoting the development of students’ literacy. However, the majority of participants perceive technology as something either in competition with or contrary to literacy development. Perhaps this is a direct consequence of the fact that literacy is framed as ‘reading’, and reading traditional texts, for the majority of participants in the early paragraphs of this section. The dominance of these beliefs would suggest that it is unlikely that participants are in a position to promote digital literacy practices.

Leu and colleagues (2011) suggest that ‘perhaps it is because we are caught in a period of transition between reading on the page and reading on the screen that these misalignments are especially salient’ (p.8). However, because adolescents are so ‘socially enmeshed in digital literacy practices’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.239) engagement is imperative rather than optional. Students need exposure to literacy pedagogy that promotes skills such as locating, critically evaluating and synthesising digital information. They need to develop their ability to navigate the multimodality and interactive nature of these texts, different to the skills required to read and understand conventional printed text, presented in a logical and linear fashion, read left to right and front to back, clearly structured in chapters, paragraphs
and sentences. Failure to acknowledge this acute difference in reading ‘alternative
texts’ (Coiro 2003) means that we are not equipping young people to navigate the
texts they will inevitably encounter and ‘for those whose reading ability is not
strong, the Internet can be a lonely place’ (Harrison 2016).

Certainly ‘good teaching and learning have resulted from multimodal pedagogies
that do not incorporate digital mediation, avoiding the digital world is another thing
altogether’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.240). The literature demonstrates how
the internet, technology and digital media have transformed how we engage with
language and literacy (Leu et al., 2011; Gee and Hayes 2011; Gee 2015) and this
ultimately presents a significant challenge to those involved in education:

‘Conventional views of literacy based on text- especially the model of literary text-
are no longer adequate... the model of text as the printed page is too narrow for
dealing conceptually and pedagogically with digital texts. Teachers and learners
need to develop new concepts of text and new orientations toward text, and to
experience authentic new forms of text production activities in addition to those of
the print era’.

(Lankshear 1999, p.142)

Further explored in chapter six, this study highlights how considering the digital
literacy needs of our students poses a challenge for educators as digital literacy
presents a ‘new demand’ for teachers own professional learning (Arjomand et al.
2013). This highlights a clear need to educate teachers on how to implement and
effectively use technology in our classrooms (Coiro 2003; Larson 2008). However,
the first step in moving towards a more holistic approach to adolescent literacy
development, one that promotes digital reading and writing, will involve challenging
the deep-seated and traditional assumptions about what it means to be literate in the
21st century that are evident from the findings in this study.

5.4.4 Literacy for Life; Holistic Understandings of Literacy

As this discussion of teachers’ beliefs about literacy draws to a close, it is worth
exploring the title of LNLL, ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’ as the
word ‘life’ was used on a number of occasions by participants, relating to a holistic
and child-centered view of literacy. Participants explore the impact that literacy has
on students’ lives but they also acknowledge, in keeping with sociocultural
perspectives, the impact that students’ ‘lived realities’ have on their understandings
of literacy, and how meaning is socially and culturally situated (Gee 1989). This
became apparent in an anecdote shared by Máire as we neared the end of the interview and I asked her about her understanding of literacy:

‘It’s about having a rich life, it is really…I’ve a boy in 3rd year and the other day… he said ‘I can now text people. I could never do it before, I’m able to text and I can read the texts they send back’… for him… he’s now literate. That text was a jumble of letters and the fact that he can now do something that he couldn’t do… And this was our highlight of the day! He’s empowered!’

(Maths/History/SEN- Birch 1)

Máire is not only acknowledging this student’s success and celebrating how this achievement can be liberating for students, but also how literacy can be viewed as multimodal and digital. The vignette illustrates the different Discourses (Gee 1989) that students occupy and how literacy is positioned as a way of making meaning that is different to how we might perceive meaning-making in a traditional sense. It is worth mentioning that the student in question told her that morning that he didn’t want to read with her. His values of literacy were enmeshed with what being ‘literate’ could help him to achieve. Bronagh also explores this idea of how literacy can support us in our daily lives in her business class when teaching her students about insurance policies:

‘If I was doing insurance with them I would send them away to maybe discuss it at home… they can use the new word ‘policy’ or whatever, the terminology that their parents would be aware of and would know. So that maybe they’re seeing it’s real to life. I think they enjoy it to a certain extent (laughs)’.

(Bronagh, Business - Birch 3)

While we might associate these views with a more functional view of literacy, focusing on literacy in terms of what it can ‘do’ for us, there is also an acknowledgement of the life-enhancing capacity of literacy. In fact, for Bronagh, learning becomes more meaningful when students can see a connection between the language of business studies as a school subject and its relevance for life outside of school, when the primary and secondary Discourses can meet. The focus on literacy for life is further explored by Erin as she speaks about how literacy offers more than an ability to navigate the demands of subject areas or exam papers:
‘it’s about helping them to realise that this is for life; It’s not just to get past your Junior Cert it’s not just about poetry, it’s about ... how you’re going to get on... being able to actually have the basic literacy reading and writing skills to be able to live your life.

(English/History- Birch 2)

I would like to close this discussion with Gearóid’s definition of literacy, one that draws on much of what has been discussed across this chapter in relation to how literacy is presented in LNLL; that literacy incorporates the processes of reading, writing, speaking and listening, is digital and multi-modal, going beyond traditional understandings of text. Literacy is a tool for communication and comprehension, but also for critical civic engagement:

‘well, it’s a life skill isn’t it? I mean, we can’t really function without it, am... even down to bus timetables, everything, you need to be able to read a little bit, filling out forms and all that. ... it would be something that we would hold in high regard you know? Look at job interviews, look at life experience, look at the validity of oracy in life in general...I mean we need to be able to read newspapers and know what’s going on in the world. You need to be able to communicate and talk with people. Ask questions, read timetables and fill out forms. Our whole world is steeped in literacy’.

(English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2)

Boldt argues that literacy can far exceed the academic needs of students, (Baker et al., 2013) and to quote LNLL, literacy is ‘for learning and life’ (DES 2011). Certainly there were many traditional and narrow views of literacy presented in this study yet it is important to acknowledge the broader understandings of literacy, albeit fewer in number, that were also shared by participants.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This research presents a systematic analysis of the expressions used by teachers as they spoke about their understanding of literacy as a concept. Like Bialostok’s study (2014), this research draws on teachers’ personal literacy history as well as on their professional attitudes and beliefs about literacy. Accepting that literacy is a complex and contested concept that has multiple meanings (Scribner 1984; Moje and Luke 2009; Hipwell and Klenowski 2011; Leu et al., 2011; Barone 2015), the analysis and presentation of the findings was framed by the definition of literacy outlined in LNLL, as the definition presented to participants tasked with implementing this national policy.
There is certainly variability in the way participants describe and define literacy, from instrumental to multifaceted, from a view of literacy as the ‘basics’ to a view that literacy is for life. However following analysis, this study would suggest that the dominant understanding of literacy is that it remains closely associated with reading and to a lesser extent, writing. MacMahon’s study (2012) reported that all subject teachers focused on the ability to read with the majority confining this to the reading of words only when asked to define literacy, with writing included by just over half of those interviewed. Similar findings are presented in this study. As outlined earlier, MacMahon’s study was conducted in three post-primary schools prior to the introduction of LNLL. While there may have been some subtle development in terms of how teachers perceive literacy, the picture of attitudes regarding reading and writing remain remarkably similar between these two Irish studies regarding literacy. 

Regarding oracy development, we appear to be on a journey in the Irish post-primary context. Some teachers value collaboration and discussion through group-work, acknowledge the importance of speaking and listening for confidence and view oracy as a life-skill that will serve all students well. However, it would be worthwhile to extend our understanding of talk and oracy beyond the ‘presentational talk’ that appears to be a marked feature of teachers’ understanding of oracy in this study.

Turning to multimedia and multiple modes of representation, the data from this study presents disconcerting findings regarding values about particular types of ‘text’. There appears to be a reliance on and legitimisation of predominantly printed, alphabetic texts and a lack of engagement with digital and multimodal texts. The book, (in particular, the printed, narrative fiction book given the emphasis on reading for pleasure among participants in this study) continues to be viewed as ‘the pinnacle of modern literate achievement’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.226). A potential explanation for this is two-fold. Firstly, this belief may stem from narrow and traditional views both of literacy and of text; literacy is perceived as reading, and to a lesser extent, writing while text is understood as print, in contrast to more contemporary understandings of text as anything that communicates meaning. On the other hand, there is a palpable sense of fear in the data that traditional, established reading practices are becoming much less prevalent. This might also contribute to a reinvigorated focus on reading traditional texts. Another form of
traditional print media, the newspaper, is also mentioned frequently, and like reading books, the reading of newspapers is positioned as a literacy practice with which students do not engage. Ironically, in our changing and technologised world, recent studies have reported that increasing numbers of people are accessing news and current affairs events online through social media, and Americans aged 18-29 are most likely to use apps such as Snapchat, Reddit and Instagram for news updates (Matsa and Shearer 2018). References to radio and television are sparse in the data. Multimodality, while the term itself is never used by participants, is explored by teachers from certain subject areas, primarily science and technology, and their collective understanding of literacy as one that incorporates graphicity is certainly in the minority. The emphasis on traditional print text, at the expense of multimodal and digital texts, is obvious. The understanding of text that is most evident in this study is in stark contrast to contemporary views of text as highlighted in the literature.

Referencing digital literacy in particular, Mills argues that ‘schools are confronted with the digital challenge- the challenge of embedding the new within the institution of schooling which historically privileges linguistic or alphabetic modes of meaning’ (Mills 2016, p.6). This obstacle certainly appears to exist in this study. Teachers typically voice the view that technology is at best, a way of transmitting information and at worst, a threat to the development of literacy, in keeping with a traditional understanding of literacy as print reading and writing. While some teachers commented on how new forms of communication are linked to literacy, there does not appear to be a conscious effort to promote the digital literacy competencies of students. This finding adds to recent reports regarding digital literacy development (MacMahon 2012; Reidy 2013) including the Interim Review on LNLL, which contends that digital literacy needs further attention (DES 2017).

The final aspect of the definition of literacy in LNLL addressed in this section concerned critical literacy. Understandings of literacy that were expressed in this study support a view of literacy that is closely aligned with comprehension and decoding; only one participant expressed an understanding that literacy serves a critical, analytical function, and that students need to be able to ‘interrogate’ texts (Serafini 2012) to examine the ideological assumptions that lie beneath. This
highlights that literacy, as perceived by participants in this study, is associated more with comprehension than with criticality.

This chapter aimed to interrogate teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy and highlights how, in keeping with international and national studies, ‘it is difficult to dislodge the term ‘literacy’ from its etymological roots in the concept of letter or alphabetic print’ (Moje 2000, p.655). The understandings discussed here are illustrative of ‘tightly framed definitions of literacy’ and the ‘persistence of old models of literacy education’ (Burnett and Merchant 2015). Accepting that teachers’ understanding of literacy as a concept influences their approaches to literacy as a classroom practice, that ‘their latent ideology becomes reality’ (Bialostok 2014, p.517), the next chapter examines teachers’ professional knowledge regarding literacy development through their pedagogical approaches to literacy in their practice.
6 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Knowledge of Literacy

6.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I consider the ‘practical tools’ - the classroom practices, strategies and resources (Grossman et al., 1999) - that teachers self-reported during interviews, offering an insight into participants’ professional knowledge of literacy as a practice.

Literacy teaching practices are often called ‘strategies’ (Moje 2008) and the strategies that teachers reported as useful for literacy development discussed here have been divided into ‘whole-school strategies’ and ‘in-class strategies’, although there is some overlap. This is because LNLL was promoted as a policy that should impact practice across schools, that ‘literacy… skills have to be carefully consolidated and developed throughout the junior and senior cycles in post-primary schools (DES 2011, p.10) and that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47). Therefore, I examine how literacy is promoted at a ‘whole-school’ level in the four schools in this study before exploring the strategies teachers reported as part of their daily classroom instruction. Relevant literature is utilised to illuminate these findings.
6.2 Some Insights from LNLL

To preface these findings, it is worth considering the discourse used in LNLL. Broadly speaking, LNLL as a policy promotes holistic, student centered and experiential learning experiences, referring to a ‘rounded and fulfilling educational experience’ and ‘the joy and excitement of getting ‘lost’ in a book’ (DES 2011, p.43). Interestingly, although referred to as ‘the national strategy to promote literacy’ (DES 2011), the document itself offers very little insight into classroom practice and pedagogy to support literacy. Of particular relevance in this study regarding literacy in the post-primary context is the fact that although the subtitle of the strategy refers to literacy ‘among children and young people’, there is no distinction made between these two different phases in literacy development and no acknowledgement of the unique literacy needs of adolescents or considerations for adolescent literacy development. Indeed, there is a lack of research cited to support some of the key elements (Murphy 2018) of the strategy, with no authors or bibliography to illustrate a credible evidence base. It actually offers teachers very little in terms of practical implementation, with a noticeable absence of models of or approaches for literacy development, such as those outlined in section 3.3.4 of this study. Such research informed and evidence-based theoretical frameworks would have been of considerable support to teachers in considering and implementing literacy strategies in their practice. Research relating to Disciplinary Literacy, for instance, would have been particularly suitable given the structure of post-primary schools into discrete subject areas.

Rather, there is repeated focus on ‘monitoring students… setting priorities… (and) learning outcomes’ in the policy document (DES 2011, pp.44-45). In fact, a significant segment of the policy is devoted to ‘assessment… data-gathering…standardised testing…performance in state examinations…and monitoring student progress’ (DES 2011, pp.73-84) and the only appendix included is entitled ‘Possible format for reporting of aggregated data from standardised assessments’ (DES 2011, p.87). Therefore, the word ‘strategy’ in the title is interesting as ironically, there is a clear lack of strategies for the teachers tasked with implementing it. In fact, Murphy argues that the policy is not a literacy strategy but a ‘literacy assessment strategy’ (2017). Furthermore, there is emphasis on the role of literacy in contributing to Ireland’s economic competitiveness, as outlined in the
introduction to this study. These observations, coupled with the earlier discussion of how literacy is framed as a construct in LNLL, are important when examining the strategies that teachers use in their practice.

6.3 **Whole-school Strategies to Promote Literacy Development**

As discussed earlier, the implementation of LNLL involved the adoption of whole-school literacy strategies, through SSE, that addressed the literacy needs of students and met the targets in a SIP. Analysis reveals the approaches identified by participants across the school and across departments. Based on their frequency in the dataset, they are organised under the thematic headings listed in Table 14 and discussed in the following paragraphs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Brief description of theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Identifying the keywords or language of different disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading initiatives</td>
<td>Any reading for pleasure strategy or initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making literacy visible</td>
<td>Efforts made across the school to visibly highlight the importance of literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-school Reading Comprehension strategies</td>
<td>References to how comprehension strategies are used across the school to support students’ literacy development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 14: Whole-School Strategies Reported in this Study*

In interpreting these findings, it would be a mistake to suggest that the strategies presented and discussed are the *only* strategies used by teachers; it may well be the case that other strategies are also being implemented. However, when asked about strategies that were being developed in their schools, these are the whole-school approaches and strategies that teachers discussed and therefore, the tentative conclusions drawn here are based on what was reported by participants.

**6.3.1 Keywords as the Dominant Literacy Strategy**

While conducting interviews and analysing the data in this study, it became obvious that there is a disproportionate reference to ‘keywords’, by far the most commonly reported literacy strategy, with 23 out of 26 participants reporting that they use keywords as an approach to literacy instruction either as part of their classroom practice or as a whole-school strategy. Thus the ‘keywords approach’ to literacy
development is something that warrants detailed interrogation in this study. Subsequent sections examine how keywords are used as a classroom strategy but here, some time is devoted to exploring the prevalence of this strategy as a whole-school approach to literacy development. I consider the term, discuss how keywords are utilised as a whole-school literacy strategy and finally, offer some possible reasons as to why there is such an emphasis on keywords in the data.

6.3.1.1 Conceptualising Keywords

The Oxford English dictionary defines the term ‘keyword’ as ‘a word or concept of great significance’ or ‘a word which acts as the key to a cipher or code’ (Oxford 2018). Such an understanding undoubtedly resonates when we consider the purpose and positioning of the phrase as used by participants in this study. The popular keywords approach may be attributable to a ‘keywords’ intervention that was developed by a Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) co-ordinator and advocated by the JCSP as a literacy initiative where students are challenged to learn keywords and key spellings across subject areas over a six week period. Some of the materials provided by professional support services to help teachers in promoting this intervention included ‘Keyword notebooks’ and ‘Keyword wall charts’ among other resources (JCSP 2015). The focus of the keywords approach is on spelling, word recognition, definitions and vocabulary building.

Other references to the concept concern ‘target words’ or ‘target vocabulary’ (Picot 2017) when speaking in general terms, and ‘academic language’ (Picot 2017) ‘specialist vocabulary’ (Milton 2008; Barton 2013; PDST 2013) ‘crucial vocabulary’ (Wray 2001), ‘subject terminology’ (MacMahon 2012) or ‘technical language’ (Gillis 2014) when related to a particular subject area or domain as is the case in post-primary education. Elsewhere, keywords are termed ‘academic vocabularies’, ‘technical vocabularies’ or simply ‘school words’ (Blachowicz et al., 2006). However, in their interrogation of the term ‘academic vocabulary’, Bauman and Graves argue that there is a ‘constellation of terms’ (2010, p.4) surrounding the phrase. While the terms mentioned above are used somewhat interchangeably in the literature, they argue that ‘domain-specific academic vocabulary’ is the term that most rightly aligns with the understanding of keywords as adopted in this study, understood as ‘content-specific terms and expressions found in content area
textbooks and other technical writing’ (2010, p.7). Bauman and Graves draw on the work of Marzano and Pickering, authors of a teacher's manual entitled ‘Building Academic Vocabulary’ (2005) that aims to assist teachers in implementing a comprehensive approach to teaching academic vocabulary in the US, to illustrate this point:

‘Teaching specific terms in a specific way is probably the strongest action a teacher can take to ensure that students have the academic background knowledge they need to understand the content they will encounter in school...students who understand the content in their state mathematics standards document regarding data analysis and statistics have an understanding of terms such as mean, median, mode, range, standard deviation, and central tendency. The more students understand these terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic. On the other hand, without a basic knowledge of these terms, students will have difficulty understanding information they read or hear’.

(2005, pp.1-2)

This understanding of a keywords approach to literacy development is something that I return to later in this section when I explore how teachers approach teaching such ‘specific terms’ in their disciplines.

6.3.1.2 **Keywords as a Whole-School Literacy Strategy**

Participants in all four schools regard keywords as part of their whole-school approach to literacy development. Focusing on Ash High as one example, Áine speaks about how ‘every classroom now is expected to have keywords’ (Art/SEN-Ash 2) and Donagh supports this by stating that ‘keywords lists would have been put up in all classrooms’ (Construction//DCG- Ash 6). Keywords charts and posters feature in many of the classrooms across the school (Áine, Art/SEN- Ash 2, Rionach, Religion- Ash 5) and teachers speak about ‘special boards put up beside our white boards’ to display the keywords (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4) or the practice of writing the keywords on boards or PowerPoint slides (Rionach, Religion-Ash 5). Such practices are also observed in the other research sites. In Birch College, Erin (English/History-Birch 2) comments on how ‘everybody pretty much works with keywords’ and in Cedar College, Sorcha remarks how ‘one of the things (we) would have tried to drive over the last few years would be the whole keyword thing... trying to get all teachers in all subjects to use (them)’ (English/History/SEN- Cedar 3).
6.3.1.3 Key **words as the ‘Hook’**

Drawing on the insights of two of the Literacy Link (LL) teachers who participated in this study, we gain an insight into another plausible explanation for the popularity of the keywords approach:

‘If you don’t have a hook for teachers and if you don’t simplify, then they go ‘well I don’t want literacy because it’s creating problems’. It’s a way ... to try to get everybody on board. We have some people completely and absolutely aware of literacy and trying to immerse themselves in it. Then you have people who just park it and (keywords is) as far as it goes’.

(Clóidhna, English/LL -Birch 5)

‘Keywords was something that we pushed because it was a handy one, because everyone was doing it... I’m sure if you walk around the classrooms you’ll see that everyone has them on their walls (and) you can see teachers saying ‘that’s literacy happening there on the wall’.

(Eoghan, English/Irish/LL -Elm 1)

The LL teachers believed that they needed a strategy that was straight-forward and easy to implement as a ‘hook’ or to get ‘buy-in’ from colleagues. In fact, such was the prevalence of this idea, of getting teachers to value and believe in literacy so as to invest in the whole-school approach to literacy development, that it is something we will return to in chapter seven when considering post-primary teachers’ experiences of policy implementation in this study. Regarding teachers’ knowledge about literacy, these insights suggest that the keywords approach may have been adopted because it was convenient; applicable to all subject areas in the post-primary setting, and perhaps didn’t require significant time to interrogate its use or to develop professional capacity for its implementation. Furthermore, it may have been perceived as less time-intensive in the classroom, as a strategy that would not detract from content learning. As the literature has highlighted, effective literacy development can take a considerable amount of time (Murnane et al., 2012; Warren-Kring and Warren 2013; Chauvin and Theodore 2015; Moje 2015; New Learning 2016g). Of course, such understandings may stem from traditional views of literacy as well as from a subscription to the ‘literacy-content dualism’ (Draper et al., 2005) where there is a belief that literacy is something ‘other’, something to be bolted-on to content learning in classrooms. Interestingly, there is no mention of keywords in LNLL and while the policy does make explicit reference to vocabulary building, it is presented as one aspect of language development with fluency and comprehension.
As explored in subsequent paragraphs, there is much less emphasis on these other aspects of literacy learning.

6.3.2 Reading Initiatives

The relationship between reading and literacy, as well as how participants value reading, has been discussed at length in the previous chapter. It may be unsurprising then that the second most commonly adopted approach to support literacy development in a whole-school sense concerns the promotion of reading initiatives.

The most commonly referenced programme is Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), referenced by teachers in all research sites, although precisely how DEAR operated and the reach of the initiative depends on each school’s context. In Birch College, DEAR happens in a specific class period that rotates weekly and therefore, can happen in any subject slot on the timetable. In Elm High, DEAR is the remit of English class time. Interestingly, in all schools, DEAR and other reading initiatives appear to be largely the preserve of junior cycle rather than senior cycle classes. This raises questions about the prevalence of the ‘vaccination model’ of literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) stemming from a belief that literacy is developed in the early years of education.

A number of other reading initiatives are mentioned. The ‘Reading Challenge’ that operates in Birch College, an initiative that involves students committing to read a certain number of books in a specified timeframe, is praised by participants. Sinéad (Maths/Science- Birch 8) describes it as ‘very good, a great idea, because a lot of students have forgotten books’. Iona (Irish- Birch 4) describes how ‘students love it! When you tell them to down tools... we’d tell them it’s reading time and... they’re so enthusiastic about getting the books’. Áine justifies the ‘Readathons’ that are promoted in Ash High, arguing that ‘having strong reading programmes is so important’ (Art/SEN-Ash 2). Gráinne explains how students in Cedar College are involved in a national initiative coordinated by the PDST called the ‘Well Read Award’ (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). Several teachers from the different schools spoke about employing cross-curricular strategies such as ‘A Book on the Go’ or ‘Book in the Bag’ initiative also (Eimear, English- Ash 1; Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Bronagh, Business- Birch 2; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL - Elm 1). In Elm High, Gobinet (English/Geography- Elm 5) organised a school book
club for students to attend on lunch-breaks and access to a school library is cited as a way to promote literacy across the school in both Ash High and Elm High.

Independent reading and reading for pleasure initiatives are presented in this study as one of the principle whole-school strategies to promoting literacy development. However, it is also interesting to note that such initiatives seem to remove reading from teachers’ pedagogy and classroom practice. When discussing how the reading initiatives operate, participants comment that while DEAR does happen the subject classroom under teachers’ supervision, it is very much independent on the part of the students in that teachers observe students reading, but this does not involve any instruction on the part of the teacher. Such a move may send messages that reading is something separate to students’ learning experiences in different subjects. Furthermore, all of these reading initiatives seem to reflect engagement with traditional text forms and position reading as silent, seated, linear and individual (Zamora 2016).

The literature contends that in-school free-reading programmes such as ‘Sustained Silent Reading’ (SSR) or ‘Free Voluntary Reading’ (Krashen 1989) or ‘Free Reading’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005) can support learning. Largely, the reading initiatives reported here promote ‘reading for pleasure’, leisure reading, independent reading or recreational reading (Clark and Rumbold 2006). Such approaches to literacy development have the potential to present many educational benefits and improve student achievement (Allington 2006; Clark and Rumbold 2006; Young and Moss 2006; Clark and De Zoysa 2011; Department for Education 2012; Sulkunen 2013; The Reading Agency 2015; Clark 2016; Smyth 2016; National Library of New Zealand 2017). However, it is important to problematise reading initiatives as a panacea for literacy development, particularly in light of the predominantly narrow understandings of literacy explored in the previous chapter where the term literacy is often used interchangeably and synonymously with reading. Literacy as understood in LNLL incorporates reading, but also writing, speaking and listening. An overwhelming focus on developing literacy through reading initiatives has the potential to copper-fasten traditional understandings of ‘literacy as reading’.

Furthermore, the focus of these reading initiatives seems to be on reading traditional print materials, more specifically, on reading books. The broad, though not universal understanding of literacy in this study aligns literacy with reading, and a very
particular type of reading practice; one that was usually independent, quiet and associated with reading books. However, a book is just one type of text and students need exposure to a balance of traditional print as well as texts regarded as aligning with the ‘new literacies’ as multimedia, multimodal and digital texts (Clark 2016; Garcia 2016). Indeed, choice is reported as a significant factor to promote student reading (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Rose 2006; The Reading Agency 2015) and effective literacy instruction must ‘make use of multiple forms of texts read for multiple purposes in a variety of learning situations’ (Alvermann 2002, p.203). As argued in section 2.5.5, it is essential that educators consider the types of texts utilised if they are to effectively support adolescent literacy development (IRA 2012) and an effective adolescent literacy pedagogy must include traditional print as well as non-traditional print and texts that extend beyond print text (Abrams and Gerber 2014).

The popularity of school-wide reading initiatives is indicative of an assumption that students have the knowledge and skills to be able to read independently. However, researchers argue that while avid readers need little more than access to books to promote reading, (Young and Moss, 2006) reluctant readers will need greater support and ‘mere exposure to texts is insufficient to help children become competent text users. Rather teachers will likely need to provide explicit instruction about how various texts are used, created, and negotiated’ (Draper et al., 2005, p.18). While reading for pleasure can be passive, effective reading instruction and strategies need to be active and responsive (Pressley and Gaskins 2006; Young and Moss 2006; Styslinger et al., 2014; Goldman et al., 2016). Indeed, ‘literacy needs to be facilitated by the teacher as an integral part of instructional time… assigning reading and writing to be accomplished out of class will not do the trick’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.8). This is supported by calls for ‘overt instruction’ (Cazden et al., 1996, p.88) to support students’ literacy development. A metview of the findings of three research projects that focused on reading for understanding for middle-grade and high-school readers in the US concluded that in particular, ‘continued instruction in reading’ (Goldman et al., 2016, p.262) is essential to support adolescent literacy development.

Certainly, the reading initiatives referenced by participants align quite well with an Authentic Literacy Pedagogy, where students are immersed in the experience of
reading and quite often, afforded opportunities to read books of their choosing (Kalantzis et al., 2016; New Learning 2016G; New Learning 2016H). However, there are implications for effective literacy practice. Students need to be able to read for purpose as well for pleasure, requiring teachers to set explicit and intentional purposes for reading:

’Sudents need structured opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills required to meet these content, text, and task challenges. To assume otherwise implies that students can do much of the work of reading to learn independently, with little instruction guidance, or feedback from teachers’.

(Goldman et al., 2016, p.256)

Schmitt (2008) argues that the most effective way of improving the incidental learning that may take place while engaged in reading for pleasure is to reinforce it with explicit learning post-task. The importance of follow-up activities to support the development of students’ language proficiency may also help motivate students (Milton 2008). Krashen highlights how students who engage in follow-up activities and tests ‘make gains superior to incidental readers’ (1989, p.454) as they provide opportunities for ‘both vocabulary recycling and reading comprehension’ (Tran 2006, p.160). Michéal makes reference to how, as part of their English programme of study, 1st year students engage in ‘one dedicated reading class a week, where they just read their own books whatever they want. They read and they do a book report then at the end of the month’ (English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). However, assigning purposes for reading and follow-up activities did not feature strongly in the dataset, as explored in further detail when considering teachers classroom practice.

However, it is important to note that over-reliance on independent reading programmes can be problematic. The impression of how these programmes are structured gleaned from this study is that reading for pleasure happens as separate from classroom instruction, without follow-up activities or monitoring of student learning. Participants also report that the successful implementation of reading initiatives is highly dependent on a number of contextual factors, explored in chapter seven, that include support from school leaders, buy-in from colleagues, adequate resourcing and whole-school commitment to supporting reading as a valuable part of students’ educational experience. Cremin draws on findings from two phases of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) project Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers, a study which involved a survey of 1200 teachers’
reading habits and their knowledge and use of children's literature, to support her argument that schools need ‘an effective pedagogy for reading for pleasure’ (Cremin 2011, p.16). This would necessitate careful consideration regarding how and why we employ particular initiatives and the implications of these choices. Furthermore, while there is no doubt about the merits of reading initiatives such as those discussed in this research, it is also important to acknowledge what is absent in participants’ discussion of reading for pleasure; namely students’ engagement with a wide variety of different types of texts. Repeated references are made to print texts, reinforcing traditional perceptions of text and contradicting aspirations in the literature, in research and in policy documents to expose students to a variety of text types, including non-fiction, informational and expository texts, multimodal and digital texts. Reading, as explored here in relation to reading initiatives, is associated primarily with reading print, narrative fiction books.

6.3.3 Making Literacy Visible

The idea of ‘making literacy visible’ (MacMahon 2014) is a theme that runs through much of the data, as creating literacy awareness in schools was another approach to whole-school literacy development. Participants speak about purposefully erected ‘keyword white-boards’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Síle Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3), and visual displays of keyword charts and posters (Áine, Art/SEN- Ash 2; Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Donagh, Construction/DCG- Ash 6; Róisín, English/Religion-Birch 9; Sorcha, English/History/SN- Cedar 3; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1; Gearóid, English/Geography/SN- Elm 2; Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5; Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). Rionach makes reference to a ‘word-wall’ she created in her classroom (Religion- Ash5), Shannon speaks about displaying articles on notice boards to promote awareness for staff and students (French/Spanish- Elm 4) and Róisin mentions how screens in the welcome hall of the school draw attention to whole-school reading initiatives (English/Religion- Birch 9). Michéal speaks about how the English department co-ordinate ‘Spelling Bee’ competitions between different class-groups (English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). Gobinet explains how she organised a ‘Literacy Week’ in an effort to promote awareness around literacy in Elm High, an initiative that involved all first year and some second year students:
On the Monday, we had a ‘Drop Everything and Read’ and made posters... Then on the Tuesday, we got an author in to do a guest speaker... On the Tuesday afternoon, we did word-orienteeering... so I laminated loads of words and phrases, stuck them outside in different colours... (students would) go around and find all the colours, find the words, rejumble the words back into phrases and find out what the sentence was... So they loved that then because that was completely active, they were mad for it! And the TYs were outside helping as well because it was like all of first year, so it was 100 students outside, going mad for literacy (laughs) and then, the Wednesday, they had ah, a fake-out game... so I gave them three definitions and a words, and they had to figure out which definition was correct’.

(English/Geography - Elm 5)

Another frequently mentioned whole-school approach concerned whole-department efforts to make literacy visible as part of their subject planning and 11 teachers made explicit reference to making literacy visible in their planning documentation. Such practices made teachers feel that literacy was certainly more visible in their practice across the school. Taken collectively, such efforts to create word-rich environments (Blachowicz et al. 2006) highlight the heightened awareness regarding literacy in schools and the conscious effort to highlight the importance and value of literacy.

6.3.4 Whole-school Reading Comprehension Strategies

Based on the earlier discussion around reading initiatives and accepting that explicit rather than implicit literacy instruction is advocated in the literature, it is noted that two teachers do make unambiguous reference to the importance of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies. Erin speaks about how across the school ‘everybody works with KWL strategies’ (English/History - Birch 2). KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know and What I’ve Learned) is a prior knowledge activation technique (Ogle 1986) that can support student reading by guiding them in their navigation of a text. It is an active reading strategy that allows the teacher to establish what students already know, as well as promote students’ comprehension skills like prediction and being able to monitor their own understanding. Similarly, Cliodhna refers to a ‘Paired Reading’ strategy promoted across the school (English/LL –Birch 5) where students take turns reading aloud and provide each other with feedback as a way to monitor comprehension. Paired or Partner Reading is an evidence-based strategy used with readers who lack fluency to provide a model of fluent reading and help students learn decoding skills.

Interestingly, both teachers are English teachers in Birch College. Conscious and explicit efforts to promote reading and comprehension through such strategies
suggest that teachers are very aware that if students struggle to decode and read fluently, they will undoubtedly struggle to access texts. This came to the fore in conversations with many of the teachers in Birch College regarding the reading ages of their students and a very real problem in accessing some of the textbooks that were used in the school. The use of explicit strategies such as those referenced here present students with a guided approach to reading, one that is important to apprentice students into reading practices and to support their reading as part of literacy development. These were the only explicit references made to awareness of overt instruction in reading comprehension in the whole-school space. In the main, when teachers spoke about promoting and teaching reading in this study, they spoke about the reading for pleasure initiatives explored earlier.

The overwhelming focus on reading as part of literacy development was also apparent in teachers’ reports of literacy practices in their classrooms and I now turn to examine the strategies reported.

6.4 Classroom Strategies to Promote Literacy Development

As outlined in chapter four, participants were asked 11 questions as part of the interview schedule (See Appendix D) and two in particular focused on the strategies they use for literacy development in their individual classroom practice:

- What do you understand by literacy strategies in the classroom?
- Are there any particular literacy strategies that you find effective?

These questions aimed to examine teachers’ professional knowledge in relation to literacy development by exploring the practical tools (Grossman et al., 1999) or ‘strategies’ (Moje 2008) they employ through their ‘overt’ classroom instruction:

‘Overt instruction ... includes all those active interventions on the part of the teacher and other experts that scaffold learning activities, that focus the learner on the important features of their experiences and activities within the community of learners and that allow the learner to gain explicit information at times when it can most usefully organise and guide practice, building on and recruiting what the learner already knows and has accomplished’.

(Cazden et al., 1996, p.86)

It is important to reiterate that in the findings presented and discussed here, it is not suggested that these strategies are the only strategies used by teachers but rather that
the strategies reported are the ones explicitly stated by teachers or alluded to as they discussed their practice. Again, it could be argued teachers employ other strategies but these are the strategies that teachers referenced and therefore, the tentative conclusions drawn here are based on what was reported.

6.4.1 Pedagogical Knowledge

Even during the data collection phase, it became apparent that some teachers felt quite uncomfortable reporting on the strategies that they use in their classrooms to promote literacy development, suggesting that some participants’ level of knowledge regarding literacy development is quite low. Áine feels that ‘a lot of teachers do a lot of strategies that they’re not aware of the names’ (Art/SEN- Ash 2) and a number of participants openly express how they sometimes struggled to name what they are doing. For instance, Brendan remarks

‘when people start talking about strategies and all that, that goes over my head now to be perfectly honest. Now at the same time ... we are doing it but it’s just I’m not good for labelling them... putting it into theory... I don’t have all the fancy lingo. (Students) are prepared... Just don’t ask me to prepare a report about what I’m doing’.

(Business/Maths/History - Ash 3)

This feeling of uncertainty about ‘labelling’ strategies is echoed by participants in the other research sites. Máire (History/Maths/SEN, Birch 1) speaks at length about the many strategies she uses on a daily basis, yet concedes that she might not have been using the ‘proper words’ to describe them. Síle comments

‘I find it hard to exactly, am (pause) ‘name’ what I’m doing literacy wise... (laughs) When I’m actually put on the spot, I’m kind of going, yeah, what am I actually-? You know, I’m thinking of the list of things, and I’m going... it’s hard to... to name it’.

(Religion/Geography, SPHE- Elm 3)

Eamon succinctly and openly acknowledges this dilemma when he responds to my question with ‘I’m probably using literacy but I don’t know it’ (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2). This study highlights how many participants struggled to name strategies they were using in their practice, raising the question of whether or not ‘naming’ strategies is important. The literature contends that teachers need to possess content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1986), and one hallmark of a professional is that they are ‘capable not only of practicing and understanding his or her craft, but of
communicating the reasons for professional decisions and actions to others… of explaining why something is done’ (Shulman 1986, p.13). Similarly, Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) argue that conscious skill development is essential for teachers to create effective learning environments and an important aspect of this is not only being aware of strategies we use but also, being able to rationalise why we are choosing and using them. They contend that teaching is one of the most demanding and complex professions in terms of the level of skill expected, ‘too complex and important for teachers not to be thoughtful (consciously skilled) in their decisions and actions’ (2001, p.15). Others contend that meta-awareness is crucial to a teacher’s professional understanding of pedagogy (Mercer 2006). Without the ability to name the practice or strategy, there is less of an opportunity for participants in this study to discuss and share practice with colleagues but furthermore, it is difficult to make literacy learning explicit for students.

6.4.2 Teacher Confidence Regarding Literacy Development

The obvious nature of these admissions across the dataset raises the issue of teacher confidence regarding literacy. As indicated in the literature review, a number of international studies highlight how secondary teachers often feel ill-prepared to be literacy teachers (Draper et al., 2005; Fisher and Ivey 2005; Park and Osborne 2006; McCoss-Yerigan and Krepps 2010). In the Irish context, MacMahon’s study involving post-primary teachers concluded that ‘subject teachers lack the professional knowledge to support students with literacy difficulties’ (2014, p.25). The findings of this study align with those in previous studies. While conducting interviews and during data-analysis, there are repeated references to how participants feel inadequately prepared to embed literacy strategies in their classes; that they find it ‘challenging’ (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3), that ‘it’s easier to implement the numeracy into the business plan and it’s harder to do the literacy part… I’m sure it could be improved’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4), and that ‘you need to be informed before you can do it’ (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm2). There is a palpable sense of uncertainty in how some participants describe their experience of learning to be literacy teachers:

‘Well I think I’ve taken it on board- maybe I could be taking it on board better or doing it in a different way, I’m not sure- am- maybe it’s the only way I know of, maybe there are other ways and I think that maybe that if we knew of other ways and were shown other ways of how you could incorporate literacy in your particular
subject... I suppose (pause) I need to be more competent definitely. Confident? Maybe I am and I’m not aware of it, maybe I’m not. I haven’t really thought about it. But I definitely need to be more competent’.

(Donagh, Construction/DCG- Ash 6)

‘Yeah, well I think that I prepared myself...well this is all coming from what I learned, what I saw in teachers that I observed or teachers that I had myself or my parents, I never learned...(to be a literacy teacher) No, no. I learned it myself’.

(Eoghan, English/Irish/LL - Elm 1)

LNLL stipulated that explicit reference to literacy instruction needed to form part of ITE programmes to ‘develop the teachers’ knowledge, understanding and ability to apply educational theory and research effectively in practice, especially in the areas of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.30). However, only one teacher in this study, Gobinet, engaged in any formal training in terms of literacy development as part of her ITE programme. This is hardly surprising given that LNLL itself states that

‘most post-primary teachers complete a nine-month university-based postgraduate course as their initial teaching qualification. This course is of insufficient duration to adequately prepare the great majority of post-primary teachers for developing effectively the skills required to teach or progress their students’ literacy and numeracy skills or to support the integration of the teaching of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum’.

(DES 2011, p.32)

The literature makes clear links between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and their practices (Louden and Rohl 2006; Murphy et al., 2013). Ozder (2011) explores how novice teachers who had high teacher self-efficacy beliefs are more capable of using instructional strategies effectively and facilitating student participation and are less likely to use direct teaching (p.1). As explored in chapter five, with the exception of Gobinet, the only teachers afforded formal CPD were the LL teachers through their engagement with the cascade model of CPD, and issues regarding this are explored in detail in chapter seven. The significance of this finding is central in this study; it is argued that if teacher confidence regarding literacy strategies is low, then they are less likely to implement them in their practice. With this in mind, it is pertinent to consider the literacy strategies that teachers reported as effective in their classroom practice. As illustrated in Table 15, they are varied and diverse but for the purpose of analysis and discussion, strategies were grouped and categorised in the first column.
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Strategy/Teaching Resource</th>
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<td>Posters</td>
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<td>Word-Attack Strategies</td>
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<td>SQ3R</td>
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<td>Skimming/Scanning</td>
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<td>DEAR (Drop Everything and Read)</td>
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<td>Paired-Reading</td>
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<td>Use of Textbooks</td>
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<td>Use of Online/YouTube videos</td>
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<td>Images and Visual Aids</td>
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<td>Subject Related Magazines</td>
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<td>Explicit Instruction of Grammar</td>
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<td>Graphical Representations (drawings, diagrams, comics)</td>
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<td>Use of a Word Processor to Check Spelling/Grammar</td>
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<td>Oral / Aural Strategies</td>
<td>Group/Pair Work (e.g. Think-Pair-Share, Placemats, etc.)</td>
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<td>Highlight/Pre-Teach Keywords</td>
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<td>Success Criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practicing Exam Style Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams Paper Language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rote Learning Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rote-Learning Notes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling Strategies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Down Notes/ taking notes from the Board</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill/Repetition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Chalk and talk’</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 15: Strategies Reported by Participants*
These categories are graphically presented in the bar chart below in Figure 23:

![Bar Chart](image)

*Figure 23: Categories based on Strategies Reported by Participants*

As illustrated in Figure 23, keyword strategies and reading strategies were, respectively, by far the most frequently discussed strategies that teachers self-reported. This section will focus the discussion on an in-depth exploration of the data that relates specifically to keyword strategies and reading strategies while offering a limited discussion of the less dominant strategies.

### 6.4.3 Keyword Strategies

As explored in section 6.3, the keywords strategy is the primary whole-school approach to literacy development in all four schools. It is, by far, the single most frequently referenced literacy strategy in the study, with 23 of 26 participants making explicit reference to it in their practice. Bridget states how ‘*keywords would be my main (strategy) to be honest, from a literacy point of view*’ (Business/LCVP-Ash 4), something that is implied by the majority of participants.
6.4.3.1 Teachers’ Understanding of Keywords as a Concept

Theories regarding academic language, the ‘domain-specific academic vocabulary’ (Bauman and Graves 2010) students need to understand so that they can successfully navigate the demands of different disciplines, were discussed at length in the previous section of this chapter. In this study, it is clear that many participants’ views align with Marzano and Pickering’s argument about the importance of ‘teaching specific terms’ (2005, pp1-2) and this certainly appears to be the understanding of keywords by participants in this study, as the central words, ideas or concepts of a topic or unit of learning. Indeed, 16 of the 26 participants view literacy as ‘subject specific’. Donagh refers to the ‘technicality’ of the language in his subjects, Materials Technology Wood (MTW) and Design and Communication Graphics (DCG), and comments that students might not encounter it outside of his classroom so he finds it useful to highlight keywords or put them in a poster. ‘I suppose it’s very technical… I suppose the language isn’t that difficult to understand, there are maybe difficult terms’ (Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6).

The nuanced nature of different subject areas is clear as participants explain how topics within subjects have their own specific language. Ryanne gives explicit examples in her discussion of the keywords associated with ‘world religions’ in her religion class:

‘The terminology now in religion is very difficult. Really difficult…We have a lot of ‘m’s in the world religions; ‘M’ for Mohammad, ‘M’ for Mosque; M for Mecca, ‘M’ for monotheistic religion.’

(Religion- Cedar 4)

Similarly, Bridget (Business/LCVP- Ash 4) speaks about how students confuse the word ‘shareholder’ with ‘stakeholder’ in a 5th Year Business class, leading her to return to the keywords approach that she would have utilised with her junior classes and she concluded that ‘there is definitely a different literacy and language for Business’. As a result, pre-teaching the key vocabulary is a literacy strategy adopted by teachers in this study. Gráinne discusses her approach in English class:
‘I suppose you’re starting with basic things, things like keywords, ensuring that they have the language for each section that they might need. So if it was a novel... we are going to be talking about characters, we are going to be talking about setting. Whereas when we are doing speeches... I’m teaching them the language of persuasive writing and actually giving them lists and examples of triples, imperatives ... rhetorical questions’.

(English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1)

Sinéad (Science/Maths- Birch 8) maintains that without the keywords, students are ‘never going to understand new science concepts or new maths concepts...they just look at me and say, ‘she’s just speaking science”’. Such an awareness of ‘the language of my subject’ (Donagh, Construction/DCG- Ash 6; Iona, Irish- Birch 4) illustrates the centrality of keywords for participants in this study. Indeed, Máire refers to how post-primary teachers are ‘really more interested in subject-based literacy’ (History/Maths/SEN-Birch 1).

Advocates of DL highlight the importance of teaching ‘specialised vocabulary’, one of the tools that discipline-experts use (Moje 2007; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008; Chauvin and Theodore 2015), and these findings suggest that teachers are aware of the nuanced nature of subject areas- that rather than there being one ‘literacy’, there are many ‘literacies’- and the need to teach specialised vocabulary. However, there are also limitations to how well lists of isolated and decontextualised terminology can meet the literacy needs of students in the post-primary setting. As Moje reminds us ‘subject-matter learning is not merely learning about the stuff of the disciplines, it is also about the processes and practices by which that stuff is produced’ (Moje 2007 p.10). This is explored in more depth in subsequent paragraphs.

6.4.3.2 **Keywords in Action**

Participants report different ways of promoting vocabulary; displaying words on white-boards, posters and flashcards, glossing the keywords in anticipation or pre-teaching activities, or highlighting them while reading passages of text. Rionach speaks about how she uses the keywords as an anchor to explore the content of the topics she was exploring in her religion classes:
You use your keywords and throughout the lesson, you would come back to the words and give definitions and make sure that they are able to understand the words and spell them and that they are able to use them in context.

(Religion- Ash 5)

A strategy commonly reported was creating lists or banks of words, sometimes in special-purpose notebooks. Several teachers make reference to keyword notebooks, one teacher actually bringing an example of the notebook that she uses with her to the interview (Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8), although they took many different forms from specific notebooks, to hardbacks, to dedicated sections in copies. As is illustrated in Figure 24, keyword notebooks, keyword lists and word banks proved popular in participants’ discussion about keywords in their classrooms.

Figure 24: How Keywords are used by Participants

Iona speaks passionately about how she encourages students in her Irish classes to keep ‘a little notebook for vocab’, an instructional strategy embedded in her practice:

‘I kind of set a routine with all my classes that whatever topic we’re covering, that they’d have their keywords relevant to that topic; they’d go home and learn those. We would revise those again orally and for spellings and then I’d examine them... I suppose their notebook is their bible... and all their vocab is in that, relevant to each topic’.

(Irish- Birch 4)
In a similar way, Ryanne explores how she uses keywords in a word bank by explaining how in their religion textbook, students

‘have a literacy library and at the end of the chapter they have key concepts and definitions... So I would basically go about explaining those and get them to transfer those into the hardback so they would be very important then and they’d be tested on those’.

(Religion- Cedar 4)

Certainly, the use of vocabulary notebooks is endorsed as a useful strategy to promote vocabulary development (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995; Tran 2006; Walters and Bozkurt 2009). Part of their popularity as a learning tool among participants in this study may have emerged from the fact that such notebooks are available to schools as part of the aforementioned JCSP literacy initiative. As well as this, commercial products have also become widely available with some school textbook companies producing ‘Keyword Notebooks’. A vocabulary notebook, or in this study, a keyword notebook, might be best described as

‘a kind of personal dictionary; learners record the words they encounter, along with their meanings and any other aspect of the word deemed important, such as part of speech, other word forms, collocates, synonyms, antonyms, and perhaps a context sentence’.

(Walters and Bozkurt 2009, p.404)

Vocabulary notebooks have potential to yield significant improvement in learning target words (Walters and Bozkurt 2009). They can promote deep mental processing of vocabulary through the organisational capacity afforded by creating semantic maps and organisational trees, as well as the opportunity recycle words that are deemed important, thereby consolidating their language learning and conceptual understanding (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995; Blachowicz et al., 2006). However students need to be actively involved in creating them and instruction needs to be definitional and contextual (Blachowicz et al., 2006). Furthermore vocabulary notebooks should not ‘replace other forms of vocabulary learning such as extensive reading, learning implicitly through task work, or explicit vocabulary exercises, so much as supplement them by focusing on a limited subset of words’ (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995, p.133). If not fully exploited, vocabulary notebooks become a mere word store or replica of a textbook.
6.4.3.3 **Repeated Exposure to Keywords**

Terms such as ‘recycling’ (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995; Tran 2006; Milton 2008), ‘rehearsal’ (Nakata 2008) and ‘reinforcing’ (Blachowicz *et al.*, 2006) are used extensively in the literature to refer to the importance of repeated exposure to vocabulary. Schmitt (2008) argues that learners need to encounter words between seven and ten times while Nation (1990, pp. 43-45) maintains that it could take anything between five and sixteen encounters with a word for it to be perceived as ‘learned’. Indeed, much of the literature relating to vocabulary instruction promotes consolidation through repetition, as advocated by Schmitt who maintains that ‘meeting a word in different contexts enhances what is known about it, which improves quality of knowledge, and additional exposure helps consolidate it in memory’ (2008).

Participants report using reinforcement techniques such as drill/repetition (seven participants), spelling strategies (nine participants), taking down notes from the board (five participants) and rote-learning notes (four participants). Donagh speaks about the need to consolidate ‘the language that is used in the book’ with keyword lists and posters so that ‘students see them every day when they come into class and it kind of eventually - I think it begins to sink in’ (Construction/DCG-Ash 6). Bronagh (Business- Birch 3) offers an anecdote regarding her approach to teaching the difference between limited or unlimited liability and how ‘you have to work on it... they weren’t going to understand it without me explaining it and working on it and we will work on it over the course’. Sinéad speaks about when she introduces students to new words, ‘you’re trying to repeat and repeat and repeat them... repetition is a lot of it’ (Science/Maths - Birch 8). MacMahon also reported frequent use of repetition by teachers regarding the subject terminology and key concepts in their subjects in the post-primary setting (2012, p.208).

As a literacy strategy, repeated exposure is supported in the literature. Goldman and her colleagues argue that presenting key concepts and vocabulary multiple times ‘ensure familiarity, develop fluency, and deepen students’ understanding of their centrality of the topic’ (2016, p.260). Frey *et al.* (2016) contend that the key to acquisition and consolidation in learning is memorisation, rehearsal and repetition through much direct instruction by the teacher and Schmitt (2008) contends that frequent exposure to the word in various contexts is crucial to promote students’
understanding. However, the same authors warn that ‘memorisation is simply an entry point’ (Frey et al., 2016, p.568) and ‘surface learning’, whereas ‘deep learning’ can only occur once students understand facts and principles of the concepts, and by having opportunities to engage in ‘planning, organisation, elaboration and reflection of conceptual knowledge’ (Frey et al., 2016, p.571). CAL strategies that could support such learning include concept mapping, discussion and questioning, reciprocal teaching and metacognitive strategies with the teacher positioned more in the role of facilitation than direct instruction (Frey et al., 2016, p.571).

6.4.3.4 Problematising a Keywords Approach

There is little doubt about the centrality of keywords in terms of teachers’ strategies for literacy development in this study and keywords are the ‘buzzword’ (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5). In the data, there is a proliferation of this word and when asked to discuss the strategies they use, the keyword strategy was the first port of call for many participants while for others, it was their main strategy for literacy development. However, therein lies the rub; meaningful literacy learning involves ‘teaching-not just using- the specialist vocabulary of our subject’ (Barton 2013, p.4). While the evidence base for explicit vocabulary learning is strong in the literature (Schmitt and Schmitt 1995; Blachowicz et al., 2006; Tran 2006; Schmitt 2008; Bauman and Graves 2010; Picot 2017), and there is value to organising the technical vocabulary of subjects into lists and word banks, vocabulary notebooks and on posters (Picot 2017), it is likely to be insufficient as the sole or main approach. In relation to spelling in particular, Culligan argues that context is crucial as the only place where we will see improvement in spelling is in free writing rather than in lists of words (2017). Over-reliance on word-lists and word-banks can reduce the complex and technical language of each subject area, ‘a system of signs used by human beings to construct meaning’ (Wray 2001, p.12), into something discrete, into decontextualized product or ‘content’. In fact, Smagorinsky argues that ‘studying language in isolation from usage (is) fruitless and often counterproductive’ (2015, p.145).

The fact that participants are aware of the nuanced language of their subject area is certainly a good starting point with a disciplinary approach to literacy development. However, this also requires consideration of the discipline specific ways in which
students read, write, speak and listen in subject areas (Moje 2007). Close examination of the strategies teachers employ is necessary to adequately prepare students to handle the different types of text associated with the discipline (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012), but also to ensure that they are authentic and domain specific literacy practices (Gillis 2014). As Moje argues

‘learning the definitions of the technical language of disciplinary subjects is not as useful, for example, if students are not engaged in disciplinary inquiry, because they have no way to apply the language they are learning’.

(2015, p.255)

This view is supported by Wray who criticises the ‘infusion’ approach that employs generic strategies to promote literacy across content areas on the basis that the sociocultural and context-specific nature of learning in different subject areas by stating that

‘literacy involves particular social practices of reading and writing texts in a range of contexts. It is not an independent set of skills, applied differently on different occasions but is inseparable from the social practices in which it is embedded’.

(2001, p.12)

Effective literacy instruction necessitates that keywords are taught in the context of the discipline, in a manner that is integrated rather than isolated. What seems to be absent from teachers’ practice concerning keywords in this study is an acknowledgement that ‘it is not just the ‘crucial vocabulary’ that is different, but also the texts students read and the texts students are expected to write (Wray 2001, p.15). Moje points to how the term ‘discipline’ is more than a synonym for ‘subject’ or ‘content area’ but rather are domains or cultures in which certain kinds of texts are read and written for certain purposes and thus require certain kinds of literacy practices (O Brien et al., 1995; Moje 2015).

Furthermore, presenting students with lists of technical terms subscribes to the ‘pedagogy of telling’ (Sizer 1984; O Brien et al., 1995) and aligns more with a Didactic Literacy Pedagogy (NewLearning 2016c). It is unlikely to promote engagement with or understanding of complex concepts since ‘evidence has accumulated that teaching cognitive skills in the absence of specific content rarely works’ (Resnick 2010, p.186). An overwhelming reliance on a keywords approach and strategies that focus on vocabulary building, as evidenced among the majority of
participants in this study, also means that other pedagogies and approaches, such as sociocultural or critical approaches, (Fang 2012) may be overlooked.

Indeed, it would appear that the keywords strategy draws quite heavily on the linguistic approach to literacy development (Fang 2012). However, even within this approach, there seems to be an overwhelming emphasis on vocabulary building rather than on decoding, fluency or text structure. Mehigan argues that the list of word learning strategies is ‘probably endless’ (Dublin City FM 2012) and relying so extensively on keywords approaches, as outlined here, may be limited in scope. For instance, rather than relying on ‘an overemphasis on the rote memorisation of discrete bits of information’, central to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning is the aspiration to keep ‘essential principles and recurring concepts at the centre’ of learning (Brooks and Brooks 1999, p.23). Therefore, ‘students need to develop independent strategies for dealing with the new words they will meet in school, in work and in other areas of life’ (Blachowicz et al., 2006, p.529). Some suggestions include developing student ability to examine the context of words, to consider the structure and morphology of the word itself and to consult a reference. These views align with the CPD supports offered to LL teachers that promoted activating prior knowledge, explicit vocabulary instruction and purposeful reading (PDST 2013) as well as morphology, morphemic awareness and explicit models of instruction relating to comprehension (PDST 2014), strategies that are largely absent in the data relating to teachers’ classroom practices. Interestingly a ‘keywords approach’ was not highlighted as part of this CPD programme. In fact, only one participant in this study speaks explicitly about such ‘Word-attack strategies’ (Deacon and Kirby 2004) that relate to etymology and morphology, and it is worth noting that Gráinne was the LL teacher, therefore attended LL CPD. Gráinne describes how she used it in her practice by

‘breaking down components of the word, (asking students) is there any word you recognise in it? Take your time, ask a question, look it up, re read the word- all those kind of pieces’.

(Geography/English/LL-Cedar 1)

This presents an interesting finding in relation to ‘Cascade Model’ of CPD that was used to support the implementation of LNLL, highlighting how central messages can
become diluted or lost as they ‘cascade’ from one level to the next, something that is explored in greater detail in chapter seven.

Finally, while teachers made frequent reference to ‘keywords’ and their importance, few teachers explored the rationale behind this popular approach to literacy instruction. Participants generally didn’t explain why they used keywords or why they thought they were a valuable literacy development strategy. Perhaps their popularity stems from the fact that, as suggested in 7.3.1, the keywords approach was viewed as a ‘generic’ strategy that could work in all subject areas. Another possible explanation for its popularity might be that it is the legacy of JCSP initiatives and the fact that it was already in the system. While it has value, an over-reliance on it as ‘the’ approach coupled with the conceptual understanding of keywords as described by participants here, potentially ‘ignores the wider subject literacy demands, practices and genres over which students are expected to have control, and the range of approaches and institutional frameworks that are available to inform support’ (MacMahon 2012, p.234).

6.4.4 Reading Strategies

While the greatest number of participants referenced keywords, the most frequently referenced strategies reported across the dataset are categorised as reading strategies. This is hardly surprising given the notable emphasis in teachers’ conceptual understanding of literacy as closely associated with, and sometimes synonymous with, reading. 118 separate references to reading were coded across 26 sources making it the most commonly coded term during data coding and analysis.

Table 16 illustrates how 24 different reading strategies and resources were identified in the dataset. While I do not explore each individually here, what follows is a synthesised discussion of these reading resources and strategies to examine how participants reported on ‘reading’ as part of literacy development in their classroom.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Resource/Strategy</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images and Visual Aids</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Textbooks</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading for Pleasure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Access to the Library</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphical Representations (drawings, diagrams, comics)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KWL</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skimming/Scanning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEAR (Drop Everything and Read)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Related Magazines</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit Instruction of Grammar</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired-Reading</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Reading (teacher modelling/think aloud)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PowerPoint Presentations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Online/YouTube videos</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNIP Literacy Programme</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-Attack Strategies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ3R</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Class Reading a Text in Class</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Reading Exercises</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read-Aloud</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed Activities Related to Reading (DARTS)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking Down Components of the Word</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of a Word Processor to Check Spelling/Grammar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 16: Reading Strategies and Reading Resources Reported by Participants*
6.4.4.1 Reading Resources

Section 5.4.1 outlines a number of the reading resources that teachers employ in their classroom practice relating to literacy development. Textbooks are widely viewed as a resource and support for literacy learning. Certainly, the dominance of textbooks is often critiqued with an argument that ‘in transmission classrooms, texts (like teachers) are viewed as dispensers of knowledge (and) … subject matter textbooks are often the de facto curriculum’ (Alvermann 2002, p.201). However, in this study there was not an obvious over-reliance on textbooks and they are viewed as one resource or support for learning. Máire describes how the history book they use at junior cycle is ‘an old book but a lovely book, one that is very much based on pictures and cloze tests and lots of questions’ (History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1) illustrating how textbooks can support multimodal learning as well as guided reading and writing and comprehension skills. As part of their overt instruction, many teachers in this study blend the use of the textbook with a number of other print materials. Donagh (Construction/DCG- Ash 6) mentions how he uses articles from a woodworking magazine or a construction studies magazine to support student learning, while Shannon (Spanish/French- Elm 4) speaks about making Spanish and French magazines as well as graphic novels such as ‘Asterix’ available to her students. Indeed, another strategy that is proportionately high in frequency was the use of images, visual aids, graphical representations, PowerPoint presentations that incorporate images, video, audio and text and the use of online video to support literacy development. Donagh, Donal and Enda are all teachers of Technology subjects and as explored earlier, they are keenly aware of the graphical nature of their subjects; of the demands of the discipline such as reading drawings (Donal, Engineering/DCG), demonstrating understanding through sketches (Donagh, Construction/DCG) or labelling a diagram of a blast-furnace (Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG). In English class, Sorcha speaks about supporting students with literacy difficulties by using a comic version of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ (English/History/SEN- Cedar 3). Alvermann argues that approaches that employ a mix of textbooks, magazines, student-generated texts, hypermedia productions, visuals, and so on can be used to extend the curriculum and support students’ literacy development (2002, p.201). Chapter five concludes that there is an overwhelming emphasis in the data on reading traditional alphabetic print and while this also seems
to be the case here, some of the reading resources reported by teachers might be indicative of a move towards a more ‘multimodal’ understanding of literacy and an acknowledgement of many forms of legitimate representation.

This is something to be welcomed. The tendency to focus on ‘school literacy’ (Knobel 2001) must be challenged in contemporary society, one that is technological, globalised and digitised. As explored in section 1.3.5 and 2.5.5, post-primary classroom practices must connect with adolescent students’ out-of-school literacy practices, their ‘mediascapes’ (Jewitt 2008, p.261) or ‘life worlds’ (Cazden et al., 1996, p.70; Cope and Kalantzis 2006) if students are to be equipped to navigate the multimodal world of multiliteracies that they inhabit. For instance, Moje (2000) explores the intricacies of tagging and graffiti writing as unsanctioned literacy practices of gang-connected youths. Knobel (2001) contrasts Jacques’ school literacy practices (where he is perceived as having great difficulty with literacy by his teacher) with the success of his public and private reading and speaking practices (his active role in an outreach programme and his ability to establish a profitable part-time lawn-mowing business). Leander and Boldt (2012) argue for the legitimacy of the literacy events associated with a young boy’s engagement with Japanese graphic novels, Manga. In all three studies, the adolescents involved were perceived as struggling with their school based literacy curriculum yet they could engage in sophisticated levels of literacy engagement in their out-of-school practices. While these are certainly individual cases, Knobel contends that they are not ‘atypical’ (2001) and serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of moving beyond the ‘official knowledge’ (Apple 1993) sanctioned and promoted in school or academic literacies.

6.4.4.2 Questioning the Assumption: All Teachers as Teachers of Reading?

While both the literature and LNLL contend that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’, it is worth problematising this claim. While reading strategies are certainly reported by teachers of many different subjects in this study, the data clearly highlights that the teachers who most frequently report the use of reading strategies are English teachers. Furthermore, significantly less emphasis is placed on the ‘explicit’ instruction of reading in subjects other than English, with a greater focus on the outcomes of reading rather than reading as a process. Of course, it must also
be acknowledged that a disproportionate number of English teachers participated in the study, as 11 of the 26 participants teach English. This may be a finding in itself when considering the different teachers who volunteered to participate in a study about literacy.

Furthermore, during data analysis it became clear that English teachers report the most diverse range of literacy strategies. For instance Erin (English/History- Birch 2) reports how she uses Skimming and Scanning (Reading Comprehension Strategies), Writing frames (A resource to instruct students how to structure paragraphs such as Point-Explain-Conclude PEC) and KWL. Clíodhna refers to KWL, SQ3R (A 5 step reading comprehension strategy prompting students to Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS promote engagement with texts as readers and writers), Skimming and Scanning and Paired Reading (English/LL- Birch 5). In Cedar College, Gráinne (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1) speaks about how she uses pre-reading exercises and word-attack strategies (breaking down components of the word) as well as explicitly teaching comprehension strategies while in Elm High, Gearóid (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) highlights his practice of explicitly teaching skills like sequencing, skimming and matching, as well as using pre-reading activities and paired reading.

When considering why English teachers seem to have the broadest range of literacy strategies to draw on, perhaps obvious answer stems from prevailing associations between ‘literacy’ and ‘English’. An alternative suggestion could concern the emphasis (or lack of emphasis) that has been on the skills of reading and writing in ITE programmes and indeed, in CPD programmes more generally. An argument presented in the literature is that perhaps unlike their colleagues, ‘English teachers are skilled instructors of reading comprehension- a nebulous concept that requires several moving parts’ (Ronan 2015) and in the memorable words of Moats, ‘teaching reading is rocket science’ (1999). As Afflerbach glibly states

‘it’s easy to say that every teacher should be a reading teacher; it’s harder when you think about the specialised training and expertise that a teacher must have to be a good teacher of reading. I’m all for the idea; it’s another thing to get the support for it I think.’

(Dublin City FM 2009)
In her case study in one post-primary school, Reidy poses an argument that ‘teachers of English and other languages are more interested in literacy issues than teachers of other subjects and have competence, through their language training, and confidence with literacy teaching methodologies’ (2013, p.15). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the three Literacy Link teachers who participated in this study were all teachers of English.

Despite an obvious awareness of literacy and overwhelming acceptance of responsibility for literacy development by all teachers, the reality is that in this study, English teachers reported the widest range of reading strategies in all four research sites and it seems difficult to shake off the association of English with literacy in schools. This raises a number of interesting questions regarding the assertion in LNLL that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47). Interesting parallels can be found when we examine the writing strategies participants reported in this study.

6.4.5 Writing Strategies

As explored in section 5.4.1.6, writing is viewed as part of literacy development by a number of participants. Across the dataset, many participants incorporate writing as part of their understanding of what it means to be literate. Upon analysis of the strategies that teachers employ to promote writing, teachers clearly present students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning through writing. However, it becomes clear that there is less emphasis on writing than reading, that writing is perceived as a product rather than a process and that there is a lack of explicit instruction regarding writing.

The most common writing practices included students writing in their copies and writing as part of homework exercises. Cloze tests are also popular strategies, understood as a text that has certain items (words, phrases or symbols) removed and students need to insert the appropriate item. Cloze tests -also referred to as ‘Fill in the blanks’ activities- assess students’ ability to understand context as well as vocabulary. Four participants refer to how they use them as writing strategies (Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1; Eamon, English/History/Irish- Cedar 2; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). While students are writing as part of the process of completing cloze tests, they are demonstrating the
learning that has taken place in the areas of comprehension, reading and vocabulary learning also.

Enda (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) and Iona (Irish- Birch 4) speak about how students complete writing activities such as worksheets in their classes. While Iona doesn’t elaborate as to how she uses worksheets, Enda gives an example of how he uses cloze test style worksheets where students need to choose from a list of given words to label a diagram of a furnace and students needed to choose the appropriate ‘keywords’ and concepts to label the diagram, such as ‘refractory brick’ for example. Crosswords are referenced by Ryanne (Religion-Cedar 4) and Michéal (English/Religion/Music- Elm 6) as a strategy they adopt in their practice to promote literacy development. Like cloze tests, crosswords have the potential to promote awareness and assess student learning in relation to vocabulary, reading, spelling and comprehension skills. Such practices are in keeping with the findings reported from other studies internationally (Kiuhara et al., 2009; Gillespie et al., 2014) as writing opportunities presented in the data are in keeping with the ‘functional’ view of writing.

However, similar to findings in relation to reading, across the dataset there is a notable lack of explicit instructional strategies to promote writing (Barton 2013). Again, participants who make explicit reference to writing strategies are all English teachers. Erin (English/History- Birch 2), Gráinne (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1), Sorcha (English/History/SEN- Cedar 3) and Gearóid (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) discuss about how they explicitly instruct students in the process of writing. They regularly use writing frames (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004) such as ‘Point, Quote, Explain’ (PQE), or ‘Point, Explain, Quote, Conclude’ (PEQC). Erin encourages her students to structure their responses in paragraphs using a ‘Point-Explain-Quote’ model in her 3rd year special class so they ‘get the basic point that there are three or four elements they need to do to make a paragraph, so just little strategies like that... it’s repetitive but I think it works’. (English/History- Birch 2). These writing structures assist students in structuring their answers by focusing on sequencing and providing them with scaffolding prompts. Erin offers the most detail on how and why she uses this strategy:
'I try and get them to structure paragraphs and get them to elaborate an answer, Point-Explain-Quote-Conclude that kind of thing… what they need to do to make a paragraph… it’s about helping them by teaching them strategies that when you’re taking a piece of information, you don’t just write down the first thing that comes into your head. You have to take your time, go through the question and go back to the text again. It’s just helping them to recognise what they’re doing… hopefully this will help in other subjects as well’.

(English/History, -Birch 2)

Similarly, Gearóid comments that reflection is a crucial part of the writing process:

‘I always say to my leaving certs, it’s P-W-C; it’s plan-write-check and it’s important to check what you’ve written, that they’re reading back over it, that they’re thinking about it, you know?’

(English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2)

Furthermore, the fact that Gearóid speaks about writing with his Leaving Certificate students is also indicative of his belief that students need support in writing throughout their time in school. He also speaks about the importance of engaging students in pre-writing activities, such as whole-class discussion about a text, as a support for writing.

Sorcha describes a JCSP strategy called ‘Everything Ok?’ as ‘easy and helpful to use’ (English/History/SEN- Cedar 3) as a support for writing, prompting students to question their use of keywords, spelling, sentence-structure, paragraphs, punctuation, whether or not points make sense, their key points, any diagrams that might support their answers and overall neatness in terms of presentation. Although the ‘Everything Ok?’ bookmarks are lauded as a useful exam preparation strategy (BEC Publishing 2018), it is clear that they facilitate conversations and learning experiences in class about how students can develop their writing skills.

These excerpts indicate clear acknowledgement that writing is a process and not merely a product, one that needs to be explicitly taught (Barton 2013) where teachers encourage meta-cognition and reflection so that students are aware of how to communicate and demonstrate their learning in writing. It would appear that English teachers in this study are aware that how well students write is dependent on how they are taught to write (Kiuhara et al., 2009). In contrast, there is little evidence in the data to suggest that teachers in other disciplines consider their role in supporting students as writers. As argued earlier, this may be attributable to the assumption that
writing, like reading, is the same across disciplines (Fang 2012; Fang and Coatham 2013). However, Smagorinsky argues that ‘virtually any act of writing requires specialized knowledge’ (2015, p.142), giving the example that a report in an English Language Arts class can look very different to a laboratory report in Science class both in terms of form as well as content. This finding, that English teachers in this study appear to approach writing differently, raises questions about how well teachers of other subjects, despite being experts in their disciplines, are equipped to teach writing (The College Board 2003; Kiuhara et al., 2009; Gillespie et al., 2014).

Participants frequently position reading in direct relation to examination paper questions and the same is true for writing. Participants argue that students need to be able to write effectively because they’re ‘writing in the exams at the end of the day’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4) and it is a priority that students are able to ‘answer what (they’re) being asked... and put what’s in (their) head on paper... because that’s what they’re going to be asked in the exam, it’s not a verbal exam’ (Sinéad, Science/Maths- Birch 8). Five participants spoke about how practising questions from past examination papers is a strategy that they use to promote literacy (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Áine, Art/SEN- Ash 2; Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6; Roisín, English/Religion- Birch 9; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). Gráinne explores this in a way that is illustrative of many of the accounts offered by other participants:

‘there’s no doubt, we’re all doing it at this time of the year, the ‘pres’ are a week and a half away, you know? We are all racing through- ‘let’s do another exam question and another exam question’... if you haven’t brought them to the point where they have the language for (navigating exam questions), they’re never going to be able to tackle the exam paper anyway’.

(English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1)

These findings align with those of other studies regarding students’ writing; writing is for very specific purposes such as completing responses to material, note-taking, and filling out worksheets (Kiuhara et al., 2009; Gillespie et al., 2014). Oftentimes, particularly in a culture of high-stakes examinations, there can be a focus on preparing students to pass written tests rather than to become better writers (Hicks and Steffel 2012; Barton 2013).

Furthermore, writing appears to be understood in quite a traditional sense; as a form of representation and reproduction that is very much based around alphabetic text
and the hand-written word. This is at odds with students’ out-of-school literacy practices where increasingly students are writing digitally and online. They write blogs, social media posts and instant messages (Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2007), use Short Message Service (SMS) or text messaging (Plester and Wood 2009; Leu et al., 2011; Powell and Dixon 2011), create wikis and videos through applications such as iMovie (Leu et al., 2011) and communicate through chat-room fora, online role-playing games or email (Williams 2005). However, across the dataset, participants do not refer to writing that embraces students’ out-of-school writing practices. The focus on writing is, rather, largely for the purpose of navigating examinations, regarded as the main instance by which students communicate their learning, ‘at the end of the day’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Erin, English/History- Birch 2), something that is vocalised by a number of participants. Such a view of writing certainly presents writing as ‘product’ rather than ‘process’. Two exceptions did emerge in the data. Gobinet speaks at length about how she uses Google Classroom with her Transition Year students, a strategy she felt was worthwhile as it gave her an opportunity to share feedback with her students in a way that they ‘can interact and ask questions’ to improve their writing (English/Geography, Elm 5). Gearóid speaks about how promoting the use of a package like Microsoft Word supports students in their writing in relation to spelling and grammar (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). Largely however, the lack of strategies to promote writing in new and digital domains is obvious. This may be linked to the reality that generally, student engagement in SEC examinations is largely in a traditional, pen and paper format. It could also be reflective of teachers’ lay theories about what it means to ‘write’, their own experiences of writing or that they have had inadequate professional support regarding writing as a learning activity.

6.4.6 ‘Freedom and Latitude’: Seeking out Space for Oracy

As discussed earlier, LNLL defines being literate not just in terms of reading and writing, but also as speaking and listening (DES 2011, p.30). In keeping with literature that highlights the centrality of oracy to literacy development (Wilkinson 1970; Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993; Oliver et al., 2005; Alexander 2006; Skidmore 2006; UNESCO 2006; Jones 2007; Bentley-Davies 2012; Mercer and Howe 2012;
Mercer and Dawes 2014; Mercer et al., 2017), many participants welcome recent curricular changes that support them to promote oral language strategies.

For instance, the introduction of the Junior Cycle English Specification (NCCA 2018) revisits the centrality of oral language in classroom practice, and English teachers in this study agree. Gráinne comments ‘that oral element in particular in Junior Cycle... it was something that we noticed was missing’ (English/Geography/LL-Cedar 1). Eoghan also acknowledges the opportunities afforded to him by the oral component of the new specification:

‘I’ve been encouraged to try more (oral strategies) in the class and me helping them out. And I think, (pause) especially with the junior cycle, things like group-work with them presenting, like splitting a poem into 4 stanzas or 4 parts and them teaching the class, ... and then plays, I think the actual performance of it definitely helps them’.

(English/Irish/LL- Elm 1)

The explicit identification of oracy in curricular documents seems to legitimise the promotion of speaking and listening for English teachers, helping to broaden traditional notions of literacy as reading and writing. In contrast, however, Eoghan feels unable to promote speaking and listening to the same extent in his Senior Cycle English classes stating ‘I would never try anything like- I would rarely do group work’. When invited to explain why, he feels that he is restricted by ‘time limits’ and his students are anxious about getting ‘notes’ (English/Irish/LL -Elm 1). Eamon reports a similar experience as he juxtaposes his Irish TY programme, which he describes as ‘entirely language based, oral and aural’, with his ‘honours Leaving Cert. class’ where there is more focus on ‘coursework’ and ‘essays’ arguing, ‘you’re not going to do the same thing’ (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2).

Other teachers share these views, what I describe as ‘legitimate spaces for oracy’. One such space identified is Religion class. Both Síle and Michéal comment on this:

‘I suppose now that we’re doing non-exam here, oral feedback would be much more important and the ability to articulate I suppose. Doing non-exam you just have much more scope to elaborate and to let students talk and to, to even give their own opinions and ideas when it’s not so exam-focused...You have the freedom... You’re constrained by the exam... it’s a complete change doing the non-exam’.

(Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3)
‘Religion is not ‘exam religion’ here...So oracy is exactly what it is. It’s trying to get them to speak and think and articulate their own opinions. In fact, that’s what I do in religion for the whole, all day. So definitely, it’s a big thing for me’.

(Míchéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6)

The data reveals how some participants construct Junior Cycle, Transition Year and non-exam classes as more ‘legitimate spaces’ for oracy development than others. It is possible that participants perceive these spaces as more ‘low stakes’ than Senior Cycle, where the long shadow of the Leaving Certificate looms large. Of course, this is not unique to the Irish context and is characteristic of any context where high-stakes testing exists. Research demonstrates how ‘dialogic pedagogies … and collaborative interactions between students are more difficult to effect when the wider contexts of interaction constrain the possibilities for dialogue’ (Wolfe and Alexander 2008, p.6). Ultimately, if written examinations dominate the learning landscape it is difficult to foster changes in teachers’ practices and assessment methods (Lenihan et al., 2016) as ‘all classroom teaching in secondary schools has the shadow of summative assessment present as an end point’ (Brindley and Marshall 2015, p.137). It also raises questions about the extent to which oracy is valued, as well as about the prevailing perception of oracy as a tool for confidence, rather than for cognitive, development.

6.4.7 Legitimate Spaces for Literacy Development

In fact, the idea of ‘legitimate spaces’ is not restricted to oral language development, but to literacy development in general. For instance, despite the rhetoric that all teachers are teachers of literacy, some participants question the legitimacy of this claim (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5; Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch 7; Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5). Eimear unequivocally states that ‘if it’s literacy, it is the English teacher’s baby’ (English- Ash 1). While the majority of English teachers point to how literacy is a concern of all teachers, there are occasions when English teachers themselves reinforce traditional associations between English and literacy. For instance, Michéal (English/Religion/Music- Elm 6) comments that ‘literacy is part and parcel of English’ and believes that English teachers are comfortable with literacy development as it is ‘natural and innate’ for English teachers to promote it. Of course, such a view is reinforced when literacy interventions are largely led by
English teachers and when ‘dedicated reading classes’ take place primarily during English class-time.

Furthermore, when reporting on strategies they use, many participants remark how literacy strategies seem more suitable for students in junior classes. Teachers comment that keywords are more appropriate for junior classes as they are deemed more suitable for ‘younger years… (who) don’t have the basics’ (Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5) in contrast with ‘Higher Level 6th year students… you’d be hoping that they’d be beyond that, the literacy issues’ (Roisín, English/Religion-Birch 9). Eoghan (English/Irish/LL- Elm 1), Gobinet (English/Geography- Elm 5) and Michéal (English/Religion/Music- Elm 6) comment on how the ‘Book in the Bag’ reading initiative in their school is restricted to 1st and 2nd year students. Similarly, TY is regarded as a legitimate space for literacy development, evidenced by Eamon’s account of the largely oral and aural strategies he incorporates in TY Irish, as it affords him ‘the freedom and the latitude to experiment’ (Irish/English/History-Cedar 2). Indeed, the very fact that Gobinet’s Literacy Week involves only students from 1st year, 2nd year and TY speaks to this. Of course, such practices could be said to be underpinned by an understanding of literacy as ‘the basics’ (Cope and Kalantzis 2006) of decoding and fluency and subscription to the ‘vaccination model’, where literacy competency is developed in earlier years of education and once students have acquired literacy skills, further development is unnecessary (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Such a view does not acknowledge that, as illustrated in Figure 2 (in chapter one), literacy development becomes increasingly specialised as students transition upwards through different stages in their education. It is ironic that in secondary or post-primary education

’skills in reading and writing become less an explicit focus of classroom teaching as the curriculum focus shifts to more esoteric fields of knowledge, even though the reading and writing skills required to learn the curriculum become more elaborate’.

(Rose 2011, p.87)

This irony is widely reported in the literature (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008, 2012; Moje 2015) and ‘by the time adolescent students are being challenged by disciplinary texts, literacy instruction has often evaporated altogether’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012, p.45). Such practices align with what Kalantzis and Cope describe as Didactic and Functional Literacy Pedagogies (NewLearning 2016c; NewLearning
and Fang’s Cognitive and Linguistic Approaches to literacy development (Fang 2012) where literacy learning is individual and focused largely on covering content for exam-success, thereby prioritising reading and writing and ensuring that traditional print-texts are privileged above other forms of communication.

6.4.8 **Rote-Learning and Exam Focused Strategies**

Table 15 highlights another category of commonly reported strategies, ‘rote learning strategies’, understood as strategies that involve memorisation through repetition and many participants make reference to their use of repetition, drill and practice as part of examination preparation in their classes. For instance, Brendan refers to how he views his subjects as ‘*quite practical*’ and this dictates the strategies that he uses which he describes as ‘*repetition, you keep doing it over and over again*’. He continues:

> ‘I suppose that’s the closest way I come to preparing them from a literacy point of view; just going through loads and loads of questions and explaining the questions and what they’re actually trying to get and the way they should interpret the question’.

(Maths/Business/History, Ash 3)

Similarly, Gráinne speaks about how as state examinations draw closer, teachers find themselves ‘*racing through- let’s do another exam question and another exam question*’ (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). This category also includes teachers’ references to students taking notes down from the board or learning notes and spellings by rote through memorisation, and a number of teachers comment of the importance of their students’ ‘notes copy’ (Iona, Irish- Birch 4) and their ‘*hardback (copy) for very important notes; very important notes. You don’t write classwork, homework, nothing!*’ (Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4). It might be argued that such practices stem from transmissive philosophies of education or that they might be attributed to traditional practices participants have experienced themselves. Perhaps such practices are a direct consequence of the current assessment practices that operate in Ireland. As explored further in chapter seven, many teachers make reference to how engaging with a broader range of strategies is curtailed by the demands of examinations.
6.4.8.1 Back to Keywords: A Key to Navigating Examinations

In fact, part of the conversation concerning keywords in this study concerns how a number of participants perceive keywords as a vital exam-preparation tool:

‘They have to be familiar ... even when they sit the exam they are asked to ‘name this’ and ‘label this’ and what’s the size of x, y and z and so on; that’s the technicality of it’.

(Donagh, Construction/DCG Ash 6)

‘It’s very important to help students to understand the keywords and to recognise the keywords. Even in terms of exam preparation; they don’t understand the word ‘discuss’; they don’t understand ‘elaborate’ so this then will of course be across the board for every subject so if it’s done in one subject, it’s going to pop up in others. That’s one that we’d use a lot’.

(Erin, English/History- Birch2)

‘Before it was very simple to say ‘keywords’ in maths like keywords: expand, simplify, factorise... but now you can’t because the language is so varied and the words are so varied... you can’t pick out (pause) ‘well this word will appear in the question and this is what it means’.

(Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3)

Indeed, what Brendan describes here was explored by a number of maths and SEN teachers in this study and has been the experience of Maths teachers internationally as recent changes in maths instruction requires students to ‘read lengthy texts that describe real world issues (and) to explain and justify their processes and answers’ (Ronan 2015). It is very much in keeping with the tenets of DL, as disciplinary knowledge is intertwined with disciplinary processes and students engage in the same processes as disciplinary experts (Spires et al., 2016). Of course, this also necessitates an approach to the subject where students ‘participate in’ rather than ‘acquire’ the knowledge of maths (Siebert et al., 2016), and must be supported by constructivist rather than transmissive pedagogies. While beyond the scope of this study, it raises a number of questions regarding pedagogy in a general sense.

6.4.9 The Backwash Effect: Examinations and Classroom Practice

International research highlights how high-stakes assessment can significantly affect teachers’ instructional decisions (In the United Kingdom- Black and Wiliam 1998; Galton 2007; Stobart 2008; In the United States-Darling-Hammond 1990; Resnick 2010; Hong and Youngs 2008; Berliner 2011; In Ireland-Devine et al., 2013; In
Australia-Polesel et al., 2014) referred to by Stobart as ‘the backwash effect’ (2008). ‘The pressure of testing’ often contributes to ‘teachers engaging in vast amounts of test preparation with their students’ (Berliner 2011 p.288), and as highlighted here, promotes strategies such as ‘drill’ and ‘repetition’. This is particularly evident in this study where participants regard the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate examinations as determinants of their pedagogical choices and classroom practices. A number of participants discuss how the teaching strategies they employ are determined by the year group they are teaching, with a particular focus on whether or not their students are in ‘exam classes’ (Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1). Roisin describes how exams affect students’ expectations as well as teachers’ practices:

‘If they want to get good grades, and they’re so focused nowadays, everything is learning things off and notes and rote-learning and unfortunately, that’s the way English has gone at Higher Level because they’re too used to the way the exam is and they know they know what they need to learn’.

(English/Religion- Birch 9)

The impact of the learning context on teachers’ instructional choices is evident when Síle speaks about how moving from teaching ‘exam’ Religion (for the purposes of an SEC examination) to teaching ‘non-exam’ Religion was a ‘complete change’ for her as a professional and how it encouraged her to reflect on the strategies she employs:

When you are teaching exam, you are constrained by the idea of covering the curriculum over three years, whereas we can divert in so many different areas now because it’s non-exam... It’s kind of like I’m starting all over again because I’m doing the non-exam. It’s so (pause) interesting! I’ve to come up with new methodologies because (pause) you actually forget how much, even if you try not to, that you do teach to the exam, you know... So you actually teach for the subject’s sake’.

(Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3)

As evidenced by Síle, instructional choices do not depend solely on teachers’ professional knowledge nor do they always emerge from a teacher’s philosophical leanings, although these are powerful and influential factors; instrumentalist or measurement approaches present a barrier to the implementation of more constructivist approaches to instruction (Shepard 2000, p. 4). This study reiterates that the range of teachers’ pedagogical choices are significantly inhibited by the assessment structure that exists in Ireland, a system that also exerts a powerful influence on the perceptions of parents and students about what constitutes
‘effective’ classroom practice. This may account for the reliance on strategies such as drill and repetition, rote learning, and notetaking reported in this study. While the impact of assessment on teachers’ practice was the focus here, I return to explore the power of assessment in chapter seven when considering teachers’ experiences of policy implementation.

6.4.10 A Notable Lack of Digital Strategies

I now turn to the final theme regarding the strategies that teachers use in relation to literacy development. As outlined in LNLL, there is an expectation that students engage with ‘digital media’ (DES 2011, p.8) and the literature makes frequent reference to digital literacy and the importance of engaging with students’ out-of-school literacy practices. However, in light of the traditional understandings of literacy and the overriding view of technology as contrary to literacy development explored in chapter five, perhaps it is unsurprising that there is a notable absence of references to digital strategies or Digital Learning Technologies (DLT) to support literacy development in this study.

As already explored, Gobinet (English/Geography- Elm 5) and Gearóid (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) offer examples of how DLT supports teaching and learning in relation to literacy by using Google Classroom and Word Processors respectively. Máire (History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1) makes reference to how she uses the SNIP Programme, a resource pack that is freely available to download that aims at increasing the reading and spelling of students with reading ages of 10+(NEPS 2012). While it is available as an online package, Máire generally prints the resource for use in class. For the most part, and as already explored in section 5.4.3, some participants speak about how they incorporate digital strategies in their practice but in a general way rather than specifically to develop digital literacy; through the use of PowerPoint (Rionach Religion- Ash 5; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) or by sharing videos (Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch 7; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5). Such practices position students as passive consumers of digital media rather than active collaborators (Mills 2016).

Indeed, this study highlights some resistance to technology in relation to digital practices, perhaps best illustrated in Michéal’s account where he describes doing assignments digitally as ‘ridiculous’ and offers his rationale for this belief:
‘There was talk here of doing a lot of assignments and stuff for TY, all submitted digitally? But for me, in English anyway, that is just totally a ridiculous idea because they don’t need to be able to spell or do grammar because the computer does it all for them. They can write, you know, a 10,000 word essay and haven’t a clue how to spell any word in it, but it’s all corrected for them. So I think that… word processing and Word and all that is affecting literacy as well, because you don’t need to be literate anymore. You just need to know how to type (laughs) and a computer will sort you out… So I said, no. I don’t want any of that for English because it totally (pause) it’s counterintuitive I think. But (pause) I could be just a Luddite as well, you know (laughs)’.

(English/Religion/Music- Elm 6)

The literature regarding pedagogies that promote digital literacy learning for adolescents speak about how teachers need to plan for opportunities to teach students how to assess and evaluate information, how to use and represent information and how to produce and exchange information (Castek and Manderino 2017) or to link, co-create, challenge and share (Mills 2016). Submitting work digitally offers an opportunity for students to use technology to share work with their peers, to co-create and produce work. Michéal’s view that this approach is ‘counter-intuitive’ and would mean that ‘you don’t need to be literate anymore’ may be suggestive of a understanding of literacy that is closely aligned with very traditional understandings, including a focus on the mechanics of language, here referred to as ‘spelling and grammar’. As suggested earlier in the discussion regarding beliefs and experience, perhaps Michéal’s beliefs stem from his own experience of education, shaping his values and professional intuition.

Nakata’s empirical study (2008) involves 226 Japanese high school students and examines the benefits of computer-based programmes to aid vocabulary development. The study compares effectiveness of word cards, word lists and computers to support vocabulary learning and concludes that computer aided strategies are ‘more conducive to learning than lists’ (2008, p.14), as well as having the capacity to motivate students. Moreover, Bialostok argues that ‘the internet has become the defining medium for literacy and learning and reading comprehension in the 21st century’ (2014, p.501). Some of the digital strategies referenced here, such as the use of online videos, present rich opportunities for student engagement and also embrace and value students’ out of school literacy practices as already outlined in chapter two (Moje 2000; Leander and Boldt 2012; Gee 2015). However, as explored previously, computers are tools that can be used in ‘didactic or
constructivist ways’ in the classroom (Carroll 2011) and there is a ‘need to focus on practices over tools’ (Lewis 2007). Careful examination of the strategies utilised and the rationale behind them is key if we are to move students beyond being consumers of text, albeit digital text, to reader-as-interrogator (Serafini 2010) and creators of text (Lankshear and Knobel 2007; Leander and Vasudevan 2009; Grayson 2014; Mills 2016).

These findings in this study are in line with international research that argues how the digital practices that are commonplace in students ‘out-of-school lives’ (Lankshear and Knobel 2007) are not necessarily embedded in school literacy practices (King and O’ Brien 2002; Lea and Street 2006; Asselin and Moayeri 2011; Carroll 2011; Prensky 2012; Kivunja 2014). This is also the case in recent Irish studies. In MacMahon’s study, ‘there were no references in teachers’ definitions’ to digital literacy and when teachers were asked if they utilised … the literacy practices and skills used by students outside school … all said that they did not (2014, p.150). Similarly, Reidy’s study found that the inclusion of digital literacy in LNLL had not impacted on the teachers in her case study (2013 p.64) and concluded that ‘digital literacy in the classroom is not yet embedded in the post-primary sector’ (2013, p.71). Here, the digital, out-of-school literacies of adolescents are not only excluded from classroom practice by a number of participants, but viewed as an obstacle to ‘literacy’ development.

A similar conclusion is drawn in this study regarding teachers’ engagement with digital literacy practices. Reluctance to engage with this aspect of literacy may well stem from traditional understandings of ‘literacy’ as reading and writing, a view that positions technology as ‘contrary’ to literacy development. The lack of focus on digital literacy may also be linked to the largely traditional pen and paper format of state examinations. However, resistance to engagement with digital literacy strategies may also stem from gaps in professional knowledge regarding online reading and writing practices as well as from a lack of appropriate CPD opportunities; as a result, it might be argued that teachers don’t feel equipped as digital literacy teachers. Access to DLT resources could also be a prohibiting factor. It is important to mention that this is not unique to the four research sites in this study. The Interim Review of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2017) highlights a number of new targets prioritised up to 2020, and one of these
targets is the development of digital literacy skills of students, suggesting that a lack of digital literacy development is a national concern. However, it does highlight something significant in terms of a gap between policy and practice regarding understandings of literacy and strategies to promote literacy development.

6.5 A Model of Practice Emerging from this Study

Having presented the findings that relate to teachers’ understandings and knowledge regarding literacy development across chapter five and six, I now take an opportunity to synthesise these findings and consider the different approaches to literacy development that emerged from this research. Data analysis processes resulted in the identification of three teacher profiles, presented here as three short case studies, in an attempt to represent teachers’ practice relating to literacy development as it emerged in this study. While there is overlap in some respects, it would appear that three distinct categories are evident in the dataset, discussed here using the titles ‘The Literacy Mechanic’, ‘The Typical Literacy Teacher’ and ‘The Literacy Advocate’. In addition to these cases, I present a case that represents high quality adolescent literacy instruction entitled ‘The Literacy Expert’. This process of reducing and displaying the data as cases (Hopkins 2008, p. 152) aims to explore current practices in the system, but also to stimulate discussion about some of the key issues for literacy development in the Irish post-primary context in the future.

6.5.1 The Literacy Mechanic

While certainly in the minority, the findings in this study reveal some instances where teachers present as diametrically opposed to the vision and expectations of the national literacy strategy, LNLL, regarding literacy. The Literacy Mechanic perceives literacy in a reductionist way, primarily as a problem that needs to be diagnosed and fixed. The Literacy Mechanic holds a particularly narrow view of literacy as reading and to a lesser extent, writing, rather than a more holistic view of literacy. Similarly, these teachers possess traditional views of reading and book reading is privileged, while reading practices involving digital or multimodal texts are either not mentioned or are regarded as illegitimate practices, sometimes fanciful while other times, counter-productive to their understanding of what it means to be literate. Their reductionist view of literacy asserts that the goal of being literate is to
be able to read questions on examinations and therefore, the Literacy Mechanic emphasises the acquisition of knowledge (Siebert et al., 2016), with the focus of their practice being on content-learning for the purpose of exams. Among these participants, there is much evidence of the ‘literacy-content dualism’ (Draper et al., 2005) where content trumps literacy. This may also be a consequence of the fact that these teachers typically perceive success in post-primary education as directly associated with examinations and understand that their primary responsibility as a teacher is to prepare adolescent students to successfully navigate those exams.

The Literacy Mechanic appears to align strongly with a vaccination model of literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008), believing that students’ literacy needs are, or at least should be, met in the early years of education. This is evident from the view held by some participants in this study that students’ literacy difficulties or ‘problems’ in post-primary school might be attributable to perceived shortcomings in their primary education, where their literacy issues were not diagnosed or not met. Furthermore, certain subject areas and year groups are regarded as more appropriate spaces for literacy development than others, and their view of literacy as the basics’ is evident in how they believe that literacy interventions should be more concentrated in junior years. Their subscription to a generic literacy development model is evident by the fact that that the Literacy Mechanic regularly links English with literacy, sometimes using the terms synonymously, indicative of their belief that reading and writing is the same across all disciplines.

Among these participants, who as aforementioned, are very much in the minority of participants in this study, there is evidence of some resistance to whole-school literacy initiatives. There is a suggestion that such interventions have a negative impact on teaching and learning in their subjects; they take teachers and students off course and consume a great deal of time, distracting from the business of content-coverage and exam preparation. Literacy strategies are perceived as another task for teachers to do. The Literacy Mechanic also demonstrates some resistance to strategies regarded as important aspects of a holistic approach to literacy development. For instance, there appears to be an emphasis on cognitive and linguistic dimensions of literacy (Fang 2012) characterised by repeated references to decoding, drill and repetition, vocabulary instruction, grammar and spelling; the mechanics or ‘nuts and bolts’ of language, as it were. Interestingly, despite their
understanding of literacy as predominantly reading and, to a lesser extent, writing, there is a lack of reference to the need for explicit instruction of reading and writing. In keeping with this view, the Literacy Mechanic typically expresses a lack of openness to digital literacy development in the post-primary school, assuming that technology has an adverse effect on literacy development.

These participants have not engaged with the policy document LNLL, although as argued in section 7.2.2, this appears to be the case for the majority of participants in this study, and Literacy Mechanics perceive literacy as an educational objective that has been mandated by policymakers rather than as something that they value at classroom level. Again, this may stem from their philosophy of education; how they perceive their primary role as one concerned with examination preparation. Finally, despite acknowledging the complexity of literacy, the Literacy Mechanic does not seek out CPD opportunities relating to literacy development.

6.5.2 The Typical Literacy Teacher

This category entitled the ‘Typical Literacy Teacher’ is so-called as it represents the majority of teachers who participated in this study. The Typical Literacy Teacher views the introduction of a national strategy as something positive that has encouraged them to be more aware of literacy as a concept and as a classroom practice. Like the Literacy Mechanic, they recognise that their students have literacy needs, but there is greater awareness of how students struggle with the ‘literacy of their subjects’ in the post-primary context. As a result, the Typical Literacy Teacher is prepared to participate in and support school wide literacy initiatives, in so far as such initiatives did not impede subject learning in class, and they frequently refer to how they support reading initiatives and the keywords approach to literacy development that are popular in their schools.

In a similar way to the Literacy Mechanic, the Typical Participant has a relatively traditional view of literacy as reading and writing, and while not synonymous (Alvermann 2002), the words ‘reading’ and ‘literacy’ are frequently used interchangeably. They hold quite functional views of literacy, frequently commenting on what literacy allows students to ‘do’. However, the Typical Literacy Teacher also refers to and values oracy, particularly the skill of speaking, and argues that it is an important aspect of self-esteem and confidence building for adolescents.
Like the Literacy Mechanic, many Typical Literacy Teachers appear to subscribe to the vaccination model of literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) and again, there is a clear sense that the earlier years of education and post-primary school are more suitable for literacy development than later years, at which point students should be sufficiently ‘literate’.

For Typical Literacy Teachers, texts remain quite narrowly conceived as alphabetic and print (Moje 2000) with a focus on linguistic and alphabetic modes of meaning (Mills 2016). Book reading is privileged and valued, but the purpose of reading is to understand and comprehend. Some Typical Literacy Teachers attempt to incorporate a greater variety of texts, and incorporate magazines, newspapers, graphic novels and video as part of their practice, but this is not necessarily the case across this group. However, there appears to be less emphasis on the out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents with a notable lack of emphasis on digital texts. Indeed, the contemporary understanding of ‘text’ presented in this study is not one that aligns with the Typical Literacy Teacher’s understanding of text. It is noteworthy that openness to multimodal texts is more evident in some subjects and in general, and that teachers of subjects that incorporate images and drawings as a central aspect of student learning appear to have a broader understanding of text.

It is important to note that the Typical Literacy Teacher expresses low confidence levels in relation to literacy. Sometimes, this stems from participants’ literacy history or personal relationship with literacy, and many teachers share moments of discomfort that they have experienced as part of their own education. More frequently, low confidence emerges from feelings of being unprepared and unsupported as teachers of literacy, stemming from traditional connections between literacy and English. The Typical Literacy Teacher presents as overwhelmed in relation to literacy at a practice level, regularly remarking on their own uncertainty and how this contributes towards feelings of professional anxiety. Nonetheless, the Typical Literacy Teacher attempts to muddle through and they draw on supports from colleagues, particularly SEN co-ordinators, something that is illustrative of the reductionist views of literacy as a problem to be fixed or an additional ‘need’ to be addressed, and English teachers, reaffirming the association between literacy and ‘English’. In other instances, they seek support from their colleagues in their subject departments, the literacy link teacher or core team offers assistance. Given the
strength of teachers’ subject identities at post-primary level, it may be unsurprising that a number of Typical Literacy Teachers express a desire for subject-specific CPD to support them as literacy educators.

Low confidence levels may partially explain why the range of literacy strategies utilised by the Typical Literacy Teacher is quite limited, but may also account for the tendency to rely on ‘generic’ rather than subject specific strategies. Typically, they tend to rely on what is advocated and implemented at whole school level (regarding reading initiatives and keywords in particular), rather than considering the literacy demands of their own subjects. In a positive sense, there is an overt emphasis on the vocabulary or ‘keywords’ of subjects, a ‘vital’ component for comprehension (Fisher and Frey 2014, p. 145) but greater consideration of the different ways that students read, write, speak and listen in different disciplines appears largely absent in the data. Other strategies regularly mentioned by Typical Literacy Teachers include repetition regarding subject terminology and key concepts (MacMahon 2012), as well as rote-learning and note-taking for the purpose of examination preparation. Indeed, many Typical Literacy Practitioners give voice to the ideological dilemma that post-primary teachers face regarding the literacy-content dualism (Draper et al., 2005); although they themselves may value literacy, they feel there is not enough time to provide literacy instruction as well as content instruction. Such a view may stem partially from the prevalence of traditional conceptualisations of literacy, but also from the strength of subject areas and the dominance of state examinations in Irish post-primary education.

6.5.3 The Literacy Advocate

This study also afforded me the opportunity to interview some very informed and confident teachers of literacy, described here as ‘Literacy Advocates’. These teachers champion literacy development at post-primary level and maintain that literacy development has always been central to their practice. Consequently, they welcome LNLL as a renewed opportunity to promote literacy and something that legitimises their values and classroom practices regarding literacy. The Literacy Advocate’s understanding of literacy aligns well with the vision outlined in LNLL, as well as in literature pertaining to effective adolescent literacy. This may be underpinned by the Literacy Advocate’s belief that literacy is not only related to success in post-primary school, but that it is central to each student being able to live as full a life as possible.
They acknowledge the importance and interrelatedness of all four language systems of reading, writing, speaking and listening (Berninger et al., 2006; Berninger and Abbott 2010). In particular, Literacy Advocates explore the centrality of classroom talk in their practice, and view speaking and listening as benefiting and supporting cognition as well as confidence-building. Indeed, Literacy Advocates are typically ‘policy enthusiasts’, teachers who ‘embody policy in their practice and are examples to others’ (Ball et al., 2012, p.59) in relation to literacy development. This may go some way to explain the level of engagement that Literacy Advocates have had with LNLL as they generally demonstrate a good understanding of the aspirations of the policy and openly pledge a commitment to literacy development as central to their practice.

As a result, Literacy Advocates speak freely and openly about the importance of literacy in their lives and they are typically quite confident as teachers of literacy. Perhaps this is the reason why oftentimes, Literacy Advocates lead learning regarding literacy in their schools and fully support the whole-school literacy initiatives operating in their schools. They often champion and coordinate literacy initiatives believing that literacy should be visible and highlighted across the curriculum. In particular, a number of Literacy Advocates have promoted reading initiatives in an effort to instil a love of reading, something that is important to them, as well as to promote a culture of reading for pleasure in their schools. It may be unsurprising, but nonetheless worthy of consideration, that the majority of Literacy Advocates teach English.

While book reading remains the most frequent type of reading, even among Literacy Advocates, they are keenly aware of the range and variety of texts that adolescents encounter in schools, and subsequently acknowledge the varied types of texts students encounter in their out of school literacy practices. As a result, Literacy Advocates highlight the importance of student voice and agency in their reading preferences, encouraging students to choose their own reading material from class libraries. These teachers also understand ‘text’ as more than alphabetic and printed books and refer to graphic novels, email and bus-timetables, among other types of text. Literacy Advocates are aware of the impact of technology on the lives of students and some make efforts to incorporate digital texts in their practice as well as
offering examples of how DLT supports literacy learning. Nonetheless, the emphasis on printed texts, even among Literacy Advocates, is evident in this study.

Regarding classroom practice, Literacy Advocates are aware of the need to adapt and change their methodology to acknowledge societal changes and the needs of the students in their classes, and they position themselves as facilitators of learning who provide students with opportunities to learn independently and in groups. In terms of instructional strategies, Literacy Advocates draw on and implement a range of Content Area Literacy Strategies, while also being aware of the unique literacy demands of their subject areas. Reading comprehension skills are explicitly taught and modelled for students, while different approaches to writing and composition are also discussed. They frequently facilitate pair and group work to promote speaking and listening skills through discussion. In contrast with the Vaccination model, Literacy Advocates acknowledge that literacy needs support and development across post-primary school and in all subject areas. They differentiate between strategies that might be used to promote basic literacy and those that will support intermediate and disciplinary literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Literacy Advocates incorporate literacy practices with their first years as well as with sixth year students.

Underpinned by the belief that learning is a life-long endeavour, the Literacy Advocate is keenly aware of the complexity of literacy as a concept and a practice and as such, has sought out opportunities for CPD either formally outside of school, or through collaborative practice in school. Nonetheless, Literacy Advocates sometimes feel restricted by constraints in the system, both at local and national levels. While they believe that literacy instruction should be part of all subjects for all students, they contend that it is difficult to get support for such a view. Similarly, while they champion varied and digital texts, they are aware that there is a tendency to value traditional pen and paper formats over digital or multimodal. As a result, school-wide and system-wide issues, on occasion, compromise the values held by Literacy Advocates.

6.5.4 **The Literacy Expert**

It is useful to consider what adolescent literacy teachers need to know to effectively promote high-quality literacy teaching in the post-primary setting. This fourth ‘ideal’ case draws on pertinent and relevant literature regarding literacy development in an
effort to outline what the ideal adolescent literacy educator might ‘look like’ in an effort to inform future practice. It would inevitably support those working in the post-primary context but may also prove useful to those working in ITE programmes and in the professional support services whose remit concerns adolescent literacy development.

The Literacy Expert has a deep understanding of the complexity of literacy as an evolving concept (Heath 1986; Knobel 2001; Cope and Kalantzis 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010) and is open to theories of multiliteracies (Cazden et al., 1996; Jewitt 2008; Kalantzis et al., 2016). Literacy Experts acknowledge the importance of the four language systems (Berninger et al., 2006; Berninger and Abbott 2010) and thereby consider learning opportunities that can promote reading, writing, speaking and listening. The Literacy Expert does not subscribe to the literacy-content dualism (Draper et al., 2005) but rather, sees literacy as crucial in supporting content learning (Spires et al. 2016). In an effort to serve the literacy needs of adolescents who are increasingly exposed to technology, digital texts and online literacy practices in their out of school literacy experiences (Gee and Hayes 2011), the Literacy Expert considers ways to promote the digital literacy skills of their students. Because they are cognisant that adolescents spend an increasing amount of time online, these teachers are also aware of the need to equip students with the critical literacy skills that they need to navigate their world and empower them to be informed, aware and active citizens (New Learning 2016m). In her exploration of adolescent literacy instruction from a 21st century perspective, Lewis argues that the literacy skills needed to manage new technologies are crucial for personal, social, academic and professional aspects of life (2016) and therefore, it is a crucial aspect of the Literacy Expert’s approach to literacy development.

The Literacy Expert understands the ‘expanding definition of text’ (IRA 2012, p. 10) and subsequently has ‘new concepts of text and new orientations towards text’ (Lankshear 1999, p. 142). They attempt to blend adolescents’ exposure to printed texts with non-print texts (Abrams and Gerber 2014), as discussed in section 2.5.5.5, by incorporating a mix of alphabetic print, visual, multimedia and multimodal texts in their classroom practice. Audio-visual texts such as video, as well as aural texts such as musical compositions or radio dramas, might be utilised as appropriate to ensure that students’ exposure to text is broad and varied. An understanding of the
contemporary meaning of text, as well as balance in terms of material, can support
the Literacy Expert in motivating adolescents who can sometimes disengage with the
texts they encounter in post-primary school (Quinlan and Curtin 2017). As well as
being mindful of the need to promote student engagement, the Literacy Expert is also
aware of the importance of ensuring that texts are accessible while appropriately
challenging. Part of this ‘breadth and balance’ approach to text choice would
necessitate that the Literacy Expert not only exposes students to digital texts, but that
they also provide opportunities for students to produce digital texts (Lankshear and
Knobel 2006, 2007; Carroll 2011; Poore 2011; Burnett and Merchant 2015;
Manderino and Castek 2016; Mills 2016; Castek and Manderino 2017). Similarly,
the Literacy Expert positions adolescent learners as critical readers of all texts they
encounter, again empowering them as literate both inside and outside school. In the
content-area classroom in the post-primary school, the Literacy Expert is aware of
and utilises a variety of texts that are considered central to their discipline. Of course,
these choices are also underpinned by the acknowledgement of adolescence as a
unique stage in literacy development (as explored in section 1.3.5.4), where students
typically experience increasing levels of independence coupled with decreasing
motivation and engagement in school, all the while trying to establish their identities.
These considerations are important when the Literacy Expert considers ways to
engage adolescent students in learning.

Ideally, in the post-primary context, the Literacy Expert has the ‘specialized
knowledge’ (Smagorinsky 2015, p. 142) that is necessary to develop reading,
writing, speaking and listening tasks that are appropriate to and associated with texts
in their subject area or discipline (Lacina and Watson 2008; Murnane et al., 2012;
Smagorinsky 2015; Goldman et al., 2016). This knowledge, coupled with the
understanding that becoming literate is a life-long endeavour and a rejection of the
‘vaccination model’ (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) of literacy, means that the
Literacy Expert is well-positioned to provide the continued support necessary to
develop adolescent literacy. While valuing the establishment of reading cultures in
schools and whole-school literacy initiatives that promote reading for pleasure, the
Literacy Expert is aware that literacy learning is an integral part of teaching and
learning and needs to take place in all subject classrooms. Therefore, the HELP will
draw on a ‘toolbox that is full’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p. 160) in terms of both
Content Area Literacy (CAL) and Disciplinary Literacy (DL) strategies that promote authentic literacy experiences for adolescents (IRA 2012, p. 13). They are aware that adolescents continue to need general comprehension and study strategies that can support their learning across a range of texts and subjects, such as opportunities to predict, make connections, organise, summarise, synthesise, analyse and evaluate texts (IRA 2012, p. 5). However, adolescents also need exposure to discipline specific texts, methodologies and language use. The Literacy Expert understands explicit instruction as a highly structured and sequential process of modelling, scaffolded independence and eventual independence. Explicit instruction in reading involves awareness of strategies that are suitable to the texts and tasks students will encounter in a discipline thereby developing learners’ text knowledge (IRA 2012, p. 9). The Literacy Expert also models writing strategies that are appropriate to the discipline (Smagorinsky 2015). Certainly, oracy development is beneficial to confidence, but the Literacy Expert is also aware of its potential for cognitive gains as a ‘precursor to both reading fluency and comprehension’ (IRA 2012 p. 9), seeking opportunities to promote active listening and speaking skills through exploratory and presentational talk (Barnes 2010). Discipline specific vocabulary development is one of the most salient aspects of a DL approach to literacy development and the Literacy Expert identifies it as a key aspect of adolescent literacy learning in the subject areas (IRA 2012, p. 9), adopting a ‘multipronged’ approach to vocabulary learning (Fisher and Frey 2014). As well as pre-teaching difficult vocabulary and building word-banks, the Literacy Expert equips students with a good understanding of etymology and morphology, while also encouraging the use of language resources such as dictionaries and glossaries. In this way, the Literacy Expert offers adolescent learners a balanced approach to literacy development, and rather than relying on one approach, they draw from cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic and critical approaches to literacy development (Fang 2012). Finally, assessment is an essential part of the teaching and learning process and as with the broad range of literacy strategies, the Literacy Expert also values variety in terms of how students’ learning can be assessed, offering assessments that highlight strengths and challenges (IRA 2012, p. 11). As such, the Literacy Expert creates opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of modes, as well as in alphabetic print, such as graphically, orally or by using digital tools. They ensure that their feedback on
student learning will help to support learning and move students’ learning forward. In the Irish post-primary context, Junior Cycle reform has resulted in renewed efforts to promote a varied approach to assessing learning as well as to discuss the role of formative assessment and student reflection as integral to learning. Thus, this is an opportune time in Irish post-primary education for the Literacy Expert to embed a varied and active approach to assessment in their practice.

The argument posed in this study is that professional collaboration between a literacy specialist or ‘Expert’, and subject teacher may offer the most successful approach to blend CAL and DL strategies that will support the learning needs of adolescents in specific subject areas in the post-primary context. The Literacy Expert is certainly proficient in literacy instruction in their own subject area, and their deep knowledge of literacy coupled with an openness to collaboration in the truest sense positions them well to develop the most effective approaches to adolescent literacy development, thereby supporting all teachers in becoming Literacy Experts. Indeed, the Literacy Expert acknowledges the centrality of professional learning for all in relation to literacy. DL approaches advocate that ‘subject-matter learning is not merely learning about the stuff of the disciplines, it is also about the processes and practices by which that stuff is produced’ (Moje 2007, p.10). The Literacy Expert is aware that the content or ‘stuff of the disciplines’ may not change over time, but the modes of delivery need to change to reflect adolescent students’ out-of-school literacy practices, as well as ever-changing conceptualisations of literacy and text.

To conclude, having reviewed the data collected, collated and analysed as part of this study, it is useful to consider the literacy practices reported by participants collectively. Such an approach offers rich insight into the current literacy practices in four post-primary schools in Ireland during the implementation stage of a national literacy strategy. It would appear that three specific cases or ‘types of literacy teacher’ emerge from the findings; in the minority are the Literacy Mechanics and the Literacy Advocates, while predominantly, the teachers who participated in this study might be referred to as Typical Literacy Teachers. The literature offers further insight into how Literacy Experts might promote literacy development most effectively, presented here as a fourth case, one that can inform future discussion regarding adolescent literacy in the Irish post-primary setting in the future. Ultimately, the ‘picture of practice’ presented in this model can support classroom
teachers, but might also inform those working in teacher education and the field of literacy research about the current position of adolescent literacy development in post-primary schools in Ireland.

6.6 Considering Teachers’ Literacy Practices and Examinations: Ideological Dilemmas

I draw this discussion regarding teachers’ knowledge relating to literacy development to a close with a vignette from Seamus, weaving together some of the central preoccupations explored across this chapter; how participants value literacy and aim to embed literacy strategies to support student learning, but also, how teachers’ pedagogical choices are significantly influenced by examinations, resulting in ‘ideological dilemmas’.

‘The didactic thing is gone anyway as regards chalk and talk... group work, pair work, sharing, it’s definitely better for the child: the child learns from other kids. ...So (pause) that change is there. Is it relatively new? Yes it is. Some schools are still in the didactic stage, like, but, here ... it’s all about pair-share, student learning, and the student being the centre of the learning...it’s huge change...

At the start, you know, you love embracing the (strategies) alright? And then, you’re working away fine, you’re working through the thing and then you see a student below and you’re doing all this lovely flowery stuff in project maths, and the poor old child is below and they’re-you know-swallowed as in they’ve no idea where they are going and then you say- What am I doing here? I’m using all the literacy techniques, I’m using all the numeracy techniques, and I’m using all the pair-work. It should work!’ But the poor student is struggling. What do you do then? You shelve it for a while, and you go back to the old style to bring that student along.

I found that a struggle at times. Even though, I know it will create better learners, I know it will create better people for life after school but (pause) you’re judged on what you get on the second week in August like, you know? Which is ... pppfff (throws up hands) there’s a ‘catch-22’ there like; what way do you go? It’s a balancing act really, it is at the moment...But we’re still, you’re still judged on how many A’s you got, how many B’s you got and how many C’s you got’.

(Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch 7)

The ‘catch-22’ that Seamus alludes to is difficult for teachers to navigate. It creates cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957; McFalls and Cobb-Roberts 2001) and presents an ‘ideological dilemma’ (Billig et al., 1988; Edley 2001) for teachers. As a result of professional learning experiences, Seamus seems aware of the value of constructivist and student-centered approaches and believes that transmissive practices, what he refers to as ‘the didactic thing’, have been replaced by constructivist and
collaborative approaches such as pair work and group work. Convinced this is valuable, Seamus has adapted his practice in an effort to reduce cognitive tension or dissonance. However, increasing accountability coupled with the high-stakes nature of examinations, leads him to believe that teachers are judged by the grades their students attain in State Examinations rather than by their professional knowledge relating to classroom practices and pedagogy. There appears to be a clash of values and this raises questions about the very philosophy of education and ‘what it means to ‘teach’’. This vignette raises questions regarding the foundations of our knowledge as teachers, as Seamus wonders whether constructivist practices, while ‘creating better learners’, have the potential to realise grades in examinations. Edley describes how these ‘contrary or competing arguments’ (2001, p.203) position teachers in a way that they feels they must make compromises (Billig et al., 1988). This is explored further in the next chapter but certainly provides a valuable insight into the complex context in which teachers make choices about teaching and learning practices.

6.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the findings of this study that relate to teachers’ professional knowledge regarding literacy development by focusing on the strategies employed at whole-school and classroom level. This research highlights how teachers’ professional knowledge relating to literacy development draws heavily on Didactic Literacy Pedagogy (NewLearning 2016c) with an overwhelming focus on traditional literacy pedagogy, vocabulary, and standardisation or searching for ‘the one right answer’. While vocabulary building is an important part of literacy learning, the overwhelming focus on keywords and word acquisition reiterates earlier findings that there is quite a narrow and traditional understanding of literacy held by the majority of participants in this study, aligning predominantly with cognitive and linguistic approaches to literacy development (Fang and Schleppegrell 2010; Fang 2012). Over-reliance on these approaches potentially compromises students’ literacy development. For instance, a lack of emphasis on sociocultural and critical perspectives is evident in this study, despite increased emphasis on the sociocultural and critical demands made of students as readers, writers, speakers and listeners (Moje 2000). This aligns with other studies in the Irish context:
‘Efforts ... in the content/subject classroom (where addressed) have generally focused on the vocabulary development, fluency and basic comprehension strategies more often associated with early literacy instruction... and (while they) go some way to equipping subject teachers to address the literacy needs of adolescent students... such practices can lead to a reductive and conservative approach to literacy development by teachers, which is inadequate in the context of the literacy demands of the 21st Century’.

(Murphy et al., 2013, p.334)

When considering teachers’ professional knowledge about literacy beside the definition of literacy outlined in LNLL, these findings suggest that the pedagogical focus is predominantly on teaching reading at whole-school and classroom levels, and the focus on reading for pleasure, while laudable in and of itself, may detract from the necessity to promote comprehension and fluency. Furthermore, the reading materials chosen, consistent with those in aforementioned international studies, privilege traditional, alphabetic printed texts over other multimodal or new literacies, despite the fact the LNLL refers to ‘various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media’ (DES 2011, p.8).

Of course, promoting multimodal texts and multiple literacies will present challenges for educators in terms of challenging cultures and norms. Firstly, there are issues regarding what is regarded as legitimate and valued as ‘text’ in schools (Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2006; Gee 2015). There is a relinquishing of power and control on the part of the teacher who welcomes out-of-school literacy practices such as those evidenced by Moje’s exploration of Gansta- literacies (2000) or Leander and Boldt’s discussion of engagement with Manga (2012). In relation to digital texts and practices with which adolescents engage, other studies explore the high levels of learning that students can potentially experience. Research conducted by Gee (2015) and Abrams and Gerber (2014) highlights the sophisticated levels of literacy used by adolescents when engaged in strategic video-games, while Elmore and Coleman (2019) explore the potential of memes to teach critical media literacy skills. Darrington and Dousay (2015) contrast multimodal writing through blogs with traditional writing assignments, and Bezemer and Kress (2017) praise the incremental gains made by a 12 year old in his multimodal text-making on Facebook. While there is much to celebrate in terms of students’ literacy learning through these multimodal and digital texts and platforms, the prospect of embracing such practices and texts is also a challenging one for adolescent literacy educators as...
it may expose teachers’ own vulnerabilities as potentially less knowledgeable in the face of students’ techno literacies (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). Furthermore, because multimodal texts are not just different ‘types’ of texts but also ‘encode knowledge differently’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.230) students require new skills to navigate the often complex, rarely linear and generally multifaceted interfaces of multimodal texts, often needing help in finding their ‘reading path’ (Serafini 2012; Jewitt 2008; Walsh 2006). Students need ‘functional grammars’ (Cope and Kalantzis 2006) ‘metalanguage’ (Jewitt 2008), and a lexicon of ‘design elements’ (Serafini 2010) so that they can describe and discuss the different modes of representation. The language of semiotic systems and visual literacy may need to be translated into conceptual (Mills 2016) and instructional frameworks (Serafini 2010) that support teachers’ understanding of multimodal pedagogy. As evident from the findings of this study, post-primary teachers will need significant support if they are going to be in a position to incorporate opportunities for adolescent students to navigate a variety of text types, including digital and multimodal texts, as well as print texts.

Writing is something that is closely associated with engagement and success in examinations and explicit instruction in writing is a practice that is notably absent across the dataset, with the exception of English teachers. Participants speak about creating a ‘culture of reading’ in their schools but it is recommended that there also needs to be an examination of the culture of writing where teachers ‘teach students how to write, not simply assign them writing’ (Hicks and Steffel 2012, p.137). Students must view writing as a process that involves conscious decisions and mistakes, where they see the value of redrafting and use timely feedback from peers and teachers to support them in their writing. How well students write is dependent on how they are taught to write (Kiuhara et al. 2009) and explicit models of instruction support learning-to-write (Barton 2013). Of course, this assumes that all teachers are equipped to teach writing and this research shows that despite being experts in their disciplines, there is scant attention given to writing. Finally, it is also crucial to consider potential opportunities for students compose on screen as well as on paper.

Considering oral language development, there are some opportunities for speaking and listening reported in the strategies teachers report. However, there appears to be
an overwhelming focus on speaking and oral language production rather than on the receptive skill of listening. There is also a palpable sense that some spaces are more legitimate spaces for oracy than others. This raises a number of questions about perceptions of ‘classroom talk’ and whether or not teachers value it as a form of learning in its own right, despite arguments in the literature (Hewitt and Inghilleri 1993; Alexander 2006; Skidmore 2006; Mercer, 2006, 2014; Mercer and Howe 2012).

What becomes most obvious concerning teachers’ literacy strategies in this study is a lack of engagement with digital and critical literacy strategies. In this study, digital literacy is rarely discussed in a way that aligns with its conceptualisation in the literature. Moreover, ‘digital’ texts and devices are positioned largely as competing influences and obstacles to literacy development, when literacy is understood in traditional terms. Similarly, there are no references in the data to strategies that promote critical literacy. As highlighted in chapter two, critical literacy moves the purpose of reading beyond comprehension to critique (McLaren 1988; Molden 2007). Developing critical literacy necessitates promoting student voice through their ability to critique, and teaching students the technical resources necessary for learning how texts work (Rogers and O’ Daniels 2015). Critical literacy strategies create an awareness of the constructed nature of the message, encouraging students to explore assumptions and provide opportunities to engage in multiple readings of the same text from different perspectives (Alvermann 2002; Molden 2007; Kellner and Share 2007; Caneiro and Gordon 2013). I discuss digital and critical literacy together here as there is a very clear link between these literacies, and I encourage policymakers to consider supporting teachers in developing these competencies together. As Williams argues

‘to turn our backs on (computer mediated literacy) practices because ‘students spend so much time on them outside of class’ means we offer students no opportunities for stepping back from their practices, to reflect and analyse the literacies and how they shape their identities in more critical and thoughtful ways’.

(Williams 2005, pp.705-706)

While participants are aware of literacy strategies that can be used at whole-school and classroom level, this study finds that teachers lack confidence when discussing literacy strategies. Furthermore, the strategies reported were quite limited in scope, aligning with Irish research in this area (MacMahon 2012, 2014; Murphy et al.,
For instance, MacMahon identifies three popular support strategies that were common to all three case study schools, those being explanation, key vocabulary and repetition (2012, p.228-233). The notable exceptions to this were teachers of English who appear to be more confident, have broader understandings of literacy and greater depth of professional knowledge to address adolescent literacy. However, the literature contends that all teachers need to promote strategies such as phonological skills, age-appropriate vocabulary and comprehension strategies (Wright et al., 2013; Moats 2000). If we truly subscribe to an understanding that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’, all teachers need to be equipped to teach students how to read, write, speak and listen in their subject areas. This will require significant investment in CPD for teachers of all subjects and supports need to be tailored to the literacy demands of different subject areas rather than a generic ‘tips and tricks’ approach to literacy development.

However, the structure of post-primary education into subject silos presents a very specific context for adolescent literacy learning, one that needs to be acknowledged in relation to the literacy strategies employed in the post-primary school and how they differ from ‘basic literacy’ strategies that serve the early literacy needs of students. Because each subject has its own unique literacy demands, teachers of all subjects need support to develop awareness about the literacy strategies that are most suitable in their own context. This forces us to question the suitability of deploying ‘generic’ whole-school approaches to literacy development for adolescents. The division of knowledge into subject areas also means that ‘neither reading nor English teachers possess the requisite prior knowledge necessary to teach students how to read or write in science, social studies or mathematics’ (Gillis 2014, p.621). Perhaps a viable solution is to invest in a model operational in the U.S. where literacy instructors, trained in the area of literacy development, work alongside content-area teachers in a ‘consistent, concerted and collaborative effort’ (Brooks-Yip et al., 2015, p.12). If effective literacy instruction ‘cannot be divorced from sufficient content knowledge to understand the epistemology and philosophy and field from which the text is drawn’ (Gillis 2014, p.621), then it follows that post-primary subject-specialists, must be involved in the process of literacy instruction. They are supported by the literacy specialist who possesses the required knowledge of literacy strategies and language awareness (Fang and Coatham 2013, p.628), knowledge with
which the subject teacher may feel less comfortable. Together, teachers can work to develop comprehensive and critical engagement with the ‘literacy’ of their disciplines. This leaves us to conclude that all post-primary subject teachers need further support around the appropriateness and value of effective implementation of literacy strategies.

Looking at pedagogy from a Vygotskian perspective encourages us to consider the extent to which ‘pedagogic practice is subject to social, cultural and political influence… (and how) pedagogies arise and are shaped in particular social circumstances’ (Daniels 2007, p.307). Again, these findings are in keeping with previously cited studies in Ireland whereby

‘pressure which resulted from preparation for state examinations at secondary school level was consistently mentioned as a concern in terms of a focus on more didactic methodologies that 'taught to the test', undermining the tendency to ‘risk’ more innovative methods’.

(Devine et al., 2013, p.101)

This study illustrates how, in keeping with previous research into classroom practice, the high stakes nature of examinations in post-primary Irish education is a significant factor in determining the pedagogies and classroom practices adopted by post-primary teachers in general, but also in relation to literacy development.

Street argues that ‘we cannot avoid the implications of the deeper conceptual frameworks that underpin our practice… Understanding and defining literacy lies at the heart of doing literacy’ (2005a, p.25). Ultimately, changing practice will necessitate changing beliefs about literacy. Chapter five of this study highlights the range of definitions of literacy in the ether, many of which are traditional, and our beliefs about what it means to be literate will have a profound impact on the practices and strategies that we employ. This is evident from the different teacher profiles that emerged from this study in relation to literacy development as discussed in section 6.5. While the Literacy Mechanic was reluctant to engage with literacy strategies due to a narrow and traditional understanding of literacy, the Literacy Advocate was eager to promote literacy in a number of different ways because of their belief that literacy is a lifelong and crucial skill. The Typical Literacy Teacher, while open to literacy strategies, generally feels unprepared as a teacher of literacy. The Literacy Expert, on the other hand, has a toolbox that is full but furthermore, this
teacher sees ‘literacy as a way to engage students in the content at hand’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.6) and believes that ‘content can be learned through literacy-related processes such as reading, writing, speaking and listening’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.159). Rather than seeing literacy instruction as something that takes teachers away from content, ‘literacy becomes a scaffold for students’ learning’ (Lacina and Watson 2008, p.160) and students can improve their ‘literacy and content knowledge simultaneously’ (Gillis 2014, p 618).

Claiming that all teachers are literacy teachers is, in the words of Gearóid, ‘very visionary’ (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). However, the reality is that ‘policy can only ever act as a statement of intent; curricular practices emerge from teachers’ understandings of these intentions’ (NCCA 2016). This study illustrates the reality for post-primary teachers and through the presentation of the three teacher profiles in this chapter, it highlights how teachers are positioned along a continuum of practice in relation to adolescent literacy development; some are not engaging in literacy development, some are leading the charge, while many are somewhere in the middle, muddling through difficult waters. Meaningful change regarding literacy as a practice necessitates not only meaningful discussion about our conceptual understanding of literacy, but also about the philosophies and assumptions that guide our practices. Only then can literacy be fully understood as more than lists of keywords, as more than the ability to decode examination questions and as more than ‘the sum of its parts’.
7 Analysis of Findings Relating to Teachers’ Experiences of Policy Implementation

‘As a young teacher, I wasn’t sure that policy... had much to do with my work...I figured I would go to my classroom each day, close my door and teach my students in ways I knew they needed, a stance shared by many of my fellow teachers. Of course, in my naiveté, I didn’t realise that closing my door was in fact a political act. My teaching always involved my own or someone else’s vision for the way we should live together, and whether I acknowledged it or not, someone else’s policies or values were always operating in and around the classrooms where I’ve taught’.

(Edmondson 2004, p.418)

7.1 Chapter Introduction

While the previous two chapters presented and discussed findings regarding teachers’ beliefs and practices relating to literacy, this chapter explores teachers’ experiences of literacy policy during the implementation stage of the national literacy strategy. Darling-Hammond advocates the idea of talking to teachers about their experiences of policy implementation as a way of ‘illuminating the effects of policy’, by exploring how teachers as ‘policy recipients... viewed or experienced the delivered wisdom of legislators and bureaucrats’ (1990, p.340). Inviting teachers to share their experiences of implementing a national strategy such as LNLL may provide us with insights as to how or why policies succeed or fail. Essentially, this chapter examines how we ‘do’ policy in Irish post-primary schools. Cognisance of the context in which LNLL was implemented and the complexity of education reform, as explored previously, is crucial when considering the findings presented and discussed here. In terms of my own positioning as both an insider/practitioner and outsider/researcher (Kerstetter 2012), I aim to adopt both ‘a critical and a sympathetic eye’ regarding teachers experiences of implementation (Darling-Hammond 1990, p.345) in this exploration.

This chapter begins by exploring teachers’ perceptions of policy in an attempt to contextualise the implementation process before discussing teachers’ experiences of policy implementation. For the purpose of clarity and in keeping with the research objectives, this discussion is framed under the themes ‘opportunities’ and ‘challenges’. Furthermore, one of the objectives in this study was to establish the extent to which change has occurred in relation to literacy in post-primary education,
as a direct consequence of the introduction and implementation of LNLL. Fullan and Pomfret’s (1977) conceptualisation of change resulting from education reform is utilised here to illuminate the findings. The chapter concludes by bringing together the findings in relation to teachers’ experiences policy implementation in this study and discussing the extent to which change has occurred.

7.2 Teachers’ Perceptions of Policy

7.2.1 Positive Perceptions of Policy

A number of participants view educational reform and the introduction of new policies as ‘positive’ (Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6). Rionach views reform as a ‘good thing’ that provides teachers with opportunities to ‘look at their own practice... and change and improve’ (Religion- Ash 5). Gearóid feels that policy offers an opportunity to professionally reflect on our practice and to see that there are ‘other ways of doing things, better ways of doing things’. (English/Geography- Elm 5). Eimear believes that any policy that improves practice as well as the students’ experience of learning is worthwhile:

‘I absolutely believe in the importance of any policy that is child centred... and an awful lot of the advice being given is very worthwhile and very good practice, you know group work and round table and think-pair-share’.

(English-Ash 1)
In terms of engagement with policy documents, some participants speak about how they have engaged with LNLL closely and demonstrate a deep awareness of some of the key aspects of the policy. Gráinne (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1) comments on how her experience of leading her colleagues as LL teacher means she is ‘quite familiar’ with the document. Gobinet (English/Geography- Elm 5) speaks about how as part of her ITE, literacy was very prevalent with a module regarding literacy development, something that has evidently had an impact on her beliefs about literacy at a conceptual level and subsequently, her willingness to incorporate holistic practices relating to literacy development. Gearóid offers an informed critique of PISA testing and felt that LNLL’s statement that all teachers should be teachers of literacy is ‘very visionary’. (English/Geography- Elm 5). However, in analysing the data it became clear that positive perceptions of policy and reform are significantly outweighed by negative views of same.

7.2.2 Negative Perceptions of Policy

While some teachers demonstrate a deep understanding of LNLL, for the majority of participants, there is a lack of engagement with the policy. Some express limited knowledge of the policy itself (Áine, Art/SEN- Ash 2; Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6; Eamon, English/History/Irish- Cedar 2; Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6) while Brendan states quite frankly ‘I know absolutely nothing about it’ (Maths/Business/History-Ash 3). As we begin to explore the reasons for a lack of engagement with LNLL as a policy, it is interesting to look at Eimear’s perspective. She feels there is a negative perception of policy as ‘word-heavy and page-heavy and labour-intensive and top-down’, some of the recurring sentiments across the dataset. In relation to the LNLL, she remarks:

'I guarantee you that nobody in a school has read the literacy policy... People are so busy and that’s the reality...it isn’t reading the literacy policy they will be... it’s seen as an encroachment, something else coming down the line, by people who know nothing about the coalface of the classroom. I’m not saying that’s how I feel but I’m saying that’s how the atmosphere can be’.

(English- Ash 1)

In its broadest sense, policy is presented in the data as far removed from the daily reality of teachers’ classroom experiences. A number of participants comment on how policy is perceived as a ‘paper trail’ or ‘paper exercise’ (Eimear English- Ash 1), ‘that there are 101 policies on 101 issues just shoved inside filing cabinets’ (Erin
Participants associate policy with paperwork rather than with practice, and for many teachers, policy as a construct is distant to their daily experience. Erin comments ‘I just do my job within my own little fishbowl and at the end of the day, what goes on outside- a policy on this and policy on that- it’s what happens on the ground’ (Erin, English/History- Birch 2).

Participants’ indifference towards policy may stem from the perception that policies are imposed on teachers, that ‘the guys in Dublin are rolling out stuff, issuing policies’ (Eimear, English-Ash 1). There is a strong sense in the data that LNLL was ‘railroaded in on top of us’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4) or ‘put on top of you along with everything else in teaching’ (Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4). Gearóid argues that this commonly occurs in the area of educational policy where ‘there’s a kind of a tendency to throw stuff on top of people and expect them to kind of assimilate it or expect them to absorb it and to know what to do’ (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). There is also a suggestion that as a result of the policy, teachers feel overwhelmed; that they are ‘thrown in there and told you’re a teacher of literacy’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4) and that teachers feel as though they must conform with policy without question. Teachers use phrases like ‘we have to try and use it... because we’re told to; It’s a national strategy isn’t it?’ (Michéal, English/RE/Music- Elm 6) or ‘we’ve been told (by management) that it has to be incorporated into our subject plan’ (Ryanne, RE- Cedar 4) and overall, there is a view that literacy is ‘something that has to be done’ (Donagh, Construction/DCG- Ash 6). It is worth considering the subtitle of LNLL: ‘The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020’. Policy analysts contend that the word ‘strategy’ ‘attempts to constrain the possibilities for interpretation’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.53) suggesting that the policy is prescriptive and ‘top-down’ in its approach. This ‘involves much clearer specification of what (teachers) are expected to achieve rather than leaving it to professional judgement’ (Whitty 2002, p.67) and may explain the perceptions discussed here.

As a result, this research raises questions about the perceived purpose of policy and whether policies are to act as rule-books or guidelines. For instance, Eoghan expresses his frustration with the broadness and ambiguity of the LNLL policy, arguing that the policy itself:
This perception of policy as ‘rulebook’ rather than policy as ‘guidebook’ is also explored by Seamus when he describes it as helpful to ensure everyone is ‘singing off the same hymn-sheet’ (Science/Maths- Birch 7). Sometimes, the data suggests that participants want instructions, want to be told what to implement yet as demonstrated here, many teachers balk at the encroachment on their professional autonomy also. Therefore it is difficult to strike an appropriate balance between the two extremes.

Such a ‘perceived conformity regimes’ may exist as a result of the view that there is a lack of consultation with teachers regarding education policy reform. Despite arguments that the policy development process in Ireland involves ‘high levels of consultation’ (Kennedy 2013, p. 517), participants report a lack of ‘conversation’ regarding education reform (Eimear, English-Ash 1), arguing that they ‘haven’t been informed’ of changes that will have a direct impact on their practice (Máire, History/Maths/SEN, Birch 1). Bridget shares an experience where she and her Business colleagues were consulted about changes in her subject area, but because the facilitators were not subject specialists but rather teachers of another discipline, she questioned their ability to fully appreciate their concerns as well as whether or not they could communicate it effectively on her behalf. Bridget reported how this made her feel ‘cross... insulted in a way’. Although she appreciated ‘being asked (her) opinions’, her experience of the consultation process led her to believe that consultation was neither transparent nor meaningful (Business/LCVP- Ash 4).

The findings here also raise the perennial question of teacher workload and as is outlined in the literature, ‘innovations are often seen as threats to stakeholders in the system: any disturbance to the status quo may have unforeseen and possibly damaging consequences (Hayes 2000, p.135). There is a strong sense across the dataset that new policies bring extra work for teachers who are already experiencing significant difficulty to fulfil their role as a result of time-constraints and limited resources. Síle comments on how her initial reaction to LNLL was that it was ‘another thing for teachers to work on, apart from everything else’
(Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3). New policies are often perceived negatively as teachers try to renegotiate already demanding schedules. Donagh speaks about how his involvement in extra-curricular activities as well as ICT co-ordination on top of his teaching commitments and role as class tutor leave him feeling ‘maxed out… I don’t have any other time to give to anything else’ (Construction/DCG- Ash 6). This is echoed by Gobinet who speaks about the challenge of ‘finding the time to plan your own lessons, get all your resources... organising... having time to breathe!’ (English/Geography-Elm 5).

There is also a suggestion that teacher cynicism regarding policies may be attributed to the fact that LNLL was introduced in an era of accelerated education reform, where teachers may experience ‘initiativitis’ or policy overload (Ball et al., 2012). Eimear comments on how ‘Junior Cert reform, School Self-Evaluation, Literacy and Numeracy, the whole notion of Assessment in the school, of kids’ exams, the whole conversation got piled into one and it became a very negative conversation in my experience’ (English-Ash 1). There is a resounding sense in the data that LNLL is perceived as the ‘policy de jour’, that it is the latest in a series of policies which has resulted in teachers commenting that ‘a lot of change (is) happening’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP-Ash 4) and that LNLL ‘is the new fun-fair’ (Eimear English, Ash 1). Teachers believe that each policy brings with it new lexicon or terminology and there are several references to ‘buzzwords’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP-Ash 4; Donal, Engineering/DCG- Birch 6; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) and ‘jargon’ (Eimear, English- Ash 1) in the data.

Finally, the views and experiences vocalised here suggest that a rejection of policy could be associated with teachers’ views about the theoretical and philosophical issues that guide education reforms. Irish studies have illustrated how theoretical bases for reform are scored low in importance for teachers (Sexton 2007). Gleeson concludes that there sometimes exists a ‘scepticism in relation to key aspects of the professional knowledge base, including education studies, research and reflective practice’ (2012, p. 13). Negative perceptions of policy could also be attributed to a lack of philosophical discussion, particularly in the Irish context, regarding the purpose of education (Gleeson 2012). These are important considerations that act as a useful backdrop to consider the opportunities and challenges participants identified when implementing LNLL as a policy.
7.3 Opportunities Experienced During the Implementation Process

7.3.1 A Platform for ‘Champions of Literacy’

As explored in chapter five, many participants speak about how they view literacy as an important educational value. For Clíodhna (English/LL- Birch 5), literacy has always been a ‘priority’. Gearóid (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) believes literacy is ‘a life skill’, one he holds in ‘high regard’ while Máire (History/Maths/SEN-Birch 1) recounts her efforts to promote awareness around literacy for ’20 or 30 years’. Gobinet feels that ‘if (students) don’t have literacy, we’ve kind of failed them… it’s about commitment and getting stuck in and valuing it’ (English/Geography- Elm 5).

When discussing their experiences of implementing LNLL, these ‘champions of literacy’ regularly remark on how it supported them in advocating for literacy. For instance, Eimear (English- Ash 1) believes that LNLL provided ‘those who were involved in literacy more of a platform’ to promote literacy, stating ‘the best outcome’ of LNLL was that

‘it made things easier for those of us who had literacy high on our agenda… I suppose on some personal level (it) suited me… literacy wasn’t just a dirty word… I would have used the literacy policy to persuade the principal to give me an extra English class for literally, sitting on a beanbag and taking out a book and reading it... one thing I’ve been trying to promote all my life’.

(English- Ash 1)

Other English teachers, Erin and Clíodhna, both express how literacy, once seen as ‘engrained’ as part of English, is not ‘predominantly English’ and that ‘the push came with the policy that it kind of became something that had to spread out... to make people take ownership in other (subjects)’ (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5). Clíodhna explains that while English teachers and SEN Coordinators had been ‘tapping into (literacy) for years’, the policy has helped to spread the message about literacy further, into other departments. It is noteworthy that much of the positive commentary about literacy advocacy resides predominantly with teachers of English.

7.3.2 Awareness Regarding Literacy

There is overwhelming consensus among participants that there is much greater awareness of the importance of literacy in all research sites, reflected in the dataset where the node ‘awareness’ is coded in 25 of 26 sources. A number of participants
feel the implementation of whole-school literacy strategies changed how they viewed literacy. Donagh remarks how it wouldn’t have ‘dawned’ on him to consider the literacy needs of his students and the policy ‘definitely made (him) more conscious to make sure that students actually understood what was in the text’ (Construction/DCG- Ash 6). Seamus remarks that his view of literacy, once traditional perceived as ‘reading and writing’, has changed to include other forms of communication such as multimodal texts like videos (Science/Maths- Birch 7).

Indeed, participants comment that literacy has increased emphasis in their schools, and often attribute this to the implementation of LNLL. Simply put, ‘the word literacy is used more now’ (Bronagh, Business- Birch 3) and due to whole-school adoption of literacy strategies in different subject areas, ‘every teacher within the school is very much aware of literacy’ (Erin, English- Birch 2). Eamon (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2) explains how

‘there are literacy posters... it’s more visible... 20 years ago we wouldn’t be sitting here talking about literacy; it would have been an issue but not addressed widely... we are now addressing it on its own merits’.

(English/History/Irish- Cedar 2)

Enda (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) agrees, stating that he had ‘never heard of literacy and numeracy when (he) started teaching’. Gearóid also feels that while ‘literacy was always there, (it) just wasn’t really spoken about’. (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). From Eoghan’s perspective as LL teacher, he argues that ‘there is definitely a change’ (English/Irish/LL-Elm 1).

Awareness of literacy and acceptance of literacy as a key aspect of student learning does appear to have had an impact on teachers’ classroom practice, albeit to varying degrees. Brendan explains how he spends time decoding examination questions with students, ‘going through exam papers and literally tearing them asunder’ (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3). Donagh explains how he makes ‘more of an effort now to actually take notice of the language and the words and the key pieces of information that’s in a text... and to make a conscious effort to make sure that students understand that’ (Construction/DCG- Ash 6). Participants speak about reflecting on the approaches they take to literacy development in their practice, resulting from greater awareness of literacy. In contrast with previous Irish studies that explore attitudes to literacy conducted prior to the introduction of LNLL
(Conway et al., 2011; MacMahon 2012; Murphy et al., 2013), this finding appears to point to a very positive success of the national strategy to promote literacy; awareness regarding literacy appears to be high across the four research sites.

7.3.3 A Shared Responsibility to Promote Literacy

Another positive finding revealed is this study concerns evidence of a shared responsibility for literacy development, with 15 participants explicitly stating how they see literacy as part of their subject, and the responsibility of all teachers. This includes teachers from many different subjects including English, History, Maths, SEN, Business, Irish, Science, Technology subjects, Geography and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). Other participants refer to literacy strategies that they use in their practice and accept their role as ‘teachers of literacy’ more implicitly, teaching students the language of Business (Bronagh, Business -Birch 3) or how to read instructions in Science (Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8).

Across the four research sites, participants comment on a whole-school effort to promote literacy, albeit to varying degrees. Erin contends ‘everybody realises genuinely and recognises that it is everybody’s job... there is a very positive attitude towards literacy here’ (English/History- Birch 2). Similarly in Elm High, Gobinet comments on how ‘most people are very open to it... everyone is starting to make an effort’ (English/Geography- Elm 5). Gearóid speaks about how he has perceived a move away from the ‘old misconception that literacy is kind of the remit of the English department; that is certainly not the case here’ (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2), an experience shared by Roisín who recalls how ‘when (she) started in 2011, literacy was a major problem... It’s not just an English problem anymore, it’s across the board’ (English/Religion- Birch 9). Fullan and Pomfret’s (1977) implementation model acknowledges that changes in value internalisation as well as changes in roles and behaviour are necessary to realise change. While teachers in this study appear to have internalised literacy as an educational value, it is worth questioning the limited range of literacy practices reported to support embedding literacy as outlined in the previous chapter when considering if behaviours have changed to match the change in values.
7.3.4 Making Literacy Visible

Given the increased awareness regarding literacy as a concept and as a practice, as well as the acceptance that literacy is 'everybody’s job’, there was undoubtedly a conscious effort in all four research sites to ‘make the invisible visible’ (Mac Mahon 2014). As discussed in chapter six, literacy initiatives are highlighted on a screen in the entrance hall of the school in Birch High, posters decorate the corridors and in classrooms in Cedar College, and in Elm High, ‘every teacher has a section for their keywords on the board’ (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). In all research sites, literacy is an agenda item during whole-staff meetings (Eimear, English- Ash 1; Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Erin, English/History- Birch 2; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1; Michéal, English/Religion/Music – Elm 6), is raised at subject meetings (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Donagh, Construction/DCG- Ash 6; Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE, Elm 3; Shannon, French/Spanish, Elm 4; Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Ryanne, Religion – Cedar 4) and is formally recorded in subject planning documents (Donagh Construction/DCG-Ash 6; Bronagh, Business- Birch 3; Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4). Other teachers speak about how literacy had become the ‘buzzword’ (Donal Engineering/DCG- Birch 6; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) and formed ‘part of the conversation’ that participants have with colleagues regarding teaching and learning (Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1) or that teachers might have with the SENO in relation to Learning Support (Gráinne English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1; Sorcha English/History/SEN- Cedar 3). Finally, the majority of participants highlighted how literacy awareness and whole-school strategies had contributed greatly to promoting a culture of reading in their schools.

Taking these findings collectively encourages us to once more consider the importance of beliefs and values in the implementation process. Fullan and Pomfret (1977) contend that one crucial dimension of implementing reform is value internalisation, whereby those involved in curriculum change value the changes and are committed to them. It is evident from the data that when participants’ values and beliefs align with policy, as it did for the literacy advocates here, there is willingness
and a commitment to implement policy. The fact that these participants’ values align with the policy aspirations in LNLL may help to explain their positive reaction to this aspect of their implementation experience highlighting the importance of teachers’ beliefs in bringing about meaningful change (Gleeson and O Donnabháin, 2009).

7.3.5 Supports for Teachers to Implementing Change

Any successful implementation process needs to be adequately supported in terms of material resources such as time and space, as well as expertise and knowledge (Fullan and Pomfret 1977; Hord 1987). Participants identify a number of supports for implementing literacy as a policy.

7.3.5.1 The Role of School Leaders

A number of participants refer to how school leaders highlighted the importance of literacy as a concept and a practice in their schools. In Ash High, Bridget refers to how support for the policy came from the ‘top down’ (Business/LCVP- Ash 4) while in Birch College, Erin describes how management was ‘one hundred percent on board’ in terms of supporting staff (English/History-Birch 2). In all research sites, school principals highlighted literacy at whole-staff meetings (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Rionach, RE- Ash 5; Erin, English/History- Birch 2; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Shannon, French/Spanish- Elm 4). Leaders also facilitated on-site literacy CPD events (Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6; Erin, English/History- Birch 2; Enda, Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) and Enda maintains that in any implementation effort, teachers ‘need support and (management are) willing to put on the in-services or bring in the speakers’ (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5). Others comment on how they were aware that their school leaders ‘make an effort... and supply materials’ (Bridget, Business/LCVP- Ash 4), something that teachers regard as supportive.

As well as resourcing and organisational supports (Fullan and Pomfret 1977), participants feel supported by leaders who demonstrate an openness to change. Sorcha argues that her school leader has ‘always been incredibly supportive... very very well informed (and) at the cutting edge of things’ (English/History/SEN- Cedar 3). Gearóid describes his school leaders as ‘dynamic... open-minded and open to research’ and that not only do they encourage teachers to ‘upskill’ through
engagement in CPD, but that they also put supports in place to ‘really allow that to happen’. (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). Similarly, Eoghan (English/Irish/LL- Elm 1) feels that his principal encouraged staff to take on ‘informal’ leadership roles, thereby encouraging initiative in others (Kouzes and Posner 2012). In fact, Eamon goes so far as to argue that the implementation of any policy ‘swings on principals really’ and that the extent to which the principal ‘orchestrates the implementation (is) critical to the implementation of policies’ (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2).

McMillan and colleagues (2016) draw on findings from a cross-border study in Ireland where teachers reported, in focus groups and questionnaires, that the relationships between ‘leader and led’ is a contributory factor to a teachers’ decision to engage with CPD, particularly in relation to encouragement from school leaders.

More generally, the literature identifies the active involvement of leaders as a crucial condition for effective implementation of educational reforms (Hord 1987; Fullan et al., 1990; Little 1993; Gleeson et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2013; McMillan et al., 2016). By highlighting literacy at whole-staff meetings and putting resources in place to support teachers, school leaders ‘wield decisive influence in determining whether or not implementation takes place’ (Hord 1987, p.16). Bassett-Jones and Lloyd (2005) highlight how perceptions of the school leader as knowledgeable, approachable and supportive, promotes positive and respectful relationships between leaders and their colleagues. Effective school leaders need to ‘listen, link and lead’ as well as ‘model, teach and learn’… through directing and steering, building widespread capacity and ownership, and being transparent about strategy and results’ (Fullan 2009, pp.123-124). Such leadership is evident in the experiences reported by teachers in this study.

7.3.5.2 **Literacy Link Teachers: Leaders of Learning**

The ‘Literacy Link Model’ identifies the LL teacher and Literacy Core team as informal leadership roles that position teachers as leaders of change in relation to literacy. However, such an understanding of these roles varied between research sites. In Ash High, there seemed to be a lack of clarity regarding the team. When asked about the presence of a literacy team or literacy co-ordinator in their school, Bridget is aware that there is a literacy team but admits that she doesn’t know ‘who is on it’, (Business/LCVP- Ash 4) while Rionach responds ‘not that I know of’ (Religion- Ash 5). In Cedar College, reactions are similarly mixed. Enda refers to ‘a
team (of) designated teachers who bring (literacy) to the fore and keep us updated with different strategies’ (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5) while Eamon seems a little less certain stating ‘I think there is a literacy team’ (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2) but doesn’t elaborate further. Síle and Gearóid (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2) in Elm High were aware of a ‘committee’ but were unclear who exactly was on the team. They had a similar view regarding the role of the literacy team to other participants; that the team’s role is to make teachers aware of possible areas or strategies that subject teachers could then ‘take on board’ and implement in their classroom practice. Birch College is possibly the most positive in terms of awareness of the presence of their literacy team and participants make frequent reference to their support, highlighting the initiatives the team coordinate and their willingness to lead on-site CPD events. This suggests that the success of the cascade model, depended greatly on school context and culture; willingness to ‘buy-in’ to the whole-school initiatives (Fullan and Pomfret 1977), as well as on the strategies and organisational structures that were put in place to make literacy visible across the school (Gleeson et al., 2002), something explored more in section 7.4.

7.3.6 Working Together as a Support

The introduction and implementation of LNLL and SSE presented teachers with opportunities for collaboration. Collaboration is highlighted in Irish education policy documents as an expectation of how teachers should work (DES 2011, 2016, 2017; DES Inspectorate 2016), as well as in the literature as both an effective, and sometimes essential, professional practice (Fullan 1993; Hargreaves 1994; Senge et al., 1999; Hargreaves 2000; Moloney 2000; Fullan 2011; Shah 2012). In a general sense, one collaborative endeavour highlighted in this study is team-teaching. Gearóid recalls how it provides him and his colleagues an opportunity for ‘pooling resources, for generating ideas and looking at different ways’ of teaching and learning (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). Brendan feels that team teaching with a colleague in Maths afforded them both opportunities to differentiate for the range of student abilities in the class while also offering students greater variety in terms of different teaching styles (Maths/Business/History- Ash 3). Eoghan describes his experience of team-teaching as ‘a dream’: 
‘We worked together... we were both the lead teachers... (students) could talk to me about certain things, they could understand things, by giving them more attention... to sit down with a student and go through what they had read, rather than having to worry about what the other 19 are doing... the more one-on-one help or small group help they got, they improved dramatically’.

(Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1)

Erin highlights how programmes link LCA and JCSP promote opportunities to work together and uses an example of how English and Business teachers work together as part of the Enterprise Module for LCA English and Communication:

‘You get to work with other teachers and see what they’re doing so you’re learning from each other and I suppose, we are very supportive of each other. I think there is a very good atmosphere in the school in terms of sharing resources... or sharing new ideas’.

(Erin, English/History- Birch 2)

Other participants echo this sentiment and speak about potential links between History and English in TY (Gráinne, English/Geography/LL, Cedar 1) while Enda discussed the cross-curricular opportunities between Material Technology (Engineering) and History, where study of decorative metal-work, enamelling and jewellery making fit well with students’ study of the Bronze Age and medieval times (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5). Sometimes opportunities to collaborate emerged from more specific needs in relation to subjects or to students and Brendan recalls how recent curricular changes encouraged Maths colleagues ‘to sit down together’ (Maths/Business/History- Ash 3) and consider how such change could be managed at classroom level.

An obvious example of collaboration for literacy development pertains to working with the SEN coordinator, referenced as a crucial support in all research sites (Rionach Religion- Ash 5; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1; Ryanne, Religion- Cedar 4; Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). Many participants regard their SEN coordinator as a point of contact, someone to consult regarding students who might have specific literacy needs. They would often address staff at meetings (Eimear English-Ash 1; Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1), encourage and support colleagues in relation to literacy strategies they could use (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3), provide colleagues with reading ages and results of aptitude tests (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1; Iona, Irish, Birch 4; Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8) and make information available
about resources and initiatives in relation to literacy (Rionach, Religion- Ash 5; Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch 7). Eoghan spoke about how the SEN coordinator in his school ‘will approach (literacy) in a way that they are trained to do’ (English/Irish/LL - Elm 1).

This study finds that attitudes to sharing and working together are largely positive among the participants. This is encouraging as the literature contends that collaborative cultures are crucial for sustainable reforms and whole-school change. Perhaps, however, there is a missed opportunity. LNLL and SSE presented a very real opportunity to collaborate for professional learning, particularly if the potential of a Literacy Core Team was fully exploited. As already reported, a number of participants comment on low confidence levels in relation to their readiness to teach literacy but also speak about the benefits of professional collaboration to support them and equip them in their role as teachers of literacy. A crucial aspect of collaboration is professional dialogue or learning conversations (Hargreaves 2000; Lawson 2004). The Literacy Core Team, if fully utilised, has the potential to promote confidence levels regarding literacy development by creating spaces for professional reflection and discussion; ultimately by building a professional learning community (O’ Sullivan 2011) or a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). Research conducted by Thibodeau (2008) concerning the development and progress of a small teacher community project supports this argument. She describes the success of a professional collaborative learning group formed to investigate teachers’ knowledge, understanding and instructional practices relating to literacy. The eight high school teachers were from a variety of subject backgrounds including English, Geometry, Family and Consumer Science but all expressed low confidence levels regarding literacy development in adolescents. Ranging from 4-35 years of experience as teachers, they worked collaboratively in their school for a year supported by each other as well as a literacy specialist who provided advice based on research in the literacy initiative field. At the end of the project, there was a significant increase in both teachers’ confidence levels and student achievement pertaining to literacy.

This study proposes that while collaboration is happening, perhaps it is happening in pockets rather than across schools. Although there are some references to cross-curricular or inter-disciplinary collaboration, the reality is that teachers are still
working ‘very much as departments’ (Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). This highlights some of the problems regarding the structure of post-primary education into traditional ‘subject silos’. Department collaboration is a welcome step away from the traditional experience of teachers isolated in their classrooms (Lortie 1975; Fullan 1990; O’ Brien et al., 1995; Hargreaves 2000; Moloney 2000; Elmore 2003; Timperley et al 2007; Fullan 2011). However, the assumptions regarding ‘whole-school’ collaboration presented in policy documents needs careful consideration in the Irish context, something explored further in section 7.4.5 and 7.4.6.

7.3.7 **The Potential of Professional Dialogue**

One of the benefits of collaboration is that it can present teachers with professional learning opportunities through investigation, research and discussion. Professional dialogue could, therefore, be viewed as a professional development experience ‘that utilizes discourse among peers as a means to grow professionally and to help teachers embrace newer and alternative forms of classroom pedagogy and assessment’ (Pourdavood et al., 2015, p.593). An interesting as well as unanticipated finding that emerged during this research was the number of participants who comment on how they had engaged in professional reflection, albeit to varying degrees, as part of the data collection process. For instance, Eimear thanked me for the opportunity presented by the interview:

‘To be asked questions, to have an opportunity to answer them and expand... that well has never been tapped into by policies. That conversation and engagement with the ‘on-the-ground’ reality is what literacy needs to go to the next level’.

(English-Ash 1)

Eimear also reflected on how she had never taken the time or space to consider how the policy had legitimised her practice and educational philosophy, but that the interview process had afforded her that space. Similarly, as our interview ended, Bridget remarked on how she hoped to ‘go back and update the literacy strategy in Business’ as she felt that following the conversation, teachers in her department ‘need more strategies and not just keywords’ (Business/LCVP-Ash 4).

Donagh, (Construction/DCG-Ash 6) Bronagh (Business-Birch 3) and Roisín (English/Religion-Birch 9) all spoke predominantly about reading when initially asked about their understanding of literacy. However, by the end of each interview
all three remarked that literacy was more than reading, seeking to build on their initial response. For instance, Donagh spoke about how in his subjects, his understanding of literacy focused on the language and terminology in the subject area and strategies concerned reading texts to identify keywords, to extract key information and to understand the language used in textbooks or on posters. However, towards the end of the interview he paused before commenting ‘well (pause) there’s probably more’ adding

‘I’d say, reading, writing, understanding (pause) demonstrating maybe?... In construction studies, you go from an explanation to give a visual explanation or a sketch or something so that’s part of it as well, to be literate’.

(Construction/DCG- Ash 6)

Again, when discussing traditional associations between reading and writing with Bronagh, she remarks

B: ‘And I never take that in, you just said writing there but I never take that in’
R: No?
B: I don’t. To me, yeah, it’s just words... But I do still need them to do that (laughs) but I’ve just never taken it into consideration!

(Business- Birch 3)

Similarly as the interview drew to a close with Roisín, my final question concerned what it means to be literate in Ireland in the 21st century. She paused and seemed to reflect on some of what she had shared before commenting:

‘Well (pause) it’s not just (pause) even though I focus on books, it’s not just reading books. Literacy is words, spoken words, email, telephone calls; it’s everything in a person’s life. It’s not just about opening a book and reading it... There are so many different layers to it. Just to get them to understand. And for myself, I suppose, at times!’ (laughs)

(English/Religion- Birch 6)

Initially Michéal spoke quite passionately about his belief that literacy and numeracy lend themselves more easily to some subjects than to others, focusing particularly on a link between English and literacy or maths and numeracy. Michéal remarked how

‘that’s just natural, innate, that’s what you think. Numeracy lends itself better to some subjects, like history obviously and maths obviously, and religion because of the dates... but English is more in tune with literacy’.

(English/Religion/Music- Elm 6)
However, later in the interview, Michéal reflected on how ‘I suppose (pause) they kind of all are because you’re reading in all subjects (pause) You know, it’s very (pause) it’s dense!’ (laughs)’ (English/Religion/Music - Elm 6).

While transcribing and analysing the data, I noted in my journal noted how these participants seemed to experience a shift in thinking in relation to some aspects of literacy over the course of the interview process; it seems that these professional conversations afforded some participants time and space to consider their of literacy and their literacy practices. Without speculating wildly or making any grand claims, it is certainly positive to note that a relatively short 40 minute conversation has the potential to challenge assumptions about literacy and this was indeed an unanticipated yet welcome finding in the data. It provides evidence to support calls for the professional learning opportunities that can emerge from dialogic, collaborative practice.

It is evident that there are a number of positive experiences to emerge from implementing LNLL at school level. In relation to literacy, increased awareness regarding literacy as a concept and a shared responsibility for its development are particularly positive: such attitudes are crucial to supporting teachers as teachers of literacy in their respective subject spaces. As highlighted in chapter six, teachers now need greater support in recognising a broad range of strategies and text types to support adolescent literacy learning and this is explored further in the implications of this study in chapter eight. Many participants also speak favourably of collaborative practice, particularly in relation to feeling supported by colleagues through professional dialogue opportunities. Having considered the opportunities, supports and positive aspects of teachers’ experience of enacting a national policy at school level, I now turn to some of the challenges that teachers faced while implementing LNLL.

7.4  Challenges Experienced During the Implementation Process

7.4.1  The Policy Context: Teachers’ ‘Reality’ in the Current ‘System’

When examining teachers’ experiences of policy implementation during data analysis, two phrases- ‘the system’ and ‘the reality’- were expressed repeatedly by participants and therefore coded accordingly in NVivo. Analysis of these nodes
provides insight into some of the negative experiences reported here. Typically, when these phrases are used, participants are speaking about workload, time constraints and accountability measures that are associated with the high stakes examination system that currently exists in Ireland. In fact, in almost all of the interviews, there is explicit and inescapable reference to the centrality of examinations in teachers’ professional experiences.

During data collection and analysis, I took notes in my reflective journal and made memos in NVivo relating to teacher’s references to their ‘reality’.

‘It is interesting to note how teachers make reference to ‘reality’ as ‘other’, as separate to or in contrast with something else. It was frequently accompanied by tones of frustration-weariness-body language was interesting. Erin in particular expressed this as she banged the table and her tone was one of sadness as she reflected on the ‘reality’ of exams and public perceptions of the work of teachers. Brendan spoke in an animated way; he shrugged and repeatedly threw up his hands as he discussed the ‘reality’ of mixed ability classes, class size and looming exams and the frustrations this presented for him.’

(NVivo Memo 20th April 2017)

This was something deemed worthy of exploration across the dataset. For Eimear (English- Ash 1), who refers to ‘reality’ on nine separate occasions, the ‘reality’ of teachers’ professional experiences encapsulates many things. Her reality is that teachers are hardworking and well-intentioned, that they are time-poor and curtailed by deadlines, that their work is rarely understood by the public or by external parties and that all too often, teachers can be isolated as professionals. For Erin, the reality is ‘the academic world we live in’ (English/History- Birch 2) and for her, many of her students struggle to participate in and access learning in a meaningful way. For Clíodhna, the reality concerns her frustration that despite her willingness to engage with active learning methodologies, the bottom line for parents concerns the grades that students attain in examinations. She argues that ‘there is a system and we’re caught’ (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5).

Many participants associate ‘reality’ with high-stakes assessment. Brendan feels his teaching is curtailed by the State Examinations arguing ‘it’s the system. I’m working towards the exam...It’s not the way I’d like to do it. But it’s the reality’ (Maths/Business/History-Ash 3). In terms of system-wide practices that are explored in this study, both Bronagh (Business- Ash 4) and Sinéad (Maths/Science- Birch 8) speak about how learning notes and rote-learning are ‘unfortunate’ but necessary for
students to succeed in exams. In Engineering, Enda argues that there is less emphasis on skills and that ‘it’s about what (students) know and feeding it back’ (Engineering/DCG/TG- Cedar 5). Eamon succinctly states that, ‘exams dictate’ (English/History/Irish- Cedar 2) while Síle comments on how ‘you’re constrained by the exam’ (Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3) and for many participants in this study, exams determine how teachers teach and how students learn. While this has already been explored in chapter six, in this chapter I consider ‘the pull of predictability’ (Stobart 2008) of high stakes assessment using the lens of ‘teacher experience’ rather than that of ‘teacher knowledge’.

7.4.2 An Era of Accountability

The literature regarding increasing accountability in education explored in chapter one is considered in this chapter as I examine teachers’ experience of implementation for two reasons. Firstly, accountability regimes form part of the contextual backdrop to the implementation of LNLL (McDermott 2012; Hennessy and Mannix-McNamara 2013). Secondly, accountability emerged as a theme when many of the participants discussed their experiences of implementing LNLL (Ball 2003; Guskey 2007). Eimear expresses particularly strong feelings about accountability and while such feelings are not as explicit in other participants’ accounts, there are certainly a number of implicit references across the dataset:

‘I’m thinking of staffroom conversations and I’m hearing hurt. There is a lot of hurt in teaching… There’s an awful lot of criticism of teachers in the media all the time… (Teachers) make one wrong error of judgement and they can be crucified by management, by parents, accountable to the department, crucified by the union. For an awful lot of teachers, teaching is NOT a positive experience. It is an isolating experience and a fearful experience’.

(English- Ash 1)

We turn now to examine some of the potential causes of feelings of negativity and isolation that teachers reported in this study.

It became apparent that the current structure of examinations in Ireland, frequently referred to by participants as the ‘system’, is negatively perceived in terms of teachers’ professional experiences. 16 of the 26 teachers in this study refer to pressure and time constraints to ‘cover the course’. There is frequent reference to the length of courses and the volume of content to be ‘covered’ (Brendan, Maths/Business/History-Ash 3; Bronagh, Business- Birch 3), to the idea of ‘getting
through’ topics (Donagh, Construction/DCG -Ash 6; Donal, Engineering/DCG-Birch 6), and not going ‘off-course’ (Clódhna, English/LL-Birch 5). Shannon remarks that while she enjoys teaching a novel in a foreign language to her TY students, ‘you don’t always have the luxury of doing that when you’re following a curriculum and an exam’ (French/Spanish- Elm 4). Eamon (English/Irish/History-Cedar 2) contrasts this to his experience of having ‘no course’ in TY and that gives you the ‘latitude and freedom to experiment a little’. Of course, this experience is also an international one and the literature acknowledges that at post-primary level, ‘the success of the curriculum is gauged by the coverage of content’ (O Brien et al., 1995, p.448, see also Sizer 1984; Gleeson 2009; Hipwell and Klenowski 2011; Gillis 2014; Smith 2016).

Experiences of accountability are also evident when teachers speak about expectations regarding documentation. The noticeable increase in the ‘paperwork and admin side’ of teaching (Iona, Irish-Birch 4) is presented as an obstacle as teachers struggle to ‘get the time and energy to put into (their) teaching; it takes a lot’ (Áine, Art/SEN-Ash 2). Teachers feel there is pressure associated with having to document literacy as a consideration in their plans (Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6) in an effort to ‘make it all more transparent’ (Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE-Elm 3). Ryanne expresses that this is something that ‘comes from management- you have to do it and incorporate it... you have to get on with it’ (Religion- Cedar 4).

A number of participants also refer to their experiences of inspection of their practice by members of the DES Inspectorate. At its most negative, this experience was described as one where teachers felt ‘terrorised’ or a very real sense of ‘fear’ when they perceived the role of the inspector as one that concerned accountability. Eimear captures this most evocatively, an experience she believes is shared by her colleagues:

‘Drive-by inspectors are considered to be like the tax collectors of the Old Testament. There is this sense of ‘How dare they pull in here to tell me how to do what they couldn’t do themselves... and drive off then and tick boxes about me? That’s how it is perceived. ... Inspection is a dirty word still... There still isn’t any sense that inspection is to help people, you know? To affirm good practice and maybe suggest ways to change that would lead to better practice... People feel terrorised in some cases that people are going to come in and make them accountable or assess them or examine them’.

(English-Ash 1)
The sense of external accountability that is associated with inspection is palpable among participants when they speak about Whole School Evaluations (WSE) (Sorcha, English/History/SEN- Cedar 3) and literacy targets (Gráinne, English/Geography/LL -Elm 1). Both Eimear and Sorcha make reference to the ‘threat’ of ‘drive-bys’, a colloquialism for ‘Incidental’ or unannounced inspections and Brendan speaks about the inspector standing in his class to ‘watch (and) judge’(Maths/Business/History- Ash 3). Again, there are references to ‘reality’ as Erin comments

‘Let’s get real here... if you have the inspector looming over your head, everybody wants to have the correct terminology to present to the inspector... nobody wants to let themselves down, nobody wants to let the school down’.

(English/History- Birch 2)

A number of participants express how they feel that parents can often hold teachers accountable (Eimear, English-Ash 1; Erin, English/History- Birch 2; Bronagh, Business- Birch 3) and describe this as an ‘external pressure’ (Bronagh, Business- Birch 3). Teachers cite their experiences at Parent-Teacher meetings as well as perceived expectations in terms of assessment and reporting of grades, arguing that there is an increasing demand to track student progress and records, to have the ‘results on paper’ (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5). Gráinne speaks about how teachers are expected to track student progress so ‘you need to have 10-15 results when parents come to PT meetings’ (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). Parents can also influence teachers’ pedagogy. Clíodhna explains how she experiences ‘huge pressure’ from parents when she adopts student-centered approaches to teaching and learning:

But it’s parents! ... And that’s the reality of it... us saying ‘he was wonderful in his group-work’ and they’ll say ‘Great! But what grade did he get?’ Because ...it’s driven by exam results. There’s huge pressure. Oh it’s huge. ‘When are ye giving out those notes to them for them to learn them off by heart?’... So you’re wondering then about the value of putting them in a group and getting them to develop (critical thinking skills) if they don’t get the same grade!?’ ... There is a system though that they’re... we’re caught... They do want results and if they don’t do well, they’re like, what happened... They want the results on paper because they know that’s the way the system works’.

(English/LL- Birch 5)
A similar experience is reported by Síle as she reflects on and contrasts her experiences in her previous school, which she describes as a ‘very, very highly academic school’ with her experiences in Elm High:

*I found where I was teaching, the bottom line was results. And it wasn’t just school driven, but parent-driven as well... here, I find, even though obviously the academic is the focus of every school... It’s one part of it... it’s kind of like I’m starting all over again because I’m doing the non-exam... you do teach to the exam, you know? And when that is taken away, that you’d keep a different range of abilities motivated and interested... So you have to actually teach for the ‘subjects sake’ you know?*

(Religion/Geography/SPHE - Elm 3)

While participants report resistance and challenge in relation to parents, League Tables and National Averages are also perceived as an accountability measure, documented in the literature as a feature of many education systems (Ball 1999; Lubinski and Myers 2016; Sjøberg 2016) and when discussed here, it is a practice presented as unjust, inequitable and deeply problematic:

*’In the harsh light of day, in the academic world we live in... it comes down to league tables and it comes down to results... It’s very difficult when people on the outside looking in don’t understand the work that goes into a child ... I find that hard to take... I find League Tables disgraceful. They are no reflection of what goes on in a school... they just show a school is down there at the bottom so ‘there’s nothing happening there’. It’s hard to feel that, you know?’*

(Erin, English/History-Birch 2)

*’You’re putting your subject up against national averages... evaluating it; you want it to be seen that your subject is doing well... obviously (League Tables) don’t take in the holistic development of a child... they don’t allow for individuality and that student achieving their best... You can’t compare this school to another school... For some children, going to (Named University), they are well capable of doing it. For another child, finishing the Leaving Cert. Applied programme is an achievement’.*

(Bronagh, Business-Birch 3)

What is interesting to note in the context of this study is the impact that these constructs have on the morale of teachers. The feelings of competition and categorisation that ranking systems in education create are ‘hard to take’ and teachers balk at the inequality that such systems highlight, but do not acknowledge. Indeed, the inaccurate, damaging and demoralising nature of League Tables has been explored in the literature (Lynch et al., 2012). Nonetheless, ‘success’ in post-primary education is closely aligned with success in examinations and with being in a position to compete with national averages and public perceptions have a very real
impact on teachers’ professional experiences. Undoubtedly, as highlighted in chapter six, this also provides an insight into the arguably narrow range of literacy practices reported in this study.

The negative impact of accountability and performativity regimes on teachers can be viewed here as a significant obstacle to meaningful reform and it is argued here that the current structure of high-stakes assessment in Ireland has the most significant impact on teachers’ experiences of accountability. In keeping with the findings of MacMahon’s study, ‘the central influence exerted by the examination system and the points system is a dominant theme’ (2012, p.235) and therefore, we will now turn to how it has shaped teachers’ experiences of implementing LNLL.

7.4.3 Literacy or the Leaving Certificate: The Impact of High-Stakes Assessment on the Implementation of LNLL

For many participants in this study, the exam is identified as the ‘end-goal’; they must ‘work towards an exam’ (Brendan, Maths/Business/History-Ash 3) or ‘get to the exam’ (Bronagh, Business- Birch 3). As explored at length in chapter six, some participants openly acknowledge that such circumstances significantly influence a teacher’s pedagogical choices as ‘you’re teaching to the exam’ (Seamus, Maths/Science-Birch 7). This is a natural consequence in a system of high-stakes assessment, well documented in the literature (Internationally in Darling-Hammond 1990; Galton 2007; Berliner 2011; And in Ireland Gleeson 2009, 2010; Gleeson and O’ Donabháin 2009; Devine et al., 2013; O’ Donoghue et al., 2017), where ‘there will inevitably be teaching to the test if the test is perceived as being important’ (Stobart 2008, p.103). Stobart explores the power of assessment, particularly high-stakes assessment, to

‘control what goes on in education and training… how assessment shapes curriculum, teaching and learning’ and his work explores the dominance of an ‘instrumental view of assessment which pervades much of teaching and learning worldwide’.

(2008, p.89)

The Irish context in particular has been referred to as ‘exceptional’ for the level of scrutiny and media attention given to state examinations, particularly the Leaving Certificate examination (O’ Donoghue et al., 2017). In such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that teachers perceive literacy initiatives as ‘interfering’ with the
ordinary business of subject learning in classrooms sometimes, particularly in ‘exam classes’ or senior classes such as 5th or 6th year groups (Eoghan, English/Irish/LL-Elm 1), where the exam ‘has become more of a focus than literacy’ (Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5). This was also Roisin’s experience:

‘I think it depends on the level of the class… if you’ve a very good class (literacy strategies) get a little bit ignored because you’re focusing on the more important things. You’re focusing on what they need to learn. Now I’m talking about very Higher Level kids… Higher Level in 6th year… you’d be hoping they’d be kind of beyond that, the literacy issues… if you have a school where you have a very high standard of student, you almost never hear anything about literacy… That’s the truth’.

(English/Religion- Birch 9)

Making specific reference to both subject syllabi and state examinations, one of Reidy’s research findings contends that

‘the syllabi do not put emphasis on the explicit teaching of literacy. Marks are not deducted for bad spelling and grammar. Therefore teachers’ instruction of students is often informed by what is necessary according to past papers and marking schemes. If there is no reason to teach literacy in a specific subject then it will not be taught, even if the teacher believes in the importance of literacy in general’.

(Reidy 2013, p.65)

What emerges here is how the dominance of the high-stakes assessment in Ireland influences teachers’ pedagogy but also that the priority can often be on subject content. These views, coupled with an understanding of literacy as ‘the basics’, can potentially results in literacy strategies being viewed as secondary to preparation for examinations. As Berliner memorably remarked, ‘we treasure what is measured’ (2011, p.299). Ironically, the broad understandings of literacy explored in the literature suggest that neglecting students’ literacy needs can result in students struggling to perform in examinations. Furthermore, discrete marks for ‘literacy’ need not be explicit. Reading and writing, supported by speaking and listening, and being able to interrogate, analyse and respond to what they experience in examination papers is all supported by literacy strategies. We are reminded of the belief that ‘literacy is not something to add to an over-crowded plate; literacy is the plate’ (Irvin et al., 2007, p.23). The need to revisit and challenge traditional assumptions about literacy, and in particular, to explore the prevalence of the ‘literacy-content dualism’ (Draper et al., 2005) is highlighted as one of the key implications of this research, as discussed in the concluding chapter of this study.
However, this research also highlights the urgent need to address the model of high-stakes assessment that dominates Irish post-primary education, another issue discussed in the implications of this study.

7.4.4 ‘Time is our Greatest Enemy’

Participants echo Eimear’s sentiment regarding time across the four research sites and many identify a lack of time as a significant obstacle to literacy development (Bridget Business/LCVP- Ash 4; Bronagh, Business- Birch 3; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1; Eamonn, English/History/Irish- Cedar 2; Eoghan, English/Irish- Elm 1). For instance, Brendan comments on how ‘you have them three times a week. There is a long course there... I have too many sitting in front of me and I don’t have time’ (Maths/Business/History- Ash 3). Bronagh agrees, pointing to how ‘time is a major challenge inside in class ... literacy is such a big area but our courses haven’t reduced, the content hasn’t reduced’ (Business, Birch 3).

Outside class, time management can also be an issue in terms of teachers’ workload. For Eoghan, time was a support he needed as LL teacher:

We were told we would be allocated time within school-time to meet and we never were. We never were... It definitely has made the literacy team suffer a bit ... we are allocated the back-ends of some meetings like ... it’s more Croke Park and you know what 5 O’Clock on a Wednesday evening is like... And you’re saying ‘I want you to do this and everyone has to do this by the end of term’ and you know, everyone is like, ‘Oh, we have to do, this and this and this’. You can see teachers tutting and switching off and it was difficult... but again, there’s thousands of pressures on (the principal) to timetable things and cover... but I think it would have made it a bit more formal... we could pin-point who is doing a job, just to be given a bit more time’.

(English/Irish/LL- Elm 1)

Gráinne expressed a similar experience when leading her literacy team. The logistics of organising team meetings for the six colleagues on the literacy team meant that it ‘became impossible to arrange the times to have everybody out of class’ (English/Geography/LL- Cedar 1). Time is a crucial resource for the successful implementation of policies (Fullan and Pormfret 1977; Hord 1987; Darling-Hammond 1990; Timperley et al 2007) as teachers need time to ‘understand new concepts, learn new skills and to develop new attitudes and tolerances’ (Cambone 1994, p.61). In relation to literacy in particular, greater time needs to be given regarding effective implementation of strategies so that teachers have opportunities
to engage in ‘critical discussions about what they do and do not accomplish as well as who would benefit from particular strategies and in what contexts’ (Fisher and Ivey 2005, p.10). It is also important not to encroach on teachers’ instructional time as this can create anxiety and if a policy is truly valued, it warrants its own time as ‘innovation time cannot compete with teaching time’ (Cambone 1994, p.72).

Earlier in this chapter, I explored how school leaders have a key role in leading policy implementation and part of this leadership involves ensuring that ‘strategies and organisational structures’ are put in place in a commitment to facilitate staff in the implementation process (Gleeson et al., 2002, p. 28). Without supporting teachers with planning and development time and space on meeting agendas it is difficult to implement change.

There is an acknowledgement from policymakers and the DES that time is needed to support teachers in their implementation efforts. This was part of the rationale behind the introduction of 33 Croke Park hours to accommodate school meetings and CPD while also preserving tuition time. Similarly, the provision of ‘Professional Time’ -amounting to 22 hours across the school year or 40 minutes per week- was for teachers, ‘non-student contact time in which teachers will participate in a range of professional and collaborative activities’ (DES 2017) was introduced to support the implementation of Junior Cycle. Unfortunately, due to the period of austerity in which LNLL was introduced, there was an expectation of schools to ‘get the very best outcomes from existing financial and human resources’ (DES 2011, p.5) and as illustrated here, a lack of time as a resource made implementation of the policy difficult.

7.4.5 Collaboration versus Isolation

In the previous section, there was an exploration of some of the positive experiences of collaboration. However, collaboration is a complex process, one that is hampered by the egg-crate organisation of schools (Lortie 1975) into individual classrooms and subject silos, resulting in feelings of isolation for teachers (Moloney 2000). Sorcha reports how ‘it’s hard to know what goes on inside everyone’s class’ (English/History/SEN-Cedar 3) and Rionach feels that ‘it can be difficult... trying to get everyone to work together’ outside of classrooms (Religion- Ash 5). Erin uses an interesting metaphor when she speaks about her classroom describing it as ‘my own
little fishbowl’ (English/History-Birch 2). In fact, a number of participants speak about their experiences of professional isolation, how ‘your classroom is your business, your classroom is your domain... it can become very isolated’ (Eimear, English-Ash 1). These views echo the literature concerning how isolation often characterises teaching (Lortie 1975; Fullan 1990; Moje and Handy 1995; O Brien et al., 1995; Hargreaves 2000; Moloney 2000; Elmore 2003; Timperley et al., 2007; Cantrell et al., 2008; Fullan 2011; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Shah 2012). The organisation of school knowledge ‘in terms of more or less distinct subject areas or disciplines is not a natural or inevitable occurrence but rather cultural and conventional’ (Green 1988, p.161) Nonetheless, such culturally defined barriers often prove difficult to overcome and ‘balkanisation’ (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) can be an obstacle to collaboration.

This is partly to do with the fact that each department or ‘subculture’ (O’ Brien et al., 2001) has its own distinctive culture and way of doing things (Hargreaves and MacMillan 1995). In this study, teachers often identify themselves as ‘masters of their subjects’ (Iona, Irish-Birch 4), discussing literacy in relation to their subjects or disciplines, their ‘area of expertise’ (Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1). This is a double-edged sword in relation implementation of a literacy policy. As explored in chapters five and six, English teachers report literacy as a comfortable fit with the learning experiences in their classrooms (Eimear, English-Ash 1; Erin, English/History- Birch 2; Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5; Eoghan , English/Irish/LL- Elm 1; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2; Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5), that English is ‘in tune with literacy’ (Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). Similarly, teachers working in the area of SEN comment how their awareness of literacy and the literacy needs of their students is high (Áine, Art/SEN- Ash 2; Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1; Clíodhna, English/LL - Birch 5; Sorcha, English/History/SEN- Cedar 3; Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2). In contrast, maths teachers comment that ‘literacy levels’ have become much more demanding since the introduction of Project Maths (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Máire, History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1; Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8; Sorcha, English/History/SEN- Cedar 3). Gravitating towards the commonality of subject identities can result in teachers being isolated within the subject subculture, reluctant to venture beyond culturally imposed and
synthetic, yet powerful, boundaries. This is vividly explored by Eoghan when he discusses his experience:

‘To be honest-you have friends in the staff and then you have your department and that’s it… ‘It’s unlikely that I have ever discussed anything school related with a science teacher; maybe a couple of the Modern Languages I might because some of them are English teachers as well… You get banded together’.

(English/Irish/ LL Elm 1)

Indeed, Máire remarks on the difference between approaches to literacy at primary and post-primary levels commenting on how ‘in National School, literacy is everything. It’s the whole core of their school day… but (post-primary teachers) are really more interested in subject based literacy’ (History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1).

The current culture of post-primary schools is a significant obstacle in successfully implementing policies in general but the implications for implementing literacy strategies in such a context are particularly clear. Despite a ‘general move to build connections across discourses of specialised knowledges’ (Jewitt 2008, p.255) through collaborative practice, the physical and philosophical barriers caused by school structure and school culture in Irish post-primary schools result in ‘pedagogical solitude’ (Conway et al., 2011). Emphasising the collective identity of the ‘subject department’ is a move towards collaboration and away from the isolation that has characterised post-primary teaching in Ireland (Moloney 2000). On the other hand, it copper-fastens notions about culture and subject identities, and proves difficult to break down barriers and collaborate in a meaningful way across departments and in a real ‘whole-school’ sense. Furthermore, as illustrated by TALIS 2009, there is a stronger emphasis on ‘exchange and coordination’ rather than ‘professional collaboration’ when considering cooperation between teachers in Ireland (Shiel et al., 2009, p. 8). This may also be attributable to the autonomy and professional independence that has, to date, characterised teaching. A recent mixed-method study concerning the relationship between autonomy and collaboration (Vangrieken and Kyndt 2019) reveals how teachers ‘find a balance between autonomy and collaboration and demonstrate a collaborative attitude as long as they still have sufficient autonomy to do their own thing within their classroom’ (p. 19). Findings from interviews and questionnaires involving secondary teachers from Belgium reveal how ‘superficial exchanges’ such as sharing teaching materials are regarded as ‘less invasive’ and more common than ‘deep level exchange activities’
such as discussing teaching beliefs and practices or team-teaching (Vangrieken and Kyndt 2019, p. 18). These findings are in keeping with the findings in this study. With the current organisation of schools, Elmore argues that ‘it is difficult to imagine a less promising institutional structure for being responsive to external pressure for change and improvement’ (2003, p.197). Thus, the subcultures that arise from these existing school structures present an obstacle to literacy development (O Brien et al., 1995; Moje 2008; Moje 2015) but also to policy implementation and education reform in general.

7.4.6 Meaningful Collaboration and Getting ‘Buy-in’

In leadership theory, ‘buy-in’ concerns the argument that intended outcomes or meaningful change can only be achieved when people identify with or accept as appropriate the values advocated by leaders of change (Northouse 2010). Of course, this immediately raises the question of values and attitudes to literacy, whether or not teachers believe literacy is an integral part of their subject, and their roles and responsibilities as educators, and links well to the understandings of literacy explored in chapter five. The dataset is replete with references to getting ‘buy-in’ (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN-Elm2) regarding literacy development, as explored with the idea of having ‘a hook’ for teachers in chapter six. Literacy advocates reflect on how they have experienced resistance to the implementation of literacy strategies. Áine (Art/SEN- Ash 2) speaks about how some of her colleagues ‘resist (change) to the end’, while Sorcha suggests that it can be a case of ‘old dog, new tricks; it just doesn’t work’ and that ultimately, there are ‘some people who just park it’ (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5).

A possible reason for a lack of buy-in may be attributable to the subcultures of subjects explored previously. Some participants feel that a number of their colleagues believe literacy has ‘nothing to do with their subject’ (Eimear, English-Ash1), or that there continues to be ‘a certain cohort of teachers then who think that literacy is the English teacher’s job, still’ (Seamus, Science/Maths- Birch7). Another reason stems from the earlier argument that literacy is separate to subject content as Eoghan speaks about how ‘some teachers complained about it’ because it was perceived as ‘interfering’ with learning in their subject areas, particularly in examination classes (English/Irish/LL- Elm 1). Alternatively, resistance may stem from the equation of collaboration with ‘conformity’ as when teachers speak about
collaborating for literacy development, they regularly speak about uniformity of practice. For instance, Seamus uses the idiom of ‘everybody teaching from the same hymn sheet’ and argues ‘that is a challenge, having conformity’ (Maths/Science-Birch 7) and there are suggestions that some participants may have changed practice ‘because they were told to’ (Michéal, English/Religion/Music-Elm 6) rather than because of their professional values concerning literacy or a perceived need in their students’ learning. Collaboration, as understood here, may be perceived as an encroachment on the professional judgement of teachers.

Another reason may concern teacher workload. Eoghan goes to lengths to explain how he had wanted to reassure colleagues that this would not lead to an increase in workload and he recalls ‘that was the emphasis of any talk I had with the staff; that you’re doing this anyway and we’re not looking for you to do extra work’ (English/Irish/LL- Elm 1). Shannon felt that while there was a stage when literacy was high on everyone’s agenda, ‘it’s just hard to sustain that kind of bombardment all the time’ and that literacy champions are trying to promote it without ‘ramming it down people’s throats’ (French/Spanish- Elm 4).

While change in the organisational structure of schools is necessary (Fullan and Pomfret 1977) for the successful implementation of policies, there is also the issue of school culture. Fullan defines a school culture as the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates (2007). Stoll (1998) describes it as ‘the way we do things around here’ and argues that culture ‘acts as a screen or lens through which the world is viewed’ (p. 9). Some of the structures and systems that characterise the post-primary school, such as department structures and subject specialisms of teachers, are at odds with the principles underpinning collaboration. Stoll uses the analogy of an iceberg to discuss aspects of change and while the ‘surface aspects of change’ such as organisation, structures and supports, are important, what goes on below the surface is ‘the real essence of school culture- people’s beliefs, values and the norms that will influence how they react’ to initiatives (1999, p. 12). In both chapter five and six, I have pointed to the importance of considering teachers’ beliefs and values in relation to literacy development. The system-wide and school wide structures that impact on teachers’ professional experiences, such as the examination system, increasing accountability and subject subcultures, are all value-laden, and must be considered if innovations are to be successfully implemented. Only when all
of these factors are considered can there be change in relation to knowledge and understanding, as well as roles and behaviours (Fullan and Pomfret 1977), making change a real possibility.

The models of change advocated by Hord (1987) and Fullan and Pomfret (1977) highlight the necessity to get all teachers to engage with and take ownership of literacy, and internalise literacy as a value, during the adoption stage (1987, p.73) for successful implementation of a whole-school literacy strategy. This necessitates asking meaningful philosophical questions about literacy as a concept, thereby inevitably challenging some deep-rooted assumptions about the purpose of education, literacy, school subjects, and the nature of collaboration as part of the implementation process. Such considerations need to be made during the assessment, exploration, adoption and initiation stages if implementation is to be successful (Hord 1987), if there is to be meaningful change in terms of knowledge and understanding as well as change in value internalisation (Fullan and Pomfret 1977).

7.4.7 Professional Learning to Support Literacy Learning

Lower level language mastery is as essential for the literacy teacher as anatomy is for the physician. It is our obligation to enable teachers to acquire it.

(Moats 1994, p.99)

The final challenge presented in this study regarding literacy policy implementation brings together issues of teacher confidence and teachers’ knowledge regarding literacy (as explored in chapters five and six) with attitudes towards professional learning. The data presents repeated references to how participants feel they have not been supported as teachers of literacy.

7.4.7.1 The Cascade Model of CPD

The importance of professional learning for policy implementation is acknowledged in LNLL with 48 explicit references to professional development (DES 2011). However as explored earlier, efforts to ‘curtail public expenditure’ (DES 2011,p.5) meant that the implementation of LNLL would not benefit from additional resourcing. The cascade model of CPD has been critiqued earlier in this study (Hayes 2000; Kennedy 2005; Wedell 2005; Solomon and Tresman 2009; Dichaba and Mokhele 2012; Bett 2016; Turner et al 2017), but it is likely that the cost-effective nature of the model (Hayes 2000; Kennedy 2005) made it a viable form of
professional learning at a time when Ireland was in the grips of an economic recession. As outlined in section 3.4.2, support for teachers regarding literacy was disseminated in a one-shot approach to CPD (Wedell 2005).

While engagement with this CPD was regarded as beneficial by the three LL teachers who participated in this study, all three LL teachers expressed that they needed additional support. As ‘level two’ trainers, LL teachers did not have the same time to engage with the material as level one trainers, and therefore it is unlikely that they possessed the depth of knowledge of the level one trainers or literacy specialists, resulting in diluted messages (Hayes 2000; Kennedy 2005; Dichaba and Mokhele 2012; Turner et al 2017). This is reflected by the fact that all three LL teachers expressed a lack of confidence not just in relation to literacy as a concept and a practice, but also in relation to leading change in their schools and managing resistance to reform efforts (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch 5; Gráinne, English/Geography/LL- Cedar 2; Eoghan English/Irish/LL- Elm 1). Furthermore, cascade models are, by their sporadic nature, often more focused on strategies than taking the time to change attitudes and beliefs. As is argued in this study, strategies cannot be meaningfully implemented, or worse, will not be implemented at all, if conceptual understandings of literacy remain traditionally narrow, if attitudes and beliefs are not challenged. Finally, there is an assumption that ‘cultural and contextual factors’ in schools will allow for such dissemination and collaboration to happen. As evidenced here, strategies and structures were not always put in place (Gleeson et al., 2002) and teachers felt they did not have time to meet for collaborative purposes. The egg-carton structure of post-primary schools coupled with the ‘backwash effect’ (Smyth 2016, p. 11) of high-stakes examinations led some participants to express that there was resistance by some of their colleagues to literacy strategies as well as to buying-in to literacy promotion at the expense of ‘content coverage’. The fact that, as already explored, a number of participants were unaware of the membership of literacy teams in their schools raises questions about the visibility, as well as the potential to bring about meaningful change, of LL teachers and literacy core teams.

The centrality of CPD for literacy development is highlighted in the literature (Moats 1994; Hawisher et al., 2004; Draper et al 2005; Blachowicz et al., 2006; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008; Nachimuthu 2010; Poore 2011; Chauvin and Theodore 2015;
As explored in chapter six, vocabulary instruction as part of the keyword approach was the predominant literacy strategy. However, effective vocabulary instruction is a complex endeavour that requires a ‘strong understanding of the underpinnings of vocabulary development, an array of strategies for teaching individual words and for teaching word learning strategies for independence, and an appreciation for the role of word consciousness in vocabulary development and ways in which word consciousness can be fostered’.

(Blachowicz et al., 2006, p.534)

While there is certainly awareness regarding the importance and value of vocabulary development and the dataset is replete with reference to keywords, ‘the strong underpinnings’ or a clear rationale was not evident. In keeping with previous research in the post-primary context (MacMahon 2012), this study contends that teachers lack the professional knowledge needed to support students’ literacy development. A lack of CPD, coupled with the view that the cascade model would adequately equip teachers, is illustrative of ‘underinvestment in teacher knowledge’ (Darling Hammond 1990). This has negatively affected teachers’ confidence, understanding and knowledge relating to literacy and subsequently, it influenced the implementation effort in schools.

Furthermore, there is an explicit call among literacy researchers for subject-specific literacy CPD for post-primary teachers. It could be argued that the ‘whole-school’ approach of LNLL resulted in the promotion of generic and transferable, rather than subject specific, literacy strategies. For instance, Shanahan and Shanahan highlight the nuances in terms of text type and literacy practices that are used by different disciplines yet ‘teachers are not prepared to address the challenges posed by the special demands of texts across the various disciplines’ (2008, p.53). As a result, highly competent teachers can struggle to integrate literacy instruction in their subject area in authentic ways (Draper et al., 2005). This is also acknowledged by participants. Donagh (Construction/DCG- Ash 6) questions the legitimacy of generic approaches to literacy and argues for further support in the technology subjects and how he thinks it ‘would work a lot better than a whole-school approach’. Bridget also reports a lack of support in relation to literacy in Business subjects (Business/LCVP-Birch 4). In fact, Gearóid identifies a lack of CPD as one of the key challenges to implementing policies in schools, arguing that ‘one of the biggest challenges for people who don’t implement a lot of stuff, it’s really a fear of the
unknown... There isn’t really any ‘Idiot’s Guide’ to this stuff. And sometimes, that’s what is actually needed’ (English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2).

Studies by Freedman and Carver (2007) and Warren-Kring and Warren (2013) highlight how teachers’ confidence and knowledge regarding literacy grew substantially when afforded CPD opportunities over five semesters and five years respectively. Support that is sustained and incremental seems to prove more successful. Another solution may be to draw on a model of literacy CPD already explored in chapter six, where school-based ‘literacy specialists’ (Gillis 2014) work with all content area teachers to model relevant, discipline specific literacy strategies to ‘bridge those knowledge gaps’ (Dean 2016, p.652). Of course, this will challenge assumptions regarding professional learning as it will necessitate a move away from the ad hoc, fragmented, hour long or day long, off-site CPD that is delivered by experts - an experience that has characterised many teachers in Ireland (Harford 2010).- to one that is collaborative, situated and context specific, taking place on-site in schools. This, in turn, will necessitate important discussions about the truest meaning of collaboration and raise questions about the possibility of collaborating for professional learning given the current structure and culture of schools. However, it is argued that the development of such a COP (Harford 2010; O’ Sullivan 2011; Moje 2015; McMillan et al., 2016) is considerably more effective than the traditional models of CPD (Kennedy 2005; Bett 2016), and therefore more likely to have longer-lasting and further-reaching impacts.

It should be acknowledged that regardless of the model of CPD provided, implementing change necessitates engagement from teachers and a willingness to participate. When asked if they had engaged with elective CPD in relation to literacy development, the majority of participants had not accessed supports although many participants expressed that they were unaware if any were available (Brendan, Maths/Business/History- Ash 3; Rionach, Religion- Ash 4; Donagh, Construction/DCG-Ash 6; Iona, Irish- Birch 4; Sinéad, Maths/Science- Birch 8; Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3). Certainly, research in Ireland points to low engagement with professional learning among Irish post-primary teachers (Shiel et al., 2009; Gleeson 2012; Lynch et al., 2013). However, a significant number of participants in this study express a real appetite for professional support and greater knowledge regarding literacy, and greatly appreciated the provision of on-site CPD
or the support of colleagues who they regarded as informed, such as the SEN coordinator. Adequately supporting professional learning is something that needs urgent consideration by policy makers in relation to education reform if we are to address what Gearóid describes as a ‘fear of the unknown’ (English/Geography/SEN-Elm 2).

This discussion of experiences of policy implementation has aimed to satisfy the research objectives of this study pertaining to the opportunities and challenges experienced by teachers while implementing a literacy policy. In terms of opportunities, a number of participants feel supported by the policy to advocate for literacy and they celebrate how they perceive greater awareness and responsibility regarding literacy as a concept and a practice in their schools. Participants highlight what supported them, including school leaders, colleagues and opportunities for collaboration and professional dialogue. However, participants also focus on the challenges of policy implementation. System-wide challenges include increasing accountability, high-stakes examinations and a lack of support in terms of their own knowledge development. School-wide issues also proved problematic and focused on a lack of time, resistance to education reform and the complexity of collaboration. This recap serves as a reminder of the key issues as I consider the potential of policies to bring about change and explore the policy-practice gap, before drawing this chapter to a close.

7.5 Policy Implementation and Practice: Rhetoric and Reality

7.5.1 Teachers as Policy Enactors

Ball and colleagues (2012) argue that teachers are both receivers and agents of policy. When considering the different positions that teachers occupy during policy implementation, it is useful to consider the different roles, actions and engagements that are involved in implementation, described as ‘making meaning of and constructing responses to policy through the processes of interpretation and translation’ (p.49). Given the focus of this study, I draw on the roles that might be ascribed to teachers as policy actors; those of policy enthusiast and policy receiver.
*Policy enthusiasts are described as those who embody policy in their practice and are examples to others; policy paragons. Policies are simultaneously translated and enacted through their practice... they recruit others to the possibilities of policy, they ‘speak’ policy directly to practice and join up specialist roles and responsibilities to make enactment a collective process’.*

(Ball *et al.*, 2012, pp.59-60)

A number of teachers in this study are positioned as ‘policy enthusiasts’ and the description offered here clearly aligns with the vision for the LL teacher, but also with school leaders and literacy champions, many of whom were English teachers or SEN coordinators. While their views of policy and policy implementation were sometimes mixed, they saw LNLL as an opportunity to bring about meaningful change in their schools in relation to the literacy needs of their students. The other role that teachers occupy, as identified in this study is that of ‘policy receiver’, those who often

‘exhibit ‘policy dependency’ and high levels of compliance. They are looking for guidance and direction... (policy) has to be done even if it is not understood... they rely heavily on ‘interpretations of interpretations’ and are attentive participants in and consumers of translation work... some manage and are ‘copers’, others struggle and are ‘defenders’- short term survival is the main concern. Not surprisingly most junior and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) (are policy receivers but) ... even more experienced teachers sometimes feel oppressed by policy’.

(Ball *et al.*, 2012, p.63)

The description of ‘policy receiver’ as outlined here seems to characterise many of the experiences of teachers in relation to implementing LNLL in their schools. There is an obvious sense that teachers feel they haven’t been equipped regarding implementation, evidenced by the desire for much greater support in terms of time and knowledge. LNLL asserts that literacy can no longer be viewed as the preserve of the English Department or the SEN teacher and that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47), an assertion that is presented in an unproblematic way. However, this research builds on knowledge generated by previous Irish studies that were conducted prior to the introduction of LNLL (MacMahon 2012; Murphy *et al.*, 2013) that highlight resistance to this assertion, suggesting that teachers’ beliefs and assumptions regarding their role as literacy teachers may need to be challenged if this policy aspiration is to be realised. Some ‘policy receivers’ admit to lacking confidence, many express how they lack
knowledge and the overwhelming majority express a lack of time and feelings of oppression regarding demands for accountability across the system.

7.5.1.1 ‘Victims of Circumstance’ vs. ‘Agents of Change’

This raises the question as to whether or not teachers’ experiences of policy implementation lead them to feel as though they are victims of circumstance or agents of change. Words used by participants to recount their experiences are quite forceful when taken collectively; words like ‘dictated’, ‘judged’, ‘constrained’ ‘frustrating’ ‘pressure’ and fear’ appear repeatedly across the dataset, and combine to paint an unsettling image of the professional experience of teachers during this time of implementation. During data analysis, one node that was created and used to code the dataset was ‘teachers’ anxiety’. In terms of exploring teachers’ experiences of implementation, this was a particularly interesting as well as disconcerting finding, with some reference to anxiety, stress or worry coded in 20 of the 26 sources. Such findings are in keeping with Ball’s work (2003) concerning the personal and psychological costs of performativity regimes.

Anxiety seems to result from the ‘pressure’ teachers experience as part of their working life. As explored earlier, system-wide issues such as accountability mechanisms, high-stakes examinations, increased workload and decreased time in a period of ‘initiative overload’, creates anxiety (McDermott 2012). There is also a sense that teachers’ own confidence levels in relation to knowledge and understanding of literacy, as both a concept and as a practice, could induce anxiety. References to a lack of awareness, a lack of knowledge or a ‘fear of the unknown’ makes teachers self-conscious and uncertain about their practice. However, cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) is also a cause of anxiety for teachers as they are confronted by inconsistent or contradictory thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. It is created by the Ideological Dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) of feeling compelled to ‘teach to the test’ to meet the ‘reality’ or the demands of the ‘system’, despite holding a pedagogically sound conviction that a broader, more holistic educational experience is what will truly benefit their students.

Teachers speak about feelings of frustration in this study as they perceive a gap between policy and practice, between the rhetoric and the reality (Gleeson 2009; Lubienski and Myers 2016) and they must negotiate this space. They feel that the
system dictates to them, very much without consultation or adequate support, and propose changes that they feel unprepared to deliver. In fact, this chapter has outlined an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, rather than a sense of agency, in the face of educational change. The dataset is peppered with references to experiences of conformity and isolation. Despite the opportunities presented by LNLL and reported here, the overwhelming sense of anxiety and frustration reported in the data would leave one to conclude that participants in this study view themselves as ‘victims of circumstance’ (Eamon, Irish/English/History- Cedar 2) rather than as agents of change.

7.5.2 **Spectrum of Change**

This finding links to the final research sub-question posed in this study, which sought to establish if the introduction of LNLL had resulted in change regarding teachers’ beliefs and practices. There is no simple answer to this question as opinions of participants are mixed, yet a number of participants frame their experiences of literacy around a change discourse. Therefore, what is discussed here is presented as a spectrum of change and Fullan and Pomfret’s ‘Five Dimensions of Change’ are utilised to consider the extent to which change has occurred in relation to the ‘actual use’ of literacy as an innovation (1977, p.336)

7.5.2.1 **Literacy: Making the Invisible Visible**

As noted across chapters five, six and seven, participants feel that there has been a very real and tangible shift in relation to the prominence of literacy in schools and there is a belief that literacy is ‘definitely more visible’ (Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). There is little doubt that literacy is high on schools’ agendas in terms of whole-school planning and SSE, department planning, and through school initiatives. Within classrooms, literacy is visible on boards and walls and in professional conversations, as teachers discuss literacy strategies and speak highly of reading initiatives in all research sites. In fact, awareness of literacy and acceptance of responsibility for literacy development are possibly two of the biggest developments when compared to national research conducted regarding literacy in post-primary schools that predate this study (MacMahon 2012; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Reidy 2013). A number of participants feel that assumptions regarding literacy have
changed with a move away from ‘old misconception(s)’ (Gearóid, English/Geography/SEN- Elm 2).

On the contrary, many participants adamantly argue that LNLL has led to very little, if any, meaningful change. Some contend that it is ‘everything we were doing already- but with a title’ (Gobinet, English/Geography- Elm 5). There are repeated references to the idea that literacy was ‘always there’ (Síle, Religion/Geography/SPHE- Elm 3), that teachers ‘were doing a lot of it anyway’ (Eoghan, English/Irish/LL- Elm 1) prior to the implementation of LNLL. Eimear is quite definite in her views about a lack of change:

I don’t think anything changed dramatically… In my school, it’s happening in the same classrooms… it didn’t improve, in my opinion, literacy within classrooms that weren’t already doing it… They may not have had a label on it, they are now aware ‘Oh, I was doing this and they call it literacy’ but has it increased literacy? I don’t think so. In a real sense, it changed nothing… I’ve seen no effective change in attitude or practice. I’m not blaming anybody for it… I feel disappointed more didn’t come out of this one’.

(English- Ash 1)

Similarly, although to a lesser extent, Donal agrees that literacy has always been part of his practice:

‘It’s the same idea for the last 22 years or whatever it is, the same philosophy… if someone gives you a drawing you should be able to read the drawing… it’s the same thing no matter where you go… you should be able to decipher it’.

(Engineering/DCG- Birch 6)

Máire (History/Maths/SEN- Birch 1) feels that prior to the strategy her colleagues were aware of literacy needs of their students and that many of the strategies they utilise in Birch College long preceded LNLL. Erin (English/History- Birch 2) agrees, stating that the initiatives and strategies implemented across the school were happening for at least ‘9 years’ and ‘well before’ LNLL was introduced. Indeed, there was consensus in Birch College that teachers were ‘tapping into it for years… without realising it’ (Clíodhna, English/LL- Birch5). Of course, it is important to reiterate that while it could be argued that there is greater awareness of literacy -that it is ‘more visible’ as an educational value in schools in this study- the evidence presented across chapters five and six highlights the dominance of traditionally conceived ideas of literacy, predominantly as reading of alphabetic, print texts. This casts a shadow over the extent of the change that has taken place during this early-
implementation stage, highlighting how policies can be ‘fit in without precipitating any major (or real) changes’ (Ball et al., 2010 p. 10).

7.5.2.2 ‘If it’s literacy, it’s the English teacher’s baby’

Like literacy and reading, sometimes the terms literacy and English are used interchangeably. For instance, when Seamus comments on literacy strategies he would use in Maths he remarks how ‘With the new Project maths now, it’s all English. There’s a load of English in it; it’s text heavy’ (Science/Maths- Birch 7). Although Seamus accepts that literacy is a concern of his in Maths and Science, the association between English and literacy proves difficult to shake. Ryanne (Religion-Cedar 4) feels that literacy was most visible ‘in the English classrooms’ and Bridget commends her colleagues in the English department who ‘built a fantastic library’ to promote literacy (Business/LCVP- Ash 4). While English teachers, in particular, highlight how literacy needs to be considered by all teachers, some still seem to unconsciously shackle literacy to English. They express how ‘in English, obviously, it’s vital’ (Roisín, English/Religion- Birch 9), how it’s the ‘nature of the beast’ (Erin, English/History-Birch2) or how ‘English is more in tune with literacy... it’s part and parcel of it’ (Michéal, English/Religion/Music- Elm 6). There is little doubt that literacy instruction is certainly part of the role of the English teacher. However, such understandings of literacy are problematic as they can potentially contribute to preserving or even reinforcing traditional notions of literacy as the remit of the English teacher. This leads teachers to comment that despite growing awareness, literacy remains ‘the English teacher’s baby’ (Eimear, English- Ash 1). It also challenges the policy assumption that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’.

In the middle ground then, there are the people who pose a number of questions. For instance, Donagh speculates

‘I do wonder how conscious people are of it? You know? It does exist, it is there, but how much attention do people pay to it on a day to day basis. I would say, tis probably (pause) it’s pretty low I’d say (Smiles) I would think’.

(Construction/DCG-Ash 6)

Perhaps it would be fair to argue that there has been some change; change with regard to the value placed on literacy, change in awareness and change in terms of teachers’ acceptance of responsibility. There is also an acknowledgement of change
regarding time, human capital and material resources that are devoted to ‘literacy’ initiatives in schools at a whole-school level. However, as aforementioned, system-wide issues, coupled with institutional factors such as the organisational structure and culture of schools, has limited the potential for change in relation to literacy policy and practice.

7.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has highlighted a number of opportunities as well as challenges experienced by participants in this study during the implementation stage of LNLL. In keeping with ‘the Irish experience’ of implementation outlined by Crooks (1983, p. 73), it explored the importance of the involvement of teachers, the need for support and CPD, the role of school culture and the role of school leaders as part of the implementation process.

Certainly, participants in this study highlighted a number of positive outcomes as a result of their engagement with LNLL in schools. The policy provided a platform for ‘champions of literacy’ to promote something they value, and as was highlighted across the three discussion chapters, this was particularly with regard to creating a culture of reading in schools. There is also clear acknowledgement of a heightened awareness regarding literacy in schools, particularly when teachers felt supported in terms of time and supports. This might be regarded as a ‘tangible success of the strategy’ (Murphy 2018). Collaborative opportunities that arose in their practice were also regarded as positive, as they presented opportunities to learn together and engage in professional dialogue. However, the challenges reported merit attention. System-wide issues regarding ‘initiative overload’ and increasing accountability were prevalent in the dataset. The nature of high-stakes examinations and the negative impact of this model of assessment on both teachers’ professional practice and students’ learning experiences has already been discussed in chapter six. However as highlighted in this chapter, the extent to which the focus on high-stakes examinations has a negative impact on the professional experiences of teachers is also evident. Participants report feeling anxious and frustrated, as well as under-supported, in terms of time and professional learning opportunities to implement LNLL. This chapter also highlights the complexity of working collaboratively in
Irish post-primary schools. Such issues, tensions and contradictions raise questions regarding how we implement education policy in Ireland.

The extent to which there has been significant and meaningful change regarding literacy development since the introduction of LNLL remains in question. Certainly, there has been increased awareness regarding literacy as a goal of education. However, this chapter clearly illustrates that conflict occurs when the theoretical ideals encapsulated in the policy, in the literature and indeed, in the study-participants conceptual understandings of literacy, clash with the ‘reality’ of the system. If there is a desire to bring about meaningful change in relation to literacy development, ‘the focus needs to be on encouraging teachers and supporting them to develop their understanding of literacy and their pedagogy of literacy’ (Murphy 2017). Encouragement and support requires resourcing, both at system level and at school level, and this chapter has attempted to highlight the supports that are needed moving forward to support implementation of LNLL in terms of time, space, effective leadership, consultation, meaningful collaboration and professional development.
8 Conclusion

‘To study is not easy, because to study is to create and recreate, and not to repeat what others say’.

(Paulo Freire)

8.1 Introduction

This research was conducted in the years following the introduction of ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020’ and from its conceptual stages, the study sought to problematise the policy assertion that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011, p.47). At a practitioner level, the statement was deemed worthy of investigation due to my own position as a post-primary and literacy link teacher, as someone challenged with leading learning about literacy with my colleagues. I believed that this study had the potential to generate greater understanding for post-primary teachers about the complexity of literacy as a concept, thereby highlighting implications for classroom practice. At a policy level, this research sought to explore how implementing this policy presented opportunities and challenges for post-primary teachers. When considering the policy context, it was important to question the introduction of LNLL. It was regarded as ‘a milestone’ in Irish education as ‘for possibly the first time in official policy… literacy was part of the official remit of the post-primary teacher’ (Murphy 2018). However, there was also speculation surrounding the timing of its introduction, hailed by commentators as a ‘knee-jerk reaction’ to PISA 2009 and a perceived literacy and teaching ‘crisis’ in the Irish media (Conway 2013). There was critique of an emerging tradition of ‘policy by numbers’ (Grek 2009) where education policy was hastily informed by and reformed due to standardised test results in PISA. This period is marked by increased interest in literacy, as literacy became a ‘buzzword’ in Irish education, and this was the context from which this study emerged.

The study is an exploratory one and the first objective in this study sought to gain an insight into teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept in an attempt to provide greater understanding for literacy practitioners, the teachers at the ‘chalk-face’ who are tasked with implementing LNLL. As explored in chapter two, the literature
outlines the complex and contested nature of literacy as a concept. The emergence of sociocultural perspectives prompted a re-evaluation of traditional ‘technical’ (Street 2001) or ‘functional’ (Lambirth 2011) views of literacy in favour of a view of literacy as social, situated, cultural and ideological, something that is enacted in social practices (Street 1984; Gee 1989, 2015). Literacy as a concept is constantly evolving and this in itself presents a challenge for educators.

Secondly, this study aimed to examine the literacy strategies that teachers utilise both at classroom and whole-school level. It was envisaged that such insights could further develop an understanding of teachers’ knowledge of literacy. While LNLL asserts that all teachers should be literacy teachers, previous studies reported that teachers lacked the professional knowledge to support students in their literacy development. This study sought to provide an insight into the professional knowledge of teachers regarding literacy, to investigate if teachers have the confidence and competence to promote literacy as it is envisaged in the policy and in the literature.

Of course, this study was conducted at a very specific moment in time in terms of policy reform, that being, during the early implementation stage of LNLL and therefore a sort of binocular view is adopted, as I consider not just literacy as a concept and practice, but also as education policy. I was keenly aware of the situated nature of this study and therefore, needed to consider the international, national and local contexts in which this study is nested. As outlined at various stages of this study, this research was conducted against a rise of neoliberalism and new managerialism, accompanied by increasing accountability, during an era of unprecedented educational change but also at a time of economic uncertainty. The findings in this study highlight how these factors have had a very real impact on the teachers who were responsible for implementing this latest policy locally, in their schools. Thus, this study fulfilled its objectives by answering the following questions:

I. What are teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept?

II. What literacy strategies do teachers utilise in their classroom practice, as well as in a whole-school approach?
III. What are the opportunities and challenges experienced by teachers at the early stage of the implementation process regarding the national literacy strategy?

Certainly four schools cannot be considered representative of the population of all schools, nor can the views of the 26 teachers who participated in this study be regarded as typical. However, this study makes no claims regarding generalisability and the intention of this study was never to ‘aim to represent typical cases’ but to ‘maximise understanding of unique cases’ (Stake 2010, p.16). At this point, I will briefly summarise the thematic findings in an effort to consider the broader significance of this study in terms of practice, policy and future research in the academic field.

8.2 How this Research Contributes to Knowledge about Literacy and Policy

The first question addressed in this study concerned teachers’ beliefs about literacy; how they defined and understood it as a concept. This research reports that teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy remain largely traditional, with literacy viewed primarily as reading and writing. Such narrow understandings of literacy inevitably contribute to other aspects and dimensions of literacy being side-lined or unexplored altogether. For instance, using the terms literacy and reading interchangeably may result in teachers focusing on and highlighting the value of reading books and reading books for pleasure. Of particular significance is the understanding that technology is adverse to literacy development. The rejection of technology by many participants in this study raises a number of questions about the purpose of education, but also highlights a disconnect between school and life outside of school, where students live in a ‘rapidly changing society’ characterised by abundant information and advanced technology (DES 2015a, p.5). It raises important questions about whether or not post-primary education in Ireland is sufficiently equipping students to be digitally literate. The study also illustrates that while speaking and to a lesser extent, listening, are valued by participants, certain ‘types of talk’ (Barnes 2010) are privileged over others and certain spaces are deemed legitimate for oral practices that do not detract from the reading and writing, ever associated with print examinations. Due to the fact that there is a view that exams
seek ‘the one right answer’, critical literacy is also neglected in this study, where a focus on literacy for comprehension and code-breaking means that literacy for challenging and questioning is largely absent from participants’ discussions.

In its exploration of teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy, this study concludes that ‘print literacies continue to dominate’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.226-227) and that the majority of participants do not subscribe to contemporary understandings of text as print, digital and multimodal. The dominance of flat textual practices (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.239) is evident in terms of how participants define and understand literacy, as well as in relation to the literacy practices that they value and subscribe to in their practice. This study reports that the research participants essentially regard literacy as closely associated with reading, and a form of reading that is predominantly traditional and print based. Although it is evident that many participants are aware of the out of school literacy practices of adolescents, these practices, platforms and texts are generally not afforded space in classrooms, and oftentimes, they seem to be regarded as not serious enough… too easy… (and) too intellectually empty’ (Williams 2005, p.704). This is evident in the findings discussed in chapter five that highlight a rejection of practices that involve reading and writing of digital texts by some participants, as well as engagement with audio books. Such pedagogical choices may serve to reinforce traditional perceptions of literacy and text, while simultaneously devaluing the literacy practices of adolescents, thereby bolstering the ‘ever widening gap between a student’s social world and the scholastic world’ (Quinlan and Curtin 2017, p. 458) and negatively impacting the students’ sense of belonging and motivation to engage in learning. The understanding of text as alphabetic and print evident in this study contrasts with the contemporary meaning of text outlined in the literature, in other research, in current education policies and curricular documents.

Unfortunately, ‘one of the great paradoxes of modern Irish education is that, while the official discourse is replete with references to change and reform, much of the available evidence suggests that little change has occurred in teachers’ beliefs and values’ (Gleeson and O Donnabháin, 2009 p.37). The interim review of LNLL commenced in 2015 (DES 2017). Findings published in 2016 reported that improvements have been realised in relation to literacy, particularly in relation to PISA 2012 and 2015 scores. Of course, the focus of PISA is on reading literacy.
Interestingly, the review now makes repeated calls for an increased focus on numeracy for the remainder of the strategy’s lifetime. The review would suggest therefore that literacy, as understood in LNLL, is being actualised in classrooms. In contrast, this study presents findings that literacy is understood in a much narrower way than envisaged in LNLL. The gap between policy and practice lives on.

While considering teachers’ beliefs regarding literacy, this study sought to investigate who teachers believe is responsible for the literacy development of adolescents. Although investigated by previous Irish research studies in this area (Conway et al., 2011; MacMahon 2012; Murphy et al., 2013; Reidy 2013), this study adds to existing knowledge about post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy as unlike earlier research, it was conducted after the introduction of a national strategy to promote literacy. A key finding reveals that there seems to have been change in terms of teachers’ awareness regarding literacy as a concept and there is little doubt that ‘literacy’ is a word that teachers use regularly, suggestive of a ‘possible tangible success’ (Murphy 2018) of LNLL. Furthermore, literacy is certainly valued as an important part of education, resulting in efforts to support literacy development. However, as outlined in the next section regarding the implications of this research for practice, the promotion of a more holistic understanding of literacy among all teachers is necessary.

The second question presented in this study sought to examine teachers’ professional knowledge relating to literacy by exploring the strategies employed, both in classrooms and across schools, to promote literacy development. A key finding emerging from this study concerns teachers’ self-reported lack of confidence regarding literacy strategies. This will inevitably influence teachers’ practice. It may also go some way to explaining another important finding, which is that teachers in this study exhibit a limited knowledge of literacy strategies, a reliance on generic approaches rather than subject-specific approaches to literacy development, and an overwhelming dominance of a ‘keywords’ approach to literacy. Literacy ‘as a practice’ draws heavily on cognitive, linguistic (Fang 2012) and didactic (New Learning 2016c) approaches to literacy development, thereby neglecting other aspects of literacy instruction. Even in this regard, where literacy is perceived as reading and writing, there is an overt lack of explicit instruction in terms of the processes involved in learning to read and write by the majority of teachers in this
study. Taken collectively, this study argues that teachers need greater support in terms of their literacy practices.

This study illustrates how the ‘whole-school approach’ to literacy development was positive in the sense that it led to increased awareness and a sense of shared responsibility. However, such an approach presented a challenge for literacy development by taking literacy ‘outside’ the classroom through literacy (typically reading) initiatives and I argue that this may also account for the limited change in pedagogical practices in the classroom relating to literacy. When considering teachers’ instructional practices, it was also evident that the nature of high-stakes assessment in Irish education has a very real impact on classroom practice. This study finds that teachers feel hampered and frustrated by the ‘reality’ of the exams ‘system’, and argue that the examinations curtail their teaching and determine the strategies they use. Moreover, this study suggests that literacy is perceived to be ‘at odds’ with teaching and learning at particular points on the journey through post-primary education, evidenced by the fact that literacy is enacted more regularly with junior or non-exam classes. Again, this raises the question about teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy. Thus, this study highlights how change regarding literacy development at a ‘whole-school’ level is limited.

The third research objective sought to gain an insight into teachers’ experiences of ‘literacy as policy’ and examines the opportunities and challenges that accompany policy implementation in Ireland, raising a number of interesting findings that have implications for policy in the future. Perhaps the greatest opportunity was how LNLL provided a platform for literacy advocates and resulted in increased awareness about literacy. However, teachers reported a number of challenges. Many of these relate to the structures and cultures of schools in terms of their organisation but also in terms of their perceived purpose or philosophies. An obvious negative experience highlighted by participants concerns the wider culture of schooling in Ireland and stems from system-wide issues concerning the model of high-stakes assessment that dominates Irish education as well as increasing accountability for teachers as professionals. While these findings are not perceived as a direct consequence of the introduction of LNLL, they were too prevalent to ignore and may go some way to explaining the instances of resistance to literacy as a practice and as a policy.
In terms of readiness for policy implementation, this study reveals that the cascade model of CPD was insufficient in terms of supporting teachers, to address their lack of confidence and limited professional knowledge regarding literacy development. Finally, this research challenges the assumptions about collaboration in educational policy documents. This study finds that schools, as organisations are not architecturally, logistically or philosophically structured for collaborative practice. The rhetoric around collaboration does not seem to fully appreciate the fact that teachers’ professional experience has been traditionally characterised by ‘pedagogical solitude’ (Conway et al., 2011) and professional isolation (Moloney 2000). Collaboration necessitates adequate resourcing as well as change in the structure of schools but moreover, a radical change in the very culture of the teaching profession.

This study sought to give voice to teachers in an attempt to understand the lived reality of policy implementation, to provide understanding through insight, and despite some positive outcomes of policy implementation such as raising the profile of reading and awareness regarding literacy, this study finds that policy implementation, in ‘reality’, is difficult. Teachers report feeling overwhelmed and under pressure by the collective impact of the pace of educational reforms, an increase in accountability measures and the ever-present strain of competition evoked by high-stakes examinations and the points-race. This is characteristic of educational reform internationally, where the influence of neoliberal agendas is apparent. Teachers’ experiences of policy implementation have been such that many appear to view themselves as ‘victims of circumstance’ rather than agents of change and the research demonstrates how it is difficult to bring about meaningful or lasting change through any innovation if such attitudes prevail.

Therefore, this study contributes new knowledge to the discussion of literacy in Irish post-primary education. Taken collectively, the findings present a dilemma for literacy development, particularly when conceptual understandings of literacy are often narrow and the associated literacy practices are frequently limited in scope. The central argument posed in this study is that we skip a crucial step if we rush to implement policies and that step is thinking, what Hayward refers to as ‘making our heads hurt’. She argues that oftentimes, ‘we believe it’s about just doing it- that we can cut out the thinking time-that’s the mistake. Without thinking time, there will be
no progress’ (Hayward 2017). Teachers’ conceptual understandings of literacy do not align with the definition outlined in LNLL, pointing to a failure of the policy and raising questions regarding the effectiveness of the cascade model of CPD and whole-school reform efforts. The argument posed here is that there was insufficient time and space to challenge beliefs and assumptions about literacy, and that without challenging beliefs, changing practice is impossible.

8.3 Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research

Although small in scale, this study raises a number of findings, questions and suggestions regarding current understandings of literacy in post-primary education in Ireland. I present these as recommendations and implications for practice, policy and future research here. Each recommendation is prefaced in the title with a quote from participants in a continued effort to honour the voice of participants in this study.

8.3.1 Implications for Practice

This study was conducted by a teacher and with teachers, and so it is fitting that I begin by considering how this research has implications for post-primary teachers’ practice. The findings highlight how there must be renewed efforts to promote a broader understanding of literacy, as well as an understanding of text that aligns with contemporary research. On a positive note, the findings highlight some potential opportunities that may emerge from professional dialogue.

8.3.1.1 ‘Literacy is Very Dense’: Developing a Holistic Understanding of Literacy

Darling-Hammond (1990) contends that one reason for ‘‘recurrent failure’’ of policies is that teachers' prior learning, beliefs, and attitudes are rarely considered as an essential ingredient in the process of teaching itself, much less in the process of change’ (p.344). Considering the findings revealed in this research, this study issues an urgent call for a renewed discussion at school level about teachers’ understandings of literacy and the literacy practices that will effectively support the needs of adolescents in post-primary education. While this study presents a variety of conceptual understandings of literacy, the findings reveal that predominantly, literacy is perceived in quite a traditional way. It is evident that post-primary teachers’ beliefs and practices align more with cognitive and linguistic (Fang 2012)
dimensions of literacy, despite calls for a more balanced approach to literacy development that encompasses sociocultural and critical dimensions as well as the cognitive and linguistic. ‘Tightly framed definitions of literacy’ are held by many participants and there is a persistence of ‘old models of literacy education’ (Burnett and Merchant 2015) whereby the emphasis is on reading and writing, rather than speaking and listening. Furthermore, given the focus of this study on adolescent literacy development, the literature highlights two areas of particular importance; digital literacy and critical literacy. This study finds that opportunities to promote and develop digital and critical literacy skills were largely absent in the data. Thus, this study issues an appeal to those involved in adolescent education to revisit their understandings of literacy. This will necessitate an honest reflection and examination of the practices we utilise in our subjects, with the aim of providing opportunities to develop not only traditional reading and writing competencies, but also digital and critical reading and writing, as well as speaking and listening skills. There is a clear need to extend literacy practices ‘beyond the lexical and the canonical’ (Abrams and Gerber 2014, p. 20). There is also a need to challenge assumptions that exist regarding the role of technology in education as well as the goals of post-primary education.

Of course, changing teachers’ understandings and practice in relation to adolescent literacy will require a concerted effort from those involved in teacher education, at both initial stages and in supporting post-primary teachers’ across their careers. The findings reveal how only one of the 26 participants experienced formal instruction regarding literacy as part of her ITE but also highlight how this certainly led to a more holistic understanding of literacy. While only one case, this is nonetheless reassuring and affirming for those involved in literacy education at ITE level; it suggests that efforts to support teachers’ understandings of literacy as part of their formal teacher education can yield positive results for adolescent literacy development. In relation to continued support for teachers across their career, explored further in subsequent paragraphs, Thibodeau’s study, discussed in 7.3.6, may offer an appropriate and alternative model to the cascade model, one that can support professional literacy learning at school level. Her research highlights how a small, collaborative teacher community project involved teachers from many subject backgrounds working with a literacy specialist, resulting in significant gains in
relation to both teachers’ confidence levels and student achievement pertaining to literacy.

8.3.1.2 ‘The World of Books’: Challenging Teachers’ Understandings of Text

In challenging teachers’ understandings of literacy as a concept, consideration must also be given to interrogating the meaning of ‘text’ in education. While national and international research has pointed to how text remains central in the post-primary classroom, the findings in this study reveal particularly narrow understandings of text as print, an understanding that is in contrast with contemporary understandings of text as anything that communicates meaning and extends beyond print text (Abrams and Gerber 2014). An overwhelming emphasis on reading books is illustrated in the literature and is also evident in the findings of this research. While there is no doubt regarding the value of book-reading and reading for pleasure, the emphasis on traditional print and alphabetic texts reinforces traditional understandings of literacy and positions print text as the most valued and legitimate (Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2006; Gee 2015). Based on the views of participants and the literacy strategies adopted in schools in this study, it appears that reading printed, narrative fiction books continues to be viewed as ‘the pinnacle of modern literate achievement’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.226). This is at odds with how text is positioned in LNLL, where it is considered as ‘various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media’ (DES 2011, p.8) (accepting that, as discussed, LNLL does appear to privilege book reading at other points in the document). This study reveals a very obvious rejection of digital texts and audio texts, despite the fact that much evidence points to how reading practices are changing in our technologised world, and concludes that participants view digital texts and devices as competing influences and obstacles to literacy development. The emphasis on traditional print text, at the expense of multimodal and digital texts, is both obvious and alarming. We must support teachers to develop contemporary understandings of text, and subsequently, encourage teachers to consider breadth and balance in relation to the variety of texts they utilise as part of their practice.

In particular, greater attention needs to be given to the texts that will engage and motivate adolescents, and a post-primary literacy pedagogy based on contemporary
understandings of text will also consider ways to bridge school literacies with students’ out of school literacy practices and texts. As highlighted in section 2.5.5.5, adolescence is recognised as a particular stage in literacy development and factors such as motivation, engagement, identity development and increasing independence need to be considered by post-primary teachers in determining which texts might best promote and enhance adolescent students’ learning in their subject classroom.

The importance of text choice is perhaps best illustrated by Quinlan and Curtin’s research conducted in the Irish post-primary context as it highlights how the text-practices adolescents encounter in schools are ‘alien’ to them and their experiences of text outside of school, where they inhabit a multimodal and digital world. As a result, adolescents have to ‘twist, bend and reform their preferred identities’ in relation to literacy within the ‘scholastic figured world’ of education (Quinlan and Curtin 2017, p.468). Some of the out-of-school literacy practices with which adolescents engage have been discussed at various stages in this study, and all present a holistic understanding of text. Graffiti-tagging (Moje 2000), manga (Leander and Boldt 2012), strategic video-games (Gee 2012; Abrams and Gerber 2014), graphic novels (Jones and Woglom 2016), social media platforms (Bezemer and Kress 2017) and memes (Elmore and Coleman 2019) are all regarded as legitimate types of text. They are also perceived as relevant, engaging and motivational to students, presenting students with greater text variety and text choice, a significant factor in promoting engagement in reading (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Rose 2006; The Reading Agency 2015).

The potential for learning through engagement in these practices has been highlighted at length, but care must be given to examine ways that these can be incorporated into classroom practice. Because these are not only different ‘types’ of texts but also ‘encode knowledge differently’ (Lotherington and Jenson 2011, p.230), students require new skills to navigate the often complex, rarely linear and generally multifaceted interfaces of multimodal texts, often needing help in finding their ‘reading path’ (Serafini 2012; Jewitt 2008; Walsh 2006). Therefore, post-primary teachers will need significant support, in terms of both ITE and CPD, if they are to be in a position to challenge the reliance on traditional printed texts and incorporate opportunities for adolescent students to navigate a variety of text types, including digital and multimodal texts, as well as print texts.
8.3.1.3 ‘Conversation and Engagement’: Harnessing the Power of Professional Dialogue

One of the unanticipated findings in this study was that a number of teachers viewed the interviews as opportunities to reflect on and discuss their conceptual understanding of literacy and sometimes, this resulted in a shift in thinking. Thus, I argue that professional dialogue has the potential to challenge our assumptions about literacy as well as provide a platform to share practices that support adolescent literacy learning. While ‘quiet, powerful internal voices clamour to be heard’ (Bolton 2010, p.98), professional dialogue offers teachers an opportunity to give expression to their concerns and thoughts, while also making sense of their professional experiences. It is different to ‘story-telling and scanning for ideas’ (Little 1990) the quick and serendipitous moments where teachers swap professional experiences, as professional dialogue is planned and purposeful. Teachers can create opportunities for professional learning conversations with colleagues and within departments, but school leaders also need to provide the strategies and structures (Gleeson et al., 2002) to make it a reality. Knowledge is constructed through interaction and teachers are actively involved in the process of shaping, as well as being shaped by (Hall et al., 2014) the experience of professional dialogue. Therefore, this study recommends that teachers seek out opportunities for professional dialogue; certainly when grappling with any educational reform in their classrooms, but particularly in relation to how they can support adolescent literacy development.

In her discussion of teachers’ professional relations for learning, Little (1990) contends that ‘joint work’ between teachers- such as team-teaching, mentoring, action research, peer coaching, planning and mutual observation with feedback- has the greatest potential for professional improvement, providing opportunities for teachers to reflect, question, observe and learn in a professional, collective and interdependent way. Such activities may provide opportunities to encourage those of us involved in adolescent literacy development to interrogate our beliefs, attitudes and values that are bound-up in understanding of literacy, what Brookfield refers to as ‘hunting our assumptions’ (1995), with the potential to influence our pedagogical practice. There is an openness among participants in this study to exchange and co-
ordinate in their practice, particularly through cross-curricular initiatives and team teaching. I recommend that teachers seek opportunities that open up their practice to peer-observation, utilising Brookfield’s lens of colleagues’ experiences (1995) to support professional learning about literacy through reflection and conversation. This practice has very particular resonance during policy implementation, as questioning our practices forces us to critically consider our philosophies, as well as how to bring about reform that supports student learning.

8.3.2 Implications for Policy

The findings of this study have implications for a broad range of policy issues and provide an evidence base to help inform the successful implementation of future policies. By offering an insight into the complexity of reform at school level, this study offers recommendations in relation to assumptions regarding collaboration, meaningful support for teachers’ professional learning and the impact of high-stakes examinations on policy implementation and reform in schools.

8.3.2.1 ‘There isn’t really any ‘Idiot’s Guide’ to this Stuff’: Support for Teachers

‘Teachers teach from what they know’ (Darling-Hammond 1990, p.346) and this study reveals low levels of confidence and professional knowledge in relation to literacy development and suggests that meaningful change regarding literacy was hindered by the impact of narrow conceptual understandings and limited theoretical, as well as practical, knowledge about literacy.

Part of this is attributed to the cascade model of CPD which proved problematic for a number of reasons and is regarded as an insufficient model of professional learning to support teachers as teachers of literacy. Certainly, all three literacy link teachers found the supports beneficial, but the structure and culture of schools where teachers identify with their subjects and work in department-based pockets of collaboration means that it was difficult to authentically communicate the messages from one-shot, off-site CPD. These teachers did not feel confident enough to share expertise or lead learning regarding literacy. Rather, for ‘sustained growth and positive changes in teaching practice to occur, incremental supports should be provided’ (Kim et al., 2013, p.83),
This study illustrates how post-primary teachers’ professional knowledge relating to literacy and literacy pedagogy needs attention to promote a holistic understanding of literacy and effective literacy development for adolescents. Irish studies regarding curriculum implementation argue that ‘appropriate in-service’ (Halbert and MacPhail 2010, p. 32) is key to successfully bring about change. Furthermore, the generic approaches advocated didn’t necessarily support teachers as discipline experts nor did they support students in how to read, write, speak and listen in different subject areas. It is recommended that subject specific literacy CPD is more widely available.

This study offers a number of models or approaches to literacy development that teachers may find useful in their practice; LNLL as a ‘strategy’ would have been a more supportive document by offering such guidance to teachers. In contrast, it is critiqued for its lack of research to support key elements (Murphy 2018). While there have been recent changes in ITE provision regarding literacy, this study demonstrates that only one of 26 participants experienced this in her ITE programme. Policymakers need to be mindful of the teachers already in the system and put sufficient structures in place to support their continuing professional learning regarding literacy and equip them with the professional knowledge that they need if all teachers are truly in a pedagogically sound position to be teachers of literacy.

‘Cosán’, the national framework for teachers’ professional learning (Teaching Council 2016), advocates the life-long nature of learning for teachers and highlights not only the range of professional learning activities that teachers can engage in but also that teachers, as professionals, should take ‘responsibility for their own learning’ (p. 5). The ‘joint work’ activities advocated by Little (1990) in the previous paragraph, as well as opportunities for professional dialogue, are all regarded as legitimate professional learning processes in Cosán. However, some work is needed, perhaps on the part of the Teaching Council, concerning teachers’ attitudes to and awareness of the range and variety of forms of professional learning as Irish teachers’ experience of CPD or ‘in-service’ has traditionally been fragmented, one-shot sessions that occur infrequently and generally off-site (Harford 2010).

As described in this study, the literacy specialist (Gillis 2014) who works alongside subject specialists has proven successful in other jurisdictions. There are parallels between the vision for literacy specialists and the literacy link teacher in this study.
Policy analysts often categorise education policies as either ‘material’ or ‘symbolic’. Material policies are ‘strongly committed to implementation’ while symbolic policies are often understood as ‘a political response to pressures for policy’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.9). LNLL has already been explored as a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction to PISA 2009 but further evidence of its symbolic rather than material nature stems from the lack of ‘commitment to funding the policy and its implementation’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.9). While €50 million has been allocated to schools and teacher education to support LNLL since 2014 (DES 2017), developing the role of the literacy link teacher as a literacy specialist would require significant and sustained investment.

8.3.2.2 ‘Trying to Get Everyone to Work Together’: Assumptions about Collaboration

Of course, for such a ‘literacy specialist’ to be able to work alongside colleagues and for the cascade model of CPD, explored above, to be successful, there needs to be a commitment to adequate resourcing of policies. Time and space to collaborate is essential. While policy documents are replete with references to collaboration and the literature positions it is a crucial aspect for schools as ‘learning organisations’, this study suggests that we need to challenge some of the assumptions regarding collaboration by meaningfully exploring school structures and school cultures. In the Irish context, post-primary schools are not organised, physically or philosophically, in ways that promote collaborative practice and this study presents much evidence regarding the obstacles to collaboration. Recent changes regarding Junior Cycle Reform, where teachers are afforded 22 hours Professional Time annually, as well as school-closure days for CPD, provides time and space for reflective professional conversations and learning and may be one way forward regarding the professional learning of teachers generally. Of course, time alone will not ensure collaborative practice; willingness to discuss philosophies and to open up teachers’ professional practice is also necessary.

8.3.2.3 ‘Exams dictate’: The High-stakes nature of Assessment in Ireland

This study clearly highlights how the prominence and nature of examinations in Irish post-primary education presents an obstacle to developing literacy in the manner envisaged in LNLL. Indeed, the high stakes nature of State Examinations has a
significant impact on teaching and learning in general as exams frequently determine
the pedagogies and classroom practices adopted by post-primary teachers. This has a
significant impact on the experiences of teachers and students, but in the context of
this study, there are also ramifications for literacy development.

In relation to teachers’ practice, classroom observations in MacMahon’s study
(2012) revealed how teaching was primarily teacher and content focused (p. 261).
While this research did not utilise classroom observation, reports from teachers
reveal that there is an obvious emphasis on ‘covering the course’ in preparation for
examinations, and that many participants rely on rote-learning, drill and repetition to
prepare students to navigate exam papers successfully. Many participants argue that
‘the exams dictate’ (Eamon, English/History/Irish- Cedar 2). In fact, a number of
participants felt that they had to go against methodologies and instructional
approaches that they believe are ‘definitely better for the child’ (Seamus,
Science/Maths-Birch 7) and rely on transmissive practices. Ultimately, the exam-
focused system in Ireland detracts from a willingness to engage in active and
student-centered learning (DCYA 2017). In interviews, participants regularly
reference the examination and past-exam papers as guides for instruction and a
determinant of their practice rather than curricula or subject syllabi. Such an
emphasis on exams creates a tendency to ‘teach to the test’ rather than to satisfy the
aspirations of the curriculum.

While this research illustrates how the examinations system in post-primary
education has an unquestionable ‘backwash effect’ (Stobart 2008) on teachers’
pedagogical practice, it also highlights how a model of high-stakes assessment like
the Leaving Certificate examinations has a negative impact on teachers’ professional
experiences. Chapter seven vividly captures the feelings of anxiety expressed by a
number of participants who speak about ‘the pressure’ of examinations as an
accountability measure and how the increasing emphasis on and media attention
given to state examinations results has negatively impacted their experience as
professionals; they increasingly feel scrutinised, overwhelmed and powerless. In
keeping with Looney’s argument, it would appear that ‘curriculum has become a
problem rather than an opportunity... something for teachers, students and schools to
overcome, to manage, to conquer. There is little empowerment associated with it’
Naturally, the negative influence of high-stakes and terminal assessment on teachers’ practice is a determinant of students’ learning and their experiences of school. Indeed, for many years, it has been argued that ‘in the Republic of Ireland, assessment in post-primary schools in the form of two formal and one high stakes certificate examinations, is almost universally presented as having a negative impact on curriculum, and on the educational experiences of students generally’ (Looney 2006, p. 350). As evidenced in the previous paragraph, and in keeping with recent studies concerning students’ experiences of post-primary school (Smyth 2016a; DCYA 2017), highly competitive education systems often emphasise the transmission of knowledge. For students, this may result in a narrowing of the curriculum with a focus on subject content rather than focusing on the attitudes, skills and values associated with learning in subject areas. In such instances, student learning is often passive rather than active (MacMahon 2012, p. 261) and as is the case in Smyth’s study (2016a), teacher talk and reading from the textbook tend to dominate classroom practice. This is particularly true for students in ‘exam years’ and in sixth-year classes in particular, as ‘classes are heavily teacher dominated and exam-oriented’ with a strong emphasis on homework, on teachers doing most of the talking, on practicing exam papers and on copying notes from the board (Smyth 2016a, p.176). More recently, the aforementioned ‘So, how was School Today?’ report captures the learning experiences of some 3,242 young people aged 12-17, and a mere ‘30% of students think their teachers make learning interesting and fun’ (DCYA 2017, p.26).

The findings of this study support these national research findings. The concept at the heart of this study is literacy development in the post-primary school, and the findings of this research illustrate how unequivocally, teachers make decisions regarding literacy development that are significantly influenced by the examinations system in Ireland. If content coverage is the priority in the subject classroom, coupled with an understanding of literacy as reading and writing, then it is hardly surprising that literacy development does not get the attention it deserves, but also that certain aspects of literacy development are privileged above others. As discussed, a number of participants express how they have experienced resistance by some of their colleagues to literacy strategies and refusal to buy-in to literacy
promotion at the expense of ‘content coverage’. Even in instances where participants in this study were aware of the importance of literacy development and prepared to promote it in their practice, they felt limited by the expectations of students and parents but most evidently, by the examination system. Despite their beliefs in the value of a more student-centered and active learning environment, whole-class discussion, structured group-work activities or comment-only feedback were relegated to the back-seat in classes where examinations loomed large. Furthermore, in relation to the examinations themselves, there is further need for reform if a holistic approach to literacy development is to be realised. The overwhelming focus on traditional pen-and-paper assessment is evident in a number of State Examinations, particularly in the Leaving Certificate (Established) programme, where students demonstrate their understanding solely through writing (Smyth and Calvert 2011, p. 4). In contrast, the literature points to how ‘traditional writing assignments are completely foreign to most students because their generation rarely engages with the world in a purely textual manner’ (Darrington and Dousay 2015, p. 33). As illustrated in the previous section regarding the need to bridge in-school literacy practices with adolescents’ out of school practices, any efforts to reform the examination system needs to be cognisant of the literacy practices of adolescents and the variety of texts that they engage with in their lives outside school. A new model of assessment needs to consider a broader approach to literacy also.

Echoing previous studies (Smyth and Calvert 2011; MacMahon 2012; Smyth 2016; Smyth 2016a; DCYA 2017), this research recommends that the current system of externally assessed state examinations needs urgent attention and review. In recent years, attempts to reform Junior Cycle education in Ireland met with much opposition, particularly in relation to changes in assessment (Lenihan et al., 2016) and a protracted dispute led to the introduction of a compromised curriculum. In its conceptual stages, the new Junior Cycle aimed to readdress the purpose of education with a shift in emphasis from the exam to putting student learning at the centre. Central to the reform was less focus on terminal examination and greater emphasis on learning at incremental moments across the three-year cycle in the form of Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs), originally worth 40% of the final grade. However, following much debate, industrial action and compromise, the external exam remains worth 90% of the students’ overall grade, and both students and
teachers question the ‘value’ of CBAs. Such an outcome is regrettable, as it appears to preserve a model of externally assessed and terminal examination. At the time of writing, an NCCA review of Senior Cycle education in Ireland is underway and this shows promise as it may result in much-needed changes to assessment. There have been repeated calls for addressing the high stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate as ‘a major pathway to higher education’ (O’Donnell 2018). Junior Cycle reform efforts have highlighted a number of important considerations and perhaps the mistakes of the past will not be repeated. It is crucial that policymakers learn from those experiences to provide a system of assessment that will best serve the needs of adolescent learners.

8.3.3 Limitations of this Study and Recommendations for Future Research

All research studies have limitations (Patton 1990) and while they are inevitable and should be acknowledged, they do not detract from the value of a study. In fact, they point towards a number of avenues for further research.

The methodological limitations of this study have been discussed in detail in section 4.13 where I addressed limitations arising from the very nature of qualitative research and my positioning as a researcher within the inquiry process. I also addressed limitations arising from the sampling method, data collection tool and data analysis procedures. I outlined, for instance, that it was due to logistical reasons, time constraints and my own availability, being unable to commit to being in schools during teaching-time, that the primary source of data collection was the semi-structured interview. As a result, the research findings in this study rely on participants who were self-reporting. The findings in this study could benefit greatly if supplemented with classroom observation of teachers’ literacy practices, as this may offer greater insight into the strategies used in classroom practice.

This study presents a number of implications for further research in the area of literacy in the post-primary context. Adolescent literacy research, as already stated, is both a complex (Moje et al 2004) and under-researched aspect of literacy education. As well as the models promoted by Fang (2010, 2012) and Cope and Kalantzis (New Learning 2016), DL has been suggested as a useful way to support adolescent literacy development in this study. While it has proved successful in other jurisdictions, there is a need to explore the merits of a disciplinary literacy
approach in the Irish context, perhaps by adopting an action research approach by researcher-practitioners in Irish post-primary classrooms. Furthermore, the conceptual framework utilised in this study, adopted and refined from the LETS research (Conway et al., 2011), offered a number of useful lenses through which literacy, as a concept, a practice and a policy, could be interrogated. This approach could be adopted in other research sites to investigate adolescent literacy. Indeed, this conceptual framework is flexible and far-reaching enough that it might be considered as a useful frame in other research studies that seek to investigate teachers’ understanding of a particular issue or educational reform.

As has been reiterated throughout this study, this research was conducted at a very particular moment in time. LNLL was introduced in 2011 and schools began to implement literacy objectives as part of the SSE process in 2012/13. Therefore, this research took place in the early stage of implementation, with data collected from schools between October 2015 and April 2016. While this research offers rich insights into post-primary teachers’ understandings of literacy, it is temporal and a snapshot of teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and experiences pertaining to literacy and literacy policy. Future studies could seek to build on this research by investigating whether or not beliefs and practices change with time as literacy initiatives and strategies become more established and embedded in practice.

While all research reports are partial, this study sought to outline a number of key findings that emerged from thematic analysis processes. A number of these findings, while interesting, illustrative and illuminative in themselves, could benefit from further research. For instance, one of the key findings of this study concerned the lack of engagement with digital literacy and the interim review (DES 2017) reiterated the need to promote digital literacy. Given the findings in this study which position DLT as an obstacle to literacy development, and the recent publication of a number of policies that support digital learning, a study that would seek greater insight into teachers’ understanding of digital literacy would also offer a worthwhile contribution to this field of study. Another important finding that arose in this research was the important role played by school leaders in supporting the implementation of education policies. This study did not capture the voice of school leaders and again, this would be a worthwhile area of study if exploring how policies are implemented at school level.
8.4 Closing Remarks

‘Localised explorations have their own implicit value’ (Hinchion 2017) and I believe that this study, though small in scale, has the potential to offer something significant in terms of how we consider literacy as a concept, as a practice and as a policy. By drawing together research from a number of theoretical fields that explore literacy, beliefs, values, attitudes, pedagogy and policy, this study highlights the complexity of literacy as a concept and problematises the literacy strategies that emerge from traditional understandings of literacy. Though not generalisable, this detailed and descriptive exploration of teachers’ understandings of literacy in four Irish post-primary schools aimed to make this study ‘accessible and usable in other contexts and thus transforming it into public knowledge’ (Cochran-Smith 2005, p.220). Its uniqueness stems from the binocular approach adopted to explore how literacy is understood as a concept and a practice, but also how a literacy policy is implemented in schools and it offers an insight into the realities of implementation experienced first-hand by the teachers who enact the policies. Thus it has the potential to build on prior research in the area but also, to inform future policy efforts in an attempt to bring about real, meaningful and sustainable education reform.

Engaging in this study has been a personal and professional journey, one that certainly deepened my curiosity about teaching and learning in relation to literacy and education policy. It has undoubtedly contributed to my growth as an educator, particularly in relation to my awareness and understanding of the complexity of literacy as well as the intricate interplay between beliefs, practices and experiences. My hope is that this study will resonate with other teachers and literacy practitioners; that they may recognise similar understandings and practices in their own professional experiences. I believe that the findings and questions raised in this study have the potential to encourage professional dialogue about literacy with our colleagues, something deemed valuable by a number of participants in this study. Perhaps this study has the potential to ignite a spark of professional reflection within each of us, a spark that can light the torch that will guide us on research journeys that serve the wider education community.
9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix A: Ethical Approval to Conduct Research

From: Anne.O'Brien
Sent: 14 April 2015 09:34
To: Carmel.Hinchion
Subject: 2015_03_15_EHS

Dear Carmel,

Thank you for your amended Research Ethics application which was recently reviewed by the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The recommendation of the Committee is outlined below.

Project Title: 2015_03_15_EHS An investigation of post-primary teachers' perceptions of literacy as a concept and a practice in three post-primary schools in the south-west of Ireland. Principal Investigator: Carmel Hinchion
Other Investigators: Marie Parker-Jenkins, Rachel Lenihan.
Recommendation: Approved until December 2016

Please note that as Principal Investigator of this project you are required to submit a Research Completion Report Form (attached) on completion of this research study.

Yours Sincerely

Anne O'Brien
Administrator, Education & Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Ollscoil Luimnigh / University of Limerick
Guthán / Phone: +353 61 234101
Facs / Fax: +353 61 202561
Riompbhost / Email: anne.obrien@ul.ie
Gréasán / Web: http://www.ehs.ul.ie
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter to Schools Seeking Participation

2nd September 2015

Dear [Principal],

My name is Rachel Lenihan. I am an English teacher in Scoil Mhuire Agus Ide, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick but I am currently on secondment to University of Limerick where I am working as a School Placement Development Officer. Since 2012, I have been enrolled on a doctoral programme in University of Limerick and my area of research concerns literacy in the post-primary setting. I am writing to invite your teaching colleagues to participate in a study concerning teachers’ perceptions of literacy.

Literacy has certainly been a topical issue in recent years. 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life' in 2011 is a policy that schools are currently implementing. Furthermore, the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process requires us as teachers to develop a School Improvement Plan (SIP) that focuses on the literacy needs of our students. This study seeks to investigate the experience of teachers concerning literacy, their attitudes and beliefs about literacy in their daily practice as well as the opportunities and challenges that recent policy reforms have presented for us as educators.

The study seeks to engage teachers in a professional conversation and it is anticipated that this study will contribute to a growing body of research about literacy. Furthermore, research participants will benefit from this opportunity to engage in professional dialogue about teaching and learning. The study requires that I interview somewhere between 5 and 10 teachers in each school. Interviews will last between 45 minutes and 1 hour and will not exceed this time, unless at the request of a participant. Confidentiality will be assured for all participants and all data and identifying factors will be anonymised as soon as interviews have been transcribed. There is, of course, the option for participants to withdraw from the research at any stage.

If it is deemed acceptable with you and your Board of Management that I conduct this research in your school, and if you think this may be of interest to your colleagues, you can contact me via the information below. I hope to make contact with you over the coming days to discuss this further.

Yours faithfully,

Rachel Lenihan
English Teacher and Doctoral Student,
E-mail: Rachel.lenihan@ul.ie
Phone: 087 6557190

This research has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSSREC), University of Limerick: Approval Number 2015_02_15_EHS; if you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick. Tel (061) 234101; Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix C: Participants’ Consent Form, Information Sheet and Oral Debriefing Sheet

Teacher Consent Form
Teachers’ Perceptions of Literacy

I have been asked to participate in a study that investigates teachers’ perceptions of literacy in their professional practice. In signing this form, I give my consent concerning the following:

I agree to participate in this study

I have been informed about the research and why it is taking place

I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary

I understand that I can withdraw at any time

I understand that my data will be anonymised

I am aware that I will be debriefed after taking part in the research

Yes/No

If you have any questions or concerns about this project you may first contact the investigator, Carmel Hinchion at carmel.hinchion@ul.ie

If you have any concerns about this project and wish to contact someone not involved in the project you may contact Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

“I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided, I understand how the project will be done. I know that I do not have to take part and can leave the project at any time without giving a reason”.

Signature of participant: ___________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of the researcher: ___________________________ Date: ______________

This research has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC), University of Limerick; Approval Number 2015_03_15_EHS
Information Sheet

An investigation of teachers’ perceptions of literacy in Irish Post-primary schools amidst the implementation of a national literacy strategy.

What is the study about?

Currently there is very little Irish research specific to teachers’ experience of implementing the national literacy strategy. Therefore, this research seeks to explore teachers’ attitudes, beliefs and experiences concerning literacy as a concept and a practice.

What will I have to do?

Participants (in this case you) are asked to participate in one interview. It is estimated that the interview be approximately 45-60 minutes in duration. Interviews are confidential and no participant or institution will be identifiable in the research.

What are the benefits?

It is a valuable opportunity for all involved in education to have a professional dialogue about our experiences concerning literacy in the classroom and whole-school setting. It is the intention of the researchers to use the findings of this research to inform current policy and practice concerning literacy and professional development for teachers.

What are the risks?

It is not envisaged that there will be risks to participants in sharing your beliefs and experiences concerning literacy education, you will not be asked for any personal or sensitive information. All data will be anonymised and confidentiality is assured.

What if I do not wish to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary and if you do not wish to take part there is no pressure to do so.

What happens if I change my mind about participating during the study?

You can withdraw your participation and consent at any time without prejudice.
What happens to the information collected?

The data will be collated, analysed and the findings will be discussed in a doctoral thesis. Peer reviewed papers may also emerge from the data that is collected. An overview of the findings of this process will be made available to you should you request it.

Who else is taking part in this research?

We are inviting participation from teachers in Post-Primary settings in Limerick.

How will the results be disseminated?

The data will be collated, analysed and the findings will be discussed in a doctoral thesis. Peer reviewed papers may also emerge from the data that is collected. The data might also be used to form the basis for workshops and presentations in academic settings or teacher education centres in the future.

Freedom of Information

The University is subject to the Freedom of Information Act and the research procedures will adhere to the provisions of Data Protection legislation.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

If you wish to ask any more questions about the research process you can contact the principal investigator or the student conducting the interviews at the following email addresses:

Principal Investigator: Ms Carmel Hinchion available at carmel.hinchion@ul.ie

Student: Rachel Lenihan available at rachel.lenihan@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101. Email: ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

This research has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC), University of Limerick: Approval Number 2015.03.15. EHS
Oral Debriefing Script

At the end of each interview, the following oral debriefing session will take place. This information will be delivered orally to the participant, rather than in written form. Each participant should be offered a take-away sheet containing written contact information and the details of the suggested reference(s), should he or she indicate an interest in retaining this information.

Title: An investigation of post-primary teachers' perceptions of literacy as a concept and a practice in three post-primary schools in the south-west of Ireland.

Before we conclude our discussion today, I just need to ask you a few questions.

Do you have any questions or comments about anything so far?

Did anything strike you as particularly interesting or unusual?

The purpose of the interview is not only for us to collect data, but also for you to have an opportunity to engage in a professional conversation about literacy as a concept and a practice as it is perceived in Ireland at the moment. It gives you a chance to express your opinions and perceptions concerning literacy while also presenting an opportunity to learn how this research might be used in the future.

In this study we were interested in how teachers perceive literacy currently; to learn more about your knowledge, attitude and experience concerning literacy, particularly since it has become such a topical matter in education in Ireland and internationally. We believe that if we understand how teachers perceive literacy, we can gain a greater insight into the challenges and opportunities that are presented by the policy ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’ (2011) and implementing it in the post-primary setting.

If you feel concerned or uncomfortable about any aspect of this interview today, you may tell us to withdraw your data from the sample. Remember that your results are confidential to me and my supervisor, and that all results are published anonymously.

If you have any complaints, concerns or questions about this research, please feel free to contact Ms. Carmel Hinchion, available at 061-213317 or carmel.hinchion@ul.ie, a lecturer in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at the University of Limerick. Alternatively, if you have any concerns about this project and wish to contact someone not involved in the project you may contact: Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, EHS Faculty Office, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 234101, Email ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

In addition, you might want to read the following article available online at http://www.jstor.org


Thank you for helping us in this research!
9.4 Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Semi Structured Interview

Proposed Questions

1. What is your subject area? How long have you been teaching?

2. What do you know about the literacy strategy ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’?

3. What value does literacy hold for you and your students?

4. What do you understand by literacy strategies in the classroom?
   Are there any particular literacy strategies that you find effective?
   Would oral literacy be viewed as a priority?

5. Are you aware of any literacy needs of your students?

6. What supports have you benefitted from in implementing changes regarding literacy?

7. What is your school’s attitude to literacy?
   To what extent do you think there is noticeable ‘system wide’ or whole school change?
   Is the literacy team visible? Is literacy something that is spoken about professionally?

8. What opportunities or challenges have you encountered as a result of recent changes brought about by the introduction of the literacy strategy?

9. Describe your own ‘competency’ with regard to literacy? Do you feel you have a positive or a negative relationship with language?

10. It is said that we are in the midst of a wave of educational reform; How have the introduction of recent policies made you feel as a professional?

11. What is it to be literate in 21st Century Ireland?

This research has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC), University of Limerick: 2015_03_15_EHS
Dear [participant],

I hope this email finds you well. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you again for your help in conducting my doctoral study concerning teachers' perceptions of literacy. Without you being so generous with your time and in sharing your thoughts and experiences, it would have been impossible to proceed with this study.

Just a quick note about progress to date. I've conducted and transcribed 26 interviews with teachers in four schools and I'm now at the stage where I am analysing data. I'm taking a two-stage approach to data-analysis. The first stage took place as I transcribed your interview. I've attached a copy of your transcription here. I hope that you will be satisfied with the outcome and that you feel it is a fair and accurate account of the conversation that we shared. As I said at the outset, the data is anonymised and completely confidential with any identifiers removed and I am only sharing the transcript as it is here with you. This is an opportunity for me to validate the data with you as one of my participants.

Doyle argues that 'research is a negotiated process' between the researcher and her participants. Here I want to 'give power, voice and engagement' to you as a participant in this research. I have transcribed the interview verbatim, including filler words, pauses, false starts and repetitive phrases. This is to fully capture the conversation that took place between us. Your contributions here are rich and meaningful and I respect what you said and therefore, I wanted to capture it as accurately as possible. However, if segments are used in the thesis, I might edit them and make clarifications where necessary, with your permission, while still keeping them as close to the original utterances as possible.

The next stage of analysis will take place over the summer months. I'm hoping to analyse the data and compile a list of emerging themes that I would really like to share with you in September. At this point, if you have any suggestions, anything you wish to add or question, I'd welcome your input again. Also, because I'm using pseudonyms in the write up of the study, perhaps you would like to choose your own pseudonym? I will contact you by email in September again but there will be absolutely no obligation to respond.

Indeed, I'm very mindful of how busy school life is in these final weeks so in relation to the transcription attached here, there is no need for you to take any action at the moment unless there is something that you would like to comment on. You may wish to change, edit or comment on something. You may not wish to make any amendments either!

However, if you do wish to comment, I'd be really grateful if you could get back to me before the end of this term. This will assist me to move forward before I begin the next stage of analysis. If I don't hear from you, I hope that you are happy for me to proceed in analysing the data here.

Finally, thank you again for your help. I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you a very happy and restful summer break.

Warm regards,

Rachel
9.6 Appendix F: Immersion and Familiarisation through Manual Coding
9.7 Appendix G: Evolving Concept Maps

Teachers’ Understanding of literacy as a concept and a practice
### Appendix H: Coding with a Critical Friend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics or Tags (50 codes created based on coding in 6 interviews)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of engagement with the policy</td>
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<td>2. Subject area literacy</td>
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<td>3. Change since 2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Lack of change since 2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Subject plans</td>
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<td>6. Top-down/mandated</td>
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<td>7. Greater awareness</td>
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<td>8. Policy as positive</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Literacy difficulties associated with SEN</td>
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<td>10. Literacy as a ‘buzzword’</td>
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<td>11. Exam success</td>
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<td>12. Accountability</td>
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<td>13. Whole school approach/all subjects</td>
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<td>14. Theory vs practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Policy vs practice (disconnect)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Pragmatism vs idealism</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Basic literacy vs holistic literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Drill/Repetition</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Confident regarding knowledge and practice/High self-efficacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Professional dialogue</td>
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<td>21. Tick box</td>
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<td>22. Covering the course/content</td>
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<td>23. Initiative overload/Initiatives</td>
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<td>24. Generic strategies</td>
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<td>25. Subject specific strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. Subject silos/departamentalisation/compartmentalisation</td>
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<td>27. Time</td>
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<td>28. Workload</td>
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<td>29. Literacy is everyone’s responsibility</td>
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<td>30. Radical shift in thinking</td>
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<td>31. SOME shift in thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>32. School context (socio-cultural)</td>
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<td>33. School context (ethos)</td>
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<tr>
<td>34. Student ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Positive attitude towards literacy development</td>
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<tr>
<td>36. Expectations of parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>37. Focus on results</td>
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<tr>
<td>38. League tables</td>
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<tr>
<td>39. Public perception</td>
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<td>40. Marketisation of education</td>
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<tr>
<td>41. Inspections</td>
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<tr>
<td>42. Lack of professional knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>43. Personal beliefs influencing professional practice</td>
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<td>44. SQR</td>
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<tr>
<td>45. Reading strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>46. Students’ negative attitudes to reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>47. Students’ expectations regarding exam preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>48. Disconnect between primary and secondary</td>
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<tr>
<td>49. Engagement with own CPD creates</td>
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<tr>
<td>50. Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>51. Testing/Screening</td>
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<td>52. Keeping staff informed</td>
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<td>53. Isolation</td>
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<td>54. Jargon</td>
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<td>55. Pre-reading discussions</td>
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<td>56. Industrial relations issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>57. Professional dialogue about literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>58. Personal Anecdotes</td>
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<tr>
<td>59. The policy is aspirational</td>
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<td>60. The policy presented opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>61. Teacher’s fear/uncertainty/feelings of intimidation</td>
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<tr>
<td>62. SEN sharing information about students</td>
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<td>63. Role-learning</td>
</tr>
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<td>64. Pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>65. Parents- Focus on grades</td>
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<tr>
<td>66. System issues- focus on exams/results</td>
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<tr>
<td>67. Perceptions of success/achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>68. Technology viewed as contrary to literacy/Negative impact of technology</td>
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<td>69. Technology viewed as a useful resource</td>
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<td>70. Talk as a tool for learning</td>
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<td>71. Cross curricular links</td>
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<td>72. Textbook as a resource</td>
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<tr>
<td>73. Note taking and notes copies</td>
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<td>74. ‘Pedagogy of telling’</td>
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<tr>
<td>75. Grades/marks points discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>76. Visible literacy team</td>
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<td>77. Openness to change</td>
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<td>78. Getting buy-in</td>
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<td>79. DEAR</td>
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<td>80. Reading for pleasure</td>
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### Appendix I: Node Structure Report

<table>
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<th>Reports\Node Structure Report 26/02/2017 11:41</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Accountability</td>
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<td>2. Adapt or ADOPT generic vs sub specific</td>
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<td>3. Anecdotes-Literacy experiences</td>
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<td>5. Bottom-up reform- need on the ground</td>
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394


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